How one consultant is winning the "burnout war"

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Beth Blakely
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After working for KPMG for a number of years, Jim Carroll decided it was time to start working from home.

"I'm not a dot-com millionaire; I never got involved in a dot-com start-up," Carroll said. "I probably could have, and I could have become rich. But I often say to my wife, 'If I did, I probably would be divorced and never see the kids.' Because I think the decision a lot of these folks make is that money is everything and other things in the world are not as important. I never wanted to be there."

The Pervasive Workplace

Pagers, cell phones, and e-mail all make it easier for you to work when you're supposed to be on your own time. How do you preserve time for your personal life? What can employers do to help employees strike a good balance between work and home demands?

Find some solutions and read about how your peers are coping with this issue in this special TechRepublic series on the pervasive workplace.

For more information, check out TechRepublic's Pervasive Workplace briefing center.

Carroll, a media authority, keynote speaker, columnist, and business consultant, is the author of more than 30 books, including *Light Bulbs to Yottabits, Surviving the Information Age*, and *Selling Online: How to Become a Successful E-Commerce Merchant*. He made the decision to work from home 10 years ago and hasn't looked back. Although his home is fully wired—he has 18 PCs—they don't take over his life, despite what the world around him may expect.

"It's fully expected that you should be plugged in and available at all times," he said. "That's sort of the culture that's been built up with the whole Internet thing."

Carroll credits his family and his "core values" for keeping his priorities straight. Here's what he had to say about setting healthy boundaries between your work and home life.

How do you get unplugged?
TechRepublic: How do you make sure your work life doesn't invade your home life?
Carroll: Having two little boys helps. They're five and seven, and certainly they know that at five o'clock—if I'm not under a big deadline—they can come down to Daddy's machine and turn it off. I think I've also sort of taught myself not to go overboard by refusing to get caught up in the "over-hype" that is out there. I've got a Palm Pilot and a Handspring, but it's sort of a conscious decision not to use them. I don't want to be a junkie to my scheduling and to my machine.
I had an Internet cell phone that would let me check my e-mail from anywhere. I'm in the bakery at 8 A.M. one Saturday reading my e-mail and I was thinking, "This is really dumb."
It's making conscious decisions to not become a slave to [work]. Do you really *need* one of these little wireless e-mail things? Do you really *need* to be checking your e-mail at 11 o'clock at night?

It's probably a little bit like booze or drugs: It's recognizing that this can be a problem.

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What are companies doing to combat employee burnout?
TechRepublic: Do you think that employers—especially consulting firms—are aware of the problems today's pervasive workplace may cause?
Carroll: I don't think that companies are really even thinking about it yet. Everybody has been busy gearing up with all this technology. Companies have been busy putting stuff in place that will let employees connect from anywhere at any time. I don't think that anybody has yet sat back and said, "Whoa, wait a moment. Are we going too far, and are we creating a problem here?" They sit back and think, "Isn't this wonderful? We can get more productivity out of these folks. They can work at home. They can do more in more time." They're only thinking of the positive benefits. I think five years from now, we might see a flood of articles that say a lot of people have burned out from technology.
There needs to be a realization by both the employee and the employer that downtime is downtime. For example, I don't give my cell phone [number] to anyone but my wife. I just don't want to do that. I like my quiet time in my car. I think people just have to begin to draw the line.

What's the positive side to technology?
TechRepublic: What role does technology play in enhancing our lives?
Carroll: If I've got a laptop and I can go home from my company and do some work at 9 P.M. and not have to drive back to the office, that's wonderful. That's the good use of technology. But I don't think that my employer should expect that Saturday afternoon if I'm at a ball game, I should be sending and receiving e-mail.
I've taken a digital camera with me [on trips away from home]. My little guys put stuffed animals in my suitcase when they were younger, and I'd take pictures of [the stuffed animals] along the way—like sitting in the seat of an airplane and sitting in the office boardroom where I was having a meeting—and put them on a Web site. My wife would take [the boys] onto the Web and say, "Here's where Daddy is and where *your* little guys have been."
I'm now working on setting up Internet Web conferencing so I can take a little Web cam with me and have a visit back to them and conversation with video. I think that's cool stuff—I think that's good stuff.

A glimpse into the future
A final thought from Carroll: "I think some smart Caribbean island somewhere in the next 10 years is going to create the first technology-free zone. You'll be frisked when you enter to be sure you're not sneaking in a Palm Pilot and a wireless and a cell phone. They will offer a completely unplugged vacation. I think people are going to crave the ability to just get away."

Read more about the 24/7 workplace
TechRepublic is taking a look at how work is encroaching on the personal lives of IT professionals via constant connectivity and ever-growing performance demands. Read more about what employers can do to help employees balance work and family demands, and what strategies employees can use to save some time for themselves in the Pervasive Workplace briefing center.