

WOMEN@WORK

Taking a break from digital overload



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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 9, 2012

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Lately, I fantasize about taking a holiday.

Not a destination holiday – which are hardly relaxing now that my Android phone and iPad accompany me everywhere – but a digital one. I crave a break where I can go for an hour or two without checking one of my digital devices. It's more complicated than it sounds, given that I have been sleeping with my iPad for more than a year. Before that, my BlackBerry never left my side.

During moments of work stress, I find myself moving from one device to another to check e-mail or social media notifications. I want to stop but, in true Pavlovian style, the new e-mail chime proves irresistible even if checking it doesn't bring relief.

Don't get me wrong – I love technology and, despite the jokes about "crackBerries," research shows that mobile devices improve productivity and our lives. But this compulsion to be productive all the time can lead to digital burnout. I worry that one day I will direct my resentment at some unwitting sender who harmlessly CCs me on a lengthy e-mail chain.

I recognize the irony of running a digital media company while advocating for some offline time, but I'm not alone in my stance. The whole reason for

Silicon Valley's annual Wisdom 2.0 conference is for executives from leading technology companies to gather to discuss how to achieve balance in the digital age.

Canadians should take heed. A 2012 comScore Inc. report showed we lead the world in online engagement, spending more than 45 hours a month online, five more than the U.S. average. We also spend an average of 2.8 hours daily on mobile devices.

Rather than joining ranks with the Luddites, a middle ground on the technology front may be available that not only saves our sanity, but also proves beneficial for businesses.

In her book *Sleeping with Your Smartphone*, Harvard Business School Professor Leslie Perlow recounts an experiment at the Boston Consulting Group in which each member of a six-person group took turns disconnecting at 6 p.m. until the next morning – sometimes against their will. This "predictable time off" led to more collaborative and efficient teams, the experiment found.

Some companies impose similar limitations. For example, Volkswagen shuts off e-mails for some of its employees 30 minutes after their shift ends and starts them again 30 minutes before their next shift.

But without an enforced structure, most people find their own way to cope.

Ottawa-based Janice McDonald, co-founder of iStyleOriginals.com and mymusic.ca, took an unintentional digital break when her BlackBerry took a spin in the washing machine on a recent holiday.

"After the initial panic and withdrawal, I learned that there are far fewer urgent e-mails that need to be answered immediately. Most can wait for a more convenient time that suits my schedule," she said.

The impact of that unexpected break proved beneficial for her business life; Ms. McDonald said she no longer treats her BlackBerry as another person at meetings and e-mail no longer drives her day, allowing her more time for

strategic thinking.

Francine Gingras, vice-president of global public relations at Elizabeth Arden in New York, is an advocate of undertaking a "digital detox."

Three years ago, when the Welland, Ont., native learned that her family's nickname for her was "BlackBerry mama," she decided to take a two-month, technology-free trip across Asia with her daughter. Four days into the trip, both of them had rediscovered how to be fully alert and attuned to their experience, likening it to donning a giant "do not disturb" sign.

Ms. Gingras said that clear division between digital time and face time continues to influence her managerial approach. "I am a communicator so there are some realities where I do need to be connected," she explained.

"Giving my team and management all of my attention while with them is not only respectful; it helps me be more efficient and sets an example for this next generation of digitally savvy millennials," she added.

The influence of the digital break extends to her daughter, Josephine Sullivan, 19, a student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "I don't think it's healthy to be reliant on temporary things. Sometimes I need to disconnect to get some quiet time to do other things," Ms. Sullivan said.

Even smaller companies are beginning to see the value of a digital disconnect for increased productivity.

In September, Adrienne Graham, chief executive officer of Atlanta-based Empower Me! Corp., a business strategy consulting firm, took her family on a Caribbean cruise. Not only did she leave all technology behind, she gave her team the time off from work – and their devices – as well.

"I can't say what they did with their time," said Ms. Graham, but she credits the break for a boost in creativity. "I came back and the ideas started rolling in," she said. "I was a lot more relaxed upon my return and that allowed me to be able to jump in to work without the usual stalling or dreading."

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