

Silencing the Smartphone

By Tanya Mohn

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Resolutions to change behavior are common at this time of year, but they usually involve exercising more or smoking less. Now, some companies are adopting policies aimed at weaning employees from their electronic devices.

Atos, an international information technology company, plans to phase out all e-mails among employees by the end of 2013 and rely instead on other forms of communication. And starting in the new year, employees at Daimler, the German automaker, can have incoming e-mail automatically deleted during vacations so they do not return to a flooded in-box. An automatic message tells the sender which person is temporarily dealing with the employee's e-mail.

No one is expected to be on call at all hours of the day and night, and "switching off" after work is important, "even if you are on a business trip," said Sabrina Schrimpf, a Daimler spokeswoman, referring to the company's recently released report, "Balanced! — Reconciling Employees' Work and Private Lives."

Disconnecting can be more challenging for business travelers who frequently work across time zones.

And there is a ripple effect, said Leslie A. Perlow, a professor of leadership at Harvard Business School and the author of "Sleeping With Your Smartphone." "These guys fly in the middle of the night and send e-mails back to colleagues" who wait up, ready to respond.

A study conducted last spring by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that while mobile phones were valued as a way to stay productive, there were downsides to being available at all times. The nationwide survey of 2,254 adults found that 44 percent of cellphone owners had slept with their phone next to their bed and that 67 percent had experienced "phantom rings," checking their phone even when it was not ringing or vibrating. Still, the proportion of cellphone owners who said they "could live without it" has gone up, to 37 percent from 29 percent in 2006.

Sam Chapman, chief executive of Empower Public Relations in Chicago, said he used to feel phantom vibrations and frequently read and sent e-mail on his BlackBerry in the middle of the night. He slept poorly, did not feel refreshed in the morning and considered himself addicted. "I wanted to make sure that what happened to me didn't happen to my employees," he said.

So Mr. Chapman adopted what he called a BlackBerry blackout policy. He and his staff of about 20 turn off their BlackBerrys from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. on weekdays and completely on weekends for all work-related use, with rare exceptions. “When I’m well rested, I show up to work ready to go,” he said.

He maintains that regimen while traveling, and said the policy had increased company productivity.

Professor Perlow agreed that companies could improve their bottom line by encouraging employees to disconnect at times. “Being constantly on actually undermines productivity,” she said.

But it is not always easy. In early 2012, when Michelle Barry, Mark Jacobsen and a third partner created Centric Brand Anthropology, a Seattle-based company that advises clients on brand strategy, design and culture management, they gave serious thought to the issue.



Michelle Barry and Mark Jacobsen of Centric Brand Anthropology strive for the elusive work-life balance. Matthew Ryan Williams for The New York Times

“A huge priority for us was to have a good balance between work-life,” said Mr. Jacobsen, Centric’s vice president and creative director. “Yet we have found that very difficult to do while working with large multinational clients,” which often require international travel and constant availability.

Being a start-up compounded those challenges. “Just because you can e-mail at 2 a.m., doesn’t mean it’s a good thing,” he said.

Centric encourages employees to prepare a week before a trip, designating a colleague as backup, informing clients about their travel plans, and trying to avoid deadlines immediately after they return. Employees are also encouraged to take spouses or partners on longer assignments and to build in downtime, said Ms. Barry, the company's president and chief executive. When traveling, she said, "I make a commitment to myself not to stay up all night answering e-mails."

Experts say there is no firm data for how many companies have policies restricting the use of electronic devices outside the office. "The companies I know actively encourage workers to stay connected after hours and on weekends," said Dennis J. Garritan, a managing partner of the private equity firm Palmer Hill Capital and an adjunct professor at Harvard Business School.

"It's positioned as a win-win," he said: employees remain aware of what's going on and feel less overwhelmed when they return to the office, and the company benefits because employees remain productive.

Wayne Rivers, president of the Family Business Institute, a consulting firm in Raleigh, N.C., said many companies "value employees who answer their phones at 1 in the morning." In most cases, it is left up to each worker "to exercise the discipline necessary to avoid exhaustion and burnout."

Christopher R. Bennett, senior transport specialist for the World Bank, who spent about five months traveling for work in 2012, refused to accept a BlackBerry several years ago. "There is a reason they are called 'CrackBerries,'" Mr. Bennett said, "What I have observed from my colleagues who have BlackBerrys is that because of the pressures of work, especially as we deal with different time zones, they are continually checking and responding to e-mails. At home. At dinner. At the gym. On weekends. Since I have such an addictive personality, I didn't want it."

Stuart Fisher, head of the personal and work stress counseling unit for the World Bank, said in an e-mail that while the bank did not have a policy restricting the use of electronic devices outside of work and had not found it to be a problem, it viewed the issue in the broader context of promoting a healthy work-life balance. Devoting "sufficient time to themselves is imperative," he said.

He added, though, that in a global organization, "ready access to staff is critically important, not just to ensure the success of the various missions and projects, but also for accountability purposes as our staff members travel to remote, austere and potentially hazardous environments."

Sherry Turkle, a professor of the social studies of science and technology at M.I.T. and author of "Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other," said she thought more companies would adopt similar policies. "I'm optimistic,

because I think that everybody is feeling the pinch,” she said. Employees are too busy using devices to have the conversations that matter and are necessary to get business done.

“I don’t use the metaphor of addiction,” said Ms. Turkle, who is also a psychologist. “We’re not going to give it up. We shouldn’t give it up. It’s more like food, and being on a digital diet. The questions we should ask are, ‘What are the healthy choices?’ ”

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