

Technology and work that never ends: Detaching from the “electronic leash”

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In the so called “good old days”, conversations that were started before leaving the house were put on hold to rush out the door for work. After work, the chair was pushed under the desk at five in the evening and the lights were turned off, it was common to unplug and go home; knowing that whatever was left unfinished would be there the next day. Boundaries between work-life and home-life were clearly defined and easy to adhere to.

Things are much different today than they were twenty years ago, to say the least. The ability to be connected at all times has blurred the boundaries between home-life and work-life. Technology is so commonplace and readily accessible that it seems to follow people everywhere. It’s as though an electronic leash keeps employees continuously tied to their work. It’s been argued that all of the technological advances can increase efficiency and productivity. But does the increased efficiency and productivity come at a cost?

Some would say that advances in technology have even made things easier. Imagine being at home and caring for a sick child while maintaining communication with work. Others would say that in spite of the occasional positive, there are many more negatives. The ever-present technology that demands our attention creates distractions and stress. In some workplaces, it may even reduce productivity. The possible relationship between technology and how it affects people has been the subject of numerous published research articles.

One such study conducted by Park and Jex (2011) looked at the effects of communication and information technology (CIT; emails, mobile phones) use on work-family interference. Work-family interference can be defined as blurring the lines between work-life and home-life. The research of 281 office workers provided findings suggesting that creating boundaries between work-life and home-life can be beneficial for an employee’s psychological work-family interference. “As rapid advancements in CIT are expected to continue to blur the work and home domains, work-home boundary management using CIT becomes an even more salient issue for employees, employers, and researchers”.

After this first study was conducted, Park, Steve, and Fritz (2011) added to the research to further study the importance of employees’ need to detach from work. The researchers surveyed 431 alumni of a United States university and asked questions relating to psychological detachment, work-home segmentation preference and the use of communication technology at home. Park et al. (2011) defined segmentation as a strategy for balancing work and personal life.

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They hypothesized that segmenting work and non-work roles can help employees detach and recover from work demands. The study concluded that employees with a strong preference for segmenting work from home experienced greater psychological detachment during non-work time. They further found that those who saw others at work practicing a healthy work-home segmentation, reported higher levels of psychological detachment from work when outside of working hours.

Creating boundaries associated with communication and information technologies, i.e. cell phones and laptops, may be necessary to limit the stress that is felt when there is too much integration of the two. The expectation is to always be on. When employees go home, it is difficult to mentally turn off work and resist the urge to check emails and respond to them while attempting to spend “quality time” with family members.

How does this expectation affect our psychological state, and can boundaries be set to mitigate the stress and anxiety that accompany our need to always be available? Park et al. (2011) suggest that “Active segmentation by constructing impermeable technological home boundaries may be a helpful strategy for an employee who has difficulty “switching off” from work during non-work hours”. Further results from their study showed that lower use of technology after work hours was associated with higher psychological detachment, i.e. turning off work when at home. It is further suggested that the creation of boundaries or segmentations can be established by communicating the boundaries to others in the workplace. It is acceptable to communicate boundaries with coworkers. If

boundaries are not communicated, the lines will be blurred and coworkers will not respect those boundaries.

Another area of technology that is the subject of recent research by Thornton, Faires, Robbins, and Rollins (2014) of the University of Southern Maine, is mobile phones. The findings of their study entitled: The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May be Distracting, was published in the Journal of Social Psychology. Thornton et al. (2014) concluded that there is a negative impact on work performance simply by having a cell phone nearby. To test this behavior, Thornton et al. (2014) and his team conducted two separate studies.

The first study was held in a laboratory setting. The participants were told that they would be taking several timed tests and attention and accuracy was imperative. Two people were “tested” together but with their backs to each other. For one participant, a cell phone was inadvertently left on the table. For the other participant, there was no cell phone left on the table. Both participants were asked to take a series of tests, some easier than others. The second study used the same measures but was performed in a classroom setting. All students in the manipulation group were asked to place their cell phones on the table while the tests were taken. In the control group, there was no mention of a cell phone. In both studies, the participants with the cell phone showed lower performance on more difficult tasks with the presence of the cell phone. Performance was not negatively impacted when the tests were easier and less cognitively demanding.

Research demonstrates that the active use of cell phones, whether talking or texting, is distracting and may contribute to diminished performance when multi-tasking. Thornton et al. (2014) explain that the mere presence of the cell phone as being “capable of creating a distraction from the immediate task or situation at hand”. If the mere presence of a cell phone at work can be distracting and may lead to decreased productivity, employers would be wise to take a look at their policies regarding cell phone use. If a policy does not exist, research seems to support the need to implement a policy.

In conclusion, technology is advancing faster than one can keep up with it. The fact that technology is so readily available throughout the entire day, has created issues with work life stealing into family time and family life seeping into the workday. Work-family interference creates distraction and can have a negative psychological effect. One answer proposed by the research to help those that experience stress associated with work-life interference is to create boundaries. Creating more boundaries around CIT use, and “getting off the electronic leash” will help reduce stress. Ideally, creating a distraction- or interruption-free environment for work and family will likely be beneficial to the family and also increase work productivity.

References

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