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COMMENTARY: Bring back human contact

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This is the time to "drill down" and "defrag" to find business solutions. This is an era when we talk "offline" and dine "at desko" when pressed for time at work.

Here's another overused contemporary phrase to sum it all up: Get real already.

In 1946, John **Bichelmeyer** opened the doors to his Kansas City, Kan., meat market and began showing the business world how to do things the right way. He never wrote a best-seller or earned his MBA, but for the next six decades, this butcher served as a timeless example of what works -- and what doesn't -- in business.

His common-sense philosophies remain a blueprint for success even in today's more complex business economy. Though he's gone now, this man's simple approach and quietly elegant advice resonate across all segments of industry.

Let's take stock of what's really important in business, something John **Bichelmeyer** understood intuitively: People do business with people.

People do not do business with personal computers, phone systems or e-mail. Companies are not "things." Companies are people working toward a shared goal. That makes business very, very personal.

Yet somehow business forgets that critical point when it insists on "streamlining" or "seeking efficiencies" in acquiring more workplace techno-gizmos. Business intentionally places obstacles in the way of engaging one-on-one with other people -- with one another in the workplace, and with their next customer. Why?

American business has become a culture of workers hiding behind computers and automated telecom attendants. Even the sales function, typified by one-on-one buyer and seller interaction, has morphed the process into the push of a keypad. Cars, books, vacations -- you name it. Just click here and the item is added to your computerized shopping cart for checkout.

People frequently speak of "the good old days." What was so different back then? Chances are the good old days equate to specific interactions with people. When a handshake was as good as a signed contract. When the milkman came to the back door on Thursdays. When the school bus driver knew your name and that you lived in the blue house second from the corner. When your dad's boss came home for dinner and your mom pulled out the "good" dishes. When you "charged" something at the local butcher shop, and John **Bichelmeyer** knew you'd be in to pay the bill at the end of the month.

Where did those frequent human "touch points" go? Why did we stop interacting with one another? Who will lead the parade in the other direction?

Business can -- and should. Here's how:

Companies must learn to re-engage with people, both their own internal human resources and their external customers. Organizations must learn to balance human processes with technology tools in order to fill the widening chasm of depersonalization. Good old common sense must stand alongside marketplace efficiency tools to create opportunities and resolve problems.

Seldom does a computer report solve an operations problem with quite the sensitivity of a live person. Conversations with a desktop virtual assistant are almost always one-sided. And rarely does a laptop smile and say thank you when wrapping up a good day's work.

What's missing is the human connection. People energy.

John **Bichelmeyer**, the KCK butcher, understood this all along, which is why his butcher shop thrived. Third-generation customers still shop there today because he placed high value in other people. His trade was meat cutting, but his real gift was his people skills.

True company assets are human beings. Let's bring "I-contact" back to the workplace.