



Flipping the Switch: Who Is Responsible for Getting Employees to Take a Break?

Published : February 15, 2012 in [Knowledge@Wharton](#)

It is quitting time, and you know the drill. You grab your coat and slip on your Bluetooth for a quick call with a client on the commute home. You stop at the grocery store and, while you are in line, pluck out your BlackBerry to respond to emails. You arrive home, sit down to dinner and try hard to resist the flashing red light on your smartphone. Dinner is done: Time to check your email again, clear the dishes, and sit on the couch for some TV -- with your computer on your lap, of course. Just a few last emails and then it is time for bed. You will soon wake up to do it all over again tomorrow.

Welcome to the new world of work, where 5:30 p.m. is far from the end of the day. It is a world in which smartphones and laptop computers -- devices that ostensibly enable us to work faster, more efficiently and more flexibly -- have become 24/7 intravenous hookups to our jobs. Not only do we have difficulty maintaining personal boundaries with work because our lives and jobs are so enmeshed with technology, but we also feel intense pressure from our organizations to be "always on" and immediately responsive to calls and emails outside of normal working hours.

Some employers, however, are now attempting to flip the "off" switch. Companies from Atos, the French information technology services giant, to Deutsche Telekom to Google have recently adopted measures that force workers toward a better work-life balance, with scheduled breaks from the Internet and constant connectivity. Just last month, Volkswagen, Europe's biggest automaker, pledged to deactivate emails on German staff BlackBerries during non-office hours. In a bid to combat employee burnout, staff at Volkswagen will be limited to only receiving emails on their devices from half an hour before they start work until half an hour after they leave for the day, and will be in blackout mode the rest of the time.

"Employers are recognizing that it is helpful for employees to have boundaries," says [Stewart Friedman](#), a Wharton practice professor of management. "The challenges of distraction in the digital world are massive.... The big issue is attention. In this digital age -- which has really only just begun -- we are starting the process of learning how to create useful boundaries that allow us to pay attention to the things that matter, when they matter."

These new policies signal that while corporations care about the psychological well-being of their workers, they are not totally altruistic. Evidence suggests that regular downtime leads to greater productivity. And although our addiction to digital devices is powerful -- there is a reason, after all, that the BlackBerry is known as a "crackberry" -- and we need some help breaking bad habits, it is not completely the responsibility of employers.

"Companies create policies that may be more symbolic than practical," notes Friedman. "These policies provide important signals about what the company stands for, but often fall short as workable solutions. Organizations and schools need to help people learn how to manage those boundaries [between work and home] themselves, and train people to stem the deluge of data that threatens to drown us. People can learn to shut things off. It's not easy, and it requires dedicated effort."

Blame the BlackBerry?



This is a single/personal use copy of Knowledge@Wharton. For multiple copies, custom reprints, e-prints, posters or plaques, please contact PARS International: reprints@parsiintl.com P. (212) 221-9595 x407.

In the age before laptops, email and smartphones, employees typically did not bring work home with them, apart from maybe a little paperwork here and there. But times have changed. According to a recent survey by Neverfail, a software company specializing in data protection, 83% of professional workers say they check email after work. Two-thirds say they have taken a work-related device -- such as a smartphone or laptop -- with them on vacation. More than 50% report that they send emails during a meal with family or friends. (A possible bright spot in the survey: The number of users who admitted to emailing during a romantic moment has decreased from 11% in 2009 to a mere 2% in 2011.)

A separate study released earlier this month by researchers at the [University of Chicago's Booth School of Business](#) found that most people consider Facebook, Twitter and email harder to resist than cigarettes and alcohol. In the study, 205 adults wore devices that recorded a total of 7,827 reports about their daily desires. Desires for sleep and sex were the strongest, while desires for media and work proved the most difficult to resist.

"We sometimes talk as if it's technology that does it to us, that makes us this way. But the problem is deeper," says [Carolyn Marvin](#), a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication who does research on the social impact of communication technologies. "Technology is just a very efficient way of implementing a view we already have of ourselves. That's the notion that who we are is our ability to produce in the marketplace and constantly show that we are producing."

In other words: Our addiction to digital devices has more to do with an underlying need to feel wanted and important. "Being a successful member of middle class society is showing our dedication to professional work and being available at all hours of the day," Marvin notes.

And yet, this dedication to our jobs does not translate into increased productivity: Computers, mobile phones and the steady stream of stimuli they offer wreak havoc on our concentration. A study conducted in 2009 by a group of Stanford University researchers found that people who are regularly bombarded with different types of electronic information do not pay attention, and do not switch from one job to another, as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time.

"People feel this constant need to be connected," states [Nancy Rothbard](#), a Wharton management professor. "There's no priority structure. Everything is urgent. Everything is red flagged. Yes, there are advantages to having these technologies -- we can work more flexibly, and we can respond to crises more speedily. But there are disadvantages that we are underestimating."

Chronic media-multitaskers are more prone to distractions and less able to focus on one thing at a time. "There are a lot of important tasks that require a great deal of focus, such as decision-making or writing," Rothbard points out. "These activities become challenging when you've got pings and dings going off, pulling your attention away from the task at hand."

It is sometimes difficult to even imagine a world without these distractions. [Justin McDaniel](#), a religious studies professor at Penn, teaches a class called "Living Deliberately," which has no exams, no formal papers and little required reading. However, students are expected to modify their lifestyles with a set of restrictions drawn from monastic traditions: They must give up alcohol and refrain from using electronic and verbal communication. McDaniel, who insists he is neither a hippie nor a technophobe, says he received a great deal of initial interest in the course, but once students understood the requirements, many expressed doubts. "Any student can give up beer, but they have a hard time giving up Facebook," he notes.

Yet the students who do enroll find that living without the Internet makes a profound difference in their lives. McDaniel, who has taught the class before, says forgoing digital devices forces people to become more disciplined and more focused. "Every student who has taken this class has said without exception that they have done better in their other classes, and they have been able to focus more," he states. "This is the best thing for their work they have ever done."

Taking a Break in an Energy Pod

Our ability to focus is not the only thing that is compromised by our all-hours use of digital devices. Numerous studies have shown that psychological detachment from work during non-work time is important for employee health. Disconnecting from work is also critical to stress reduction: Health care

expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress, according to the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. Stress plays a role in several types of chronic health problems, especially cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders and psychological disorders.

"Being able to disconnect from work has great benefits to your health and productivity," says Jennifer Sabatini Fraone, assistant director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family. "The issue is not so much the calls or emails after hours: It is whether or not you have control over your time. If you do not have autonomy about when you are able to switch off and on, it causes stress."

Sabatini Fraone works with Fortune 100-level companies on health and wellness initiatives for employees. "In the knowledge economy, companies recognize that employees are their greatest resource," she notes. "If people are drained and getting burned out, they are not bringing their best selves to work every day. It has a big effect on their creativity, their energy, their productivity and their ability to innovate."

To that effort, many companies have instituted policies on the kinds of communication employees can engage in during non-work hours; some have also ordered their employees to take regular breaks during the workday. Last year, management at Deutsche Telekom, for instance, pledged to not expect workers to read email after business hours at certain points during the week. Six months ago, Lloyds bank in the U.K. banned all employees from traveling during the third week of every month. The move was outlined to staff in a memo that read: "This will improve colleagues' work/life balance. It will also help to reduce costs significantly." (Since the travel ban was put in place, 70,000 fewer trips have been taken.) Meanwhile, Google, in a bid to create the "healthiest and happiest workforce on the planet," launched a program focused on employees' emotional well-being, which includes the installation of recharging spaces -- or energy pods -- within the office for 20- or 30-minute breaks.

Even countries are starting to get in on the act: Last month, Brazil introduced a law requiring companies to pay overtime to workers who make or receive work phone calls or emails outside of office hours. The legislation recognizes emails sent to employees by their employers as "direct orders"; employees who respond to those orders outside of regular work hours are therefore entitled to overtime.

The law, which was approved by President Dilma Rousseff in December, is already drawing negative reaction from businesses. "Here in Brazil, there is a law for everything, but the problem is how to regulate it," Claudia Sakuraba, owner of Carnaval Store, a costume shop in São Paulo with four employees, told the *Financial Times* recently. "What about when you send an email and, because of problems with the Internet providers in Brazil, it doesn't arrive straight away? Or you send a text message early in the morning and, for some reason, they don't get it until the evening? It's not clear how this is all going to work."

Universal prescriptions are usually well intended, but often not very practical, according to Wharton's Friedman. "What is more useful is a customized approach," he says. "For example, some companies have rules about not using email when you go on vacation. These companies are trying to help. But many people find that not checking email while on vacation is more stressful because they know they will face a full inbox upon their return. For some people, it's better to take an hour a day to check in with the office before they go to the beach or go on a hike with their family. They want contact that is bounded. Flexibility is the essential element. But it's got to be defined and driven by the employee."

A study by Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow challenges the notion that employees need to be always available to do a good job. Perlow's findings, outlined in a recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, concerned teams of consultants at Boston Consulting Group (BCG) -- a company known for its hard-driving, ambitious and career-focused workforce. In one experiment, which involved a team working on a project for a new client, Perlow required everyone in the group to take one full day off a week. In a second experiment, which involved a team working on a post-merger restructuring project, she mandated that each consultant take one planned evening off a week, during which the employee could not work after 6 p.m., even to check email.

She found that participants who had regular downtime reported greater satisfaction with their jobs, increased likelihood that they could envision a long-term career at the firm and better work/life balance compared with BCG employees not taking part in the experiments. Participants' work benefited, too. The experiments resulted in more open communication among team members, which sparked new efficiencies

with how the team delivered projects. In addition, Perlow found that these kinds of initiatives help people learn better by forcing team members to more deeply understand each others' jobs.

"When you can just call or email the expert anytime anywhere, other people don't learn," notes Wharton's Rothbard, who reviewed Perlow's forthcoming book on the subject, *Sleeping with Your Smartphone: How to Break the 24/7 Habit and Change the Way You Work*. "Other team members don't develop. They don't gain new skills. They don't create institutional team knowledge."

Taking time away from work and our digital devices improves our health, our happiness and our productivity. But who is responsible for making sure we take that time off?

In the era of virtual offices and blurred boundaries between work and home, Craig Chappelow, global portfolio manager at the Center for Creative Leadership, a consulting firm based in Greensboro, N.C., says it is the responsibility of individual leaders "to model the kinds of behaviors they expect to see cascade down through" the organization.

"It's the boss who should be saying: 'We're better if we are not working all weekend long.' Companies should say: 'If we give people their weekends, we get their weekdays,'" he says. "Part of the solution is figuring out how you approach work, and how you approach integrating family. This is where the importance of ground rules -- and sticking to them -- comes into play. In my family, we have a rule: No BlackBerries until breakfast is over."

Companies ought to have ground rules, too, he suggests. Indeed, a growing number of businesses are reviewing their policies on how workers manage email, including how many employees are allowed to be copied on a message and how many times an email may be sent back and forth. Some companies are also monitoring the use of smartphones by employees during non-work hours.

"The fact is, work and personal life are very much intertwined, and we have to figure out [how] those two things [can] coexist in a way that doesn't stress us out," Chappelow notes. "People are going to have to learn new coping behaviors for this technology so they don't burn out. There is also a saturation point; there are only so many hours in the day."

This is a single/personal use copy of Knowledge@Wharton. For multiple copies, custom reprints, e-prints, posters or plaques, please contact PARS International: reprints@parsintl.com P. (212) 221-9595 x407.