

March 22, 2004

www.csae.com

Taking Back Your Personal Life

Remember the FiloFax?

It was the hottest workplace accessory back in the '80s - the paper-based calendar, notebook, address book and to-do list was the "personal organizer" that people swore by.

So much so, that the company boasted a huge share of the nearly \$1-billion worldwide market for desktop organizers.

But then along came personal computer organizer software, closely followed by Palm Pilots, cell phones with built-in calendar software, RIM pagers... and with these new technologies, came the popularity of e-mail, the Internet, voicemail, instant messaging and e-mail paging.

Suddenly, it seemed, we had a lot more tools to organize our working life and a lot more connectivity as well.

FiloFax ended up being bought out by its competitor DayRunner in the late 1990s for less than \$85-million US and today, while you can still buy a FiloFax, it seems like nothing more than a quaint reminder of a decade that featured new wave music, spiked hair, and "personal time" that was actually personal.

What a difference we've seen in the workplace as a result of the change from paper to technology! One of the most significant impacts is that the new way of doing things has led to a significant reduction in the fine line between "work time" and "personal time."

Quite clearly, back in the "good old days" of the FiloFax, we had time of our own. When we left the office at the end of the day, it was rare for us to be contacted by our fellow employees or clients.

Sure, we might have taken some work with us on occasion, but we weren't faced with constant interruptions from the office and co-workers. We didn't scramble at 10 p.m. to read our latest business message, or to contact someone with a great idea we just had.

Today, in the wired world, people are lugging around with them laptops, cellphones, pagers, and e-mail pagers. They're taking calls at all hours of the day, checking their e-mail on a constant basis, constantly calling in to their voicemail, and are taking their work with them wherever they go.

Maybe the first signs of the reduction of our personal life were evident when cellphone companies began boasting that they were improving their network coverage in "cottage country" and other recreational areas.

All of this makes many people wonder if things have gone too far.

It's certainly an issue that's a hot topic in the world of human resources. Examine the brochure for any HR conference, and you'll find that there's a discussion of the idea of "work/life balance" on the agenda.

These people are at the vanguard of a growing perception that perhaps we need to work harder to ensure that people can get their valuable personal time back.

There is no doubt that people are adopting technology with a vengeance. In North America, there are now over 100 million cellphones - and an additional 46,000 people sign up for cellphone plans each and every day.

On the Internet, people are sending about 10 billion e-mail messages every day, a figure that is expected to grow to 35 billion in a few short years. Our usage of the Web has come to rival the time we spend in front of the TV.

While much of this technology is referred to as "time-saver" technology, studies show that most of us feel like our personal time is being stolen from us.

A survey by IPSOS-Reid found that 59% of people check their office voicemail after their work day is finished, 30% accept work related faxes at home, and 29% keep their cellphones on so that they can be reached at home.

Mix into this, the number of times we might sneak into our e-mail to see what might be waiting for us there, and you've got a lot of work going on during personal time.

How bad is it? Perhaps the most telling statistic comes from a recent survey by Wirthlin Worldwide, which indicated that 39% of those polled said they would answer a cellphone call in the bathroom.

It's time that everyone think about the need to find a proper degree of balance between how much they work, and how much time they devote to the rest of their life. What should you do if things have gone overboard with your technology- plugged-in-life?

First, question the "buzz" that suggests that you need to be plugged in all time. Over the last few years, the mantra has emerged with the so-called "fast economy" that we need to "work fast, work faster, work 24/7."

Is this really necessary? Maybe not - step back and assess your situation.

You can best do this by assessing your values. To achieve real balance in your working life, you've got to rethink the fundamental values which motivate you: is it money and career success that is your overriding goal, or is it something else?

How important is your family compared to your job? How important is that vacation you've been thinking about?

Perhaps a fundamental re-assessment of your own values will help you determine how to achieve a better balance between work and life in the digital age - because it will help you to decide whether to unplug a bit during your personal time.

If you feel that other things in life are more important to you than your job, it becomes an easy matter of achieving balance, even in a world in which technology can link you to your job all the time.

And make sure you create some personal space. Take the time to create technology-free zones in your home, your office and in your life. You need to establish several areas of digital-free life - areas and times in your life when you will truly be unplugged.

Bottom line? Learn to ignore. Turn things off! Go without sometimes! Successful people are plugged in, but they know when to tune out and unplug - take the time to do the same.

If you are headed on vacation, do you really want your cellphone or pager? Assess the necessity of

this with every family vacation you set out for.

Should you share your cellphone number with everyone, or restrict it to just a few? Think about the consequences.

You should also be frank and forthright with your co-workers and boss about your digital boundaries.

There are far too many expectations in the workplace today that you should be reachable all the time, from anywhere. That's fine. In fact, that's fantastic for during the business day. There's no better way to provide optimum customer service by having instant connectivity especially if you are a busy road warrior. It's the best way to keep on top of all your client's accounts.

But if you want some down time, if you truly want some down time, pick a right time for it and make sure that people understand you are going to have it.

Of course, this calls for a complete cultural shift within many organizations. If you are a senior executive, then you should take some time to learn the business case of balance, and encourage the organization to think about the issue at a corporate level.

The fact is, there are many studies and reports that indicate that individuals who better manage their time, and learn to divorce their personal time from their work time, reduce their stress, improve their health, and end up living a happier and more enriching life.

The bottom line is that many organizations need to question their current corporate culture when it comes to their digital values.

It shouldn't be up to an employee to advise co-workers that there are times that they can't be reached!

Jim Carroll, an author, keynote speaker and columnist, lives in a home that features 18 personal computers, yet he feels gloriously unconnected much of the time. He learned how to draw a dividing line between his digital work world and his unplugged personal time one Saturday morning while reading e-mail on his Internet cell-phone and ignoring his 6 and 8-year-old sons. At that point, he got rid of the device, and gave them permission to keep him away from technology during his "off time." You can learn more about him at his Web site.

You can learn more about him at www.jimcarroll.com. For permission to re-print this article or to provide feedback to the author, please contact Jim at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.



CANADIAN SOCIETY OF ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES
SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DES DIRECTEURS D'ASSOCIATION

© Copyright 2004 Canadian Society of Association Executives