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Humans are social beings who yield for interaction and the circuit breaker will not change that inert need for external engagement, says sociologist Professor Paulin Tay Straughan.



A man sits on a bench with areas marked off for safe distancing in Marina Bay, Singapore on Apr 2, 2020. (Photo: AFP/Roslan Rahman)

Living in densely populated Singapore, one might imagine that calls to practice social distancing might be much welcomed for a community that has complained perpetually about overcrowding on our small city-state.

Yet, this has been a challenging demand for many, so much so that COVID-19 ambassadors have to be appointed to assist law enforcement agents to police the community.

The circuit breaker demands of us social behaviour that is so contrary to what Singaporeans are used to.

We have promoted social integration as a panacea to many of our social challenges – race relations, intergenerational gaps, as well as addressing inequality. Thus, the concept of social distancing is a construct that requires re-socialising entrenched norms and behaviours.

Difficult as it may be, we find that over time, we are indeed an adaptable lot.

Instead of face-to-face meetings, once we get the hang of using the various virtual platforms, we find that meetings can still be conducted – perhaps even more efficiently.

Voice and video calls replace physical social visits, and we no longer need an excuse to be glued to our personal computers and noise-cancelling earpieces.

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We are living in the midst of unprecedented global crisis, reeling from the outbreak of one of the most infectious diseases that has brought the entire world to a standstill.

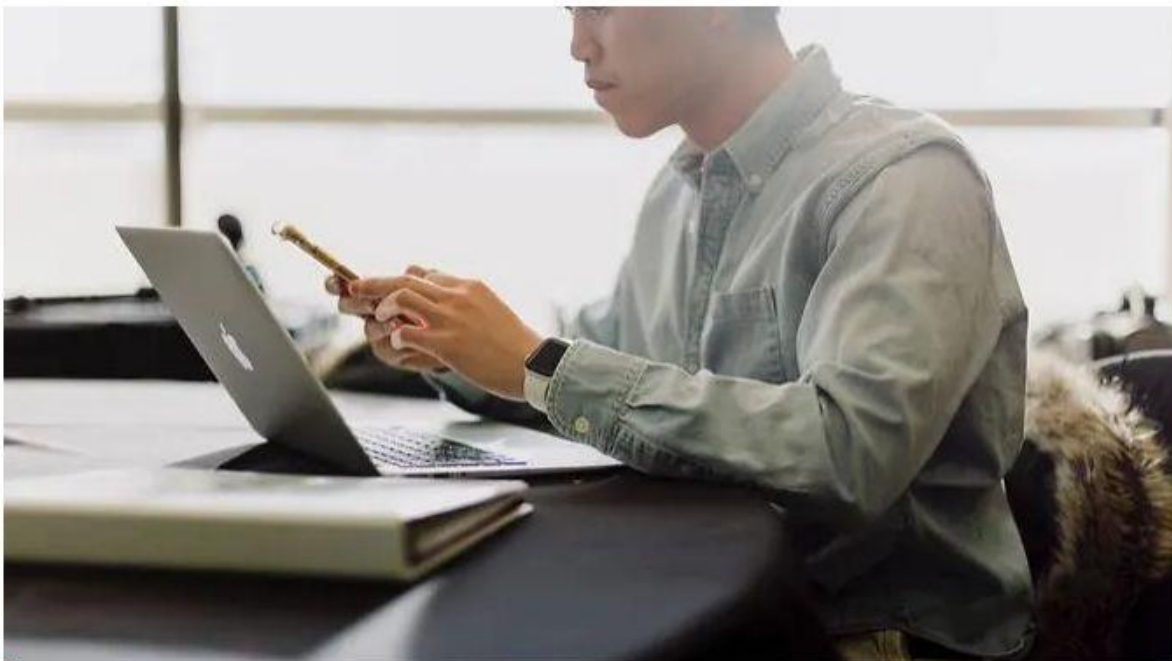
Even after the circuit breaker is lifted and the last infected person is identified and treated, we may not be able to return to the old norm.

What will change?

FLEXIWORK IS HERE TO STAY

Now that most of us are working from home, an important barrier is broken.

For those with child and parent care responsibilities, this is an important exercise to demonstrate that work can be done anywhere and anytime. Will employers in Singapore be willing to embrace this mindset change? I believe so.



(Photo: Unsplash/Priscilla Du Preez)

The businesses which are able to survive this pandemic crisis are the ones who were able to shift operations from the office to homes overnight.

The benefits of having employees attend to work requirements under circuit breaker conditions will be noted and acted upon by savvy entrepreneurs.

However, we also realise that we need to be resource-rich to make working from home (WFH) successful. In terms of infrastructure, a good Wi-Fi connection, home-based office set-up and up-to-date technical tools are essential.

In addition, the support for domestic responsibilities like childcare, household chores and meals preparation, are also luxuries that make for a successful WFH experience.

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Further, many also realise that working from home often resulted in working much longer hours as the separation of office and home space dissipates.

So it might not be the case that there will be an exodus of employees who would opt for work from home.

For most, I suspect they would look forward to going back to the office, and to reclaiming their private personal time and space when they exit the office each work day.

TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

We have already seen this emerging – commuters glued to their handsets, oblivious to the flow of social life around them; family dinners with members sitting around the same table but communicating through WhatsApp instead of normal conversations. The list goes on.

This circuit breaker has certainly short-circuited our face-to-face engagements.

One lingering effect post-COVID-19 will certainly be the proliferation of communication via social media platforms.

The restrictions of the circuit breaker compelled novices to technology to learn to use the smart phone, tablets and video conferencing platforms so that they can stay socially connected.

Will this render us more adverse to face-to-face interactions? Perhaps.

We may now find it easier to communicate via text, WhatsApp or over Zoom rather than travel out for a real chat over coffee. But we should also note that modes of communication change over time.

Long before computers and telephones became norm, we wrote letters. When land lines and mobiles were more accessible, we used the telephone.

Now that Internet connectivity and smart phones are prevalent, we text, post on Facebook and send emojis.

Though we argue that nothing can replace face-to-face interactions, I am mindful that any communication is better than no communication, regardless of the quality of it.

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) professor of psychology and biobehavioural science Matthew Lieberman, one of the founders of social cognitive neuroscience, argued in his book, which cites more than 1,000 studies, that the need to connect socially with others is as basic as our need for food, water and shelter.

"Being socially connected is our brain's lifelong passion," said Lieberman.

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A man on a smartphone wearing a face mask walks past a safe distancing awareness notice in the Chinatown district of Singapore, Apr 13, 2020. (Photo: AFP/Roslan Rahman)

So as long as we continue to satisfy our desire for socially connection with each other, we are good.

HUMAN INTERACTIONS ARE STILL IMPORTANT

Some might argue that this period of forced confinement may release the hidden introvert in some of us. Perhaps.

That also depends if the home environment is a quiet and conducive one for the introvert to thrive in.

In the busyness of everyday life, we often yearn for that moment of solitude where we can be by ourselves to ponder on our musings.

Under circuit breaker conditions, those who live alone or in small families would have extended periods of such solitude – which may have been valued at the beginning.

But when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the extension of the circuit breaker for another month, there was a collective groan.

Immediately, sad-faced and crying emojis were exchanged over messaging platforms as many wondered how we would manage the next six weeks.

We are, by and large, social beings who yield for human interaction. I doubt very much that this circuit breaker will change that inert need in us for external engagement.

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