Thrive

Reducing digital overload

by GAYNOR PARKIN

Commentary around the perils of technology has never been stronger. Harvard Business Review has described this overload as possibly "the defining problem of today's workplace":

All day and night, on desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, we're bombarded with so many messages and alerts that even when we want to focus, it's nearly impossible. And when we're tempted to procrastinate, diversions are only a click away.

(https://hbr.org/2015/06/conquering-digital-distraction)

The advantages of being able to work flexibly, contactable at any location and to respond quickly to urgent requests make smartphones and other portable devices invaluable in our working lives. Feeling unable to switch them off, even while we sleep, being distracted by incoming messages when we need our full attention on a conversation, or feeling anxious when we can't access the network are less desirable.

Even though we might be aware of the consequences that incur from being constantly 'on', it still appears extremely difficult for people to follow through on switching off. Common concerns we hear from our clients include:

• Worry that they might miss an important call

• Fear they will be left out of the loop on a critical decision

• Unclear expectations around required response times

While there is certainly an individual responsibility component, organisations need to step up to demonstrate a duty of care around technology use. Behavioural psychology clearly shows us that individuals will struggle to sustain change if the people and systems around them are not actively modelling and supporting their desired behaviour.

Advocating and making it possible for people to take breaks from digital devices and ensuring employees oversee when and how to use technology is an essential starting point. People do worry that they might miss an important call, or be left out of the loop on a critical decision when expectations are not clear. Then there are workplace expectations about acceptable time frames to respond to emails. We absolutely know that this is an area where behaviour matters – what is done carries much more weight than what is said. We have lost count of the times people have told us, "I can't ignore an email from my manager/client" (even if it is 11pm or 6.30am).

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS? WE RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING.

1. Encourage more conversations about expectations and solutions. Hold open forums to discuss solutions, agree codes of conduct and hold everyone (including senior leaders) accountable to these codes. Perhaps your business group can agree to limit emails or other internal communications within certain business hours or time frames (no comms after 6pm or before 6am), or in 24/7 organisations – we expect you to ignore comms if it's not your shift.

2. Discuss and agree what are the rewards (individual and team) for sticking to these solutions and codes of conduct? How can we celebrate and reward people and teams who are positive examples of proactively managing technology? What are the consequences if people break our agreements?

3. Communicate the expectations of your business group to other teams in the organisation and customers if necessary. Other teams and stakeholders can either support or challenge your agreed ways of working. How can you engage others in your solutions? Perhaps you do this directly by advising external people of your business unit's intention to maintain healthy limits around technology. Or do you ensure everyone has an out-of-office reply that states when and how often emails or text messages will be replied to?

4. Brainstorm and experiment with individual and team strategies to properly switch the technology off. Could there be one day a week when everyone completely disconnects and focuses on tasks or projects that require full (off-line) attention? Or a period of time each day? Some teams find even a 60-minute period each day helpful for this.

5. Ensure that your organisation's duty of care, expectations and guidelines for managing technology are incorporated into your health and safety policies and any wellbeing initiatives.