

# Work-Related Communication Technology

## Managing the challenges



By David W. Ballard

**O**ur love affair with smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices makes it increasingly difficult for employees to disconnect from the office outside of normal work hours. While this has the potential to negatively affect well-being and job performance, in a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, a majority of working Americans said communication technology also allows them to be more productive and gives them added flexibility.

More than half of employed adults said they check work messages at least once a day over the weekend, before or after work during the week, and even when they are home sick. More than 4 in 10 workers reported doing the same while on vacation. In addition to enhanced productivity and flexibility, working adults reported that communication technology makes it easier for them to get their work done and nearly half indicated that it has a positive impact on their relationships with co-workers.

But being plugged in 24/7 is not without its challenges. More than one-third of employed Americans said communication technology increases their workload and makes it more difficult to stop thinking about work and take a break. Although people are often given the advice to unplug in order to avoid the unhealthy effects of their hyper-connected lives, that doesn't necessarily require a complete "digital detox."

Forward-thinking organizations are beginning to reevaluate their technology-related work practices and provide employees with resources that help them make effective use of information and communication technology, while avoiding the potential downsides.

### Organizational Issues

As employers grapple with the ever-changing technology landscape and its implications for work and well-being, they need to consider the way their workplace practices, norms, and expectations shape the way employees use communication technology.

**Technology as a stressor:** By automating routine tasks, giving us easy access to information, and removing barriers to communication, technology is designed to make us more effective and efficient. In this "utopian world," these tools free us to put our time and energy to more creative, productive, and meaningful use. That is, until we awaken to the reality of system failures, equipment malfunctions, and network errors. Add to that the pressure to work faster and be more productive, the need to stay up-to-date on the latest technology, information overload from hundreds of daily e-mails, and constant interruptions as new messages pour in, and the benefits of these technologies can be quickly eroded.

Don't let the very tools that are supposed to help employees get the job done hinder their ability to achieve goals and cause anger, frustration, and job stress. Fix your information technology problems, provide high-quality support services, select solutions that are user-friendly, and plan new system and software rollouts carefully, so technology is part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

**Understand your workforce:** Before you jump straight to providing technical training, start with a good understanding of employees' attitudes about communication technology. Use employee surveys,

small group meetings, and one-on-one conversations with managers to assess the degree to which employees feel confident in their ability to master new technologies and use existing tools effectively. Similarly, getting a read on their underlying beliefs about the technologies your organization uses can help you plan more effective communications and training. For example, if employees think the tools are overly complicated, intrusive, time-wasting, or too impersonal, unearthing these beliefs can help you address barriers to effective technology use and build employees' feelings of self-efficacy.

**Examine your culture:** With few exceptions, it's unlikely that you have explicit policies that require employees to be "on call" and responsive at all hours. However, the norms and expectations that exist in your organization may be functioning as a set of unspoken rules that promote an always-on mentality. Does a "good" employee respond to an e-mail from the boss within minutes, even in the evenings and on weekends? Do managers expect employees to be available at their beck and call? What behaviors get highlighted as desirable or undesirable when it comes to availability and response time and what actions get rewarded? Are organizational leaders, who may be more likely to put in long hours and stay connected to the office outside of normal business hours, inadvertently communicating through their actions that they expect their employees to do the same?

These norms and expectations may be adding to employees' stress levels and preventing them from having the necessary recovery time to perform at their best. In addition to examining the assumptions that may be operating below the surface in your organization and taking steps to address any dysfunctional elements, managers and work teams should explicitly discuss their expectations when it comes to the use of information and communication technologies.

**Good intentions gone bad:** Some organizations are aware of the problems that constantly being plugged in can cause for employees and the organization alike and force employees to disconnect. Through either voluntary or mandatory e-mail blackouts, these employers effectively shut off e-mail after hours. Although designed to "protect" employees, this type of paternalistic approach may inadvertently cause more stress by reducing the flexibility employees have in how, when, and where they work, decreasing the amount of control they have over their work environment, and preventing people from working in ways that are the best fit for their personal needs and preferences.

A more effective approach is to communicate the importance of recovery time and help employees develop healthy habits when it comes to their use of information and communication technology. By ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the skills necessary to recover from work stress, avoid burnout, and minimize work-life conflict, employers can buffer themselves from the associated damage to engagement and productivity and benefit from the value technology can bring to the workplace.

Here are some tips you can share with your workforce...

### 7 Communication Technology Tips for Staying Fully Charged

**Stop multitasking:** In an effort to be more productive and juggle the multiple demands they face every day, people fool themselves into

believing they are great multitaskers. In reality, this amounts to nothing more than a frequent shifting of attention that is further exacerbated by the chirping tweets, pinging text messages, and chiming e-mail alerts that distract us from the task at hand. Research suggests that we actually get less done, miss more information, and make more mistakes when we multitask. So, eliminate distractions, turn off push notifications and alerts for all but essential communication channels, and give what you are doing your full attention.

**Take short breaks:** Stay energized and productive by taking a minute or two periodically throughout the day to stand up, stretch, breathe deeply and shake off the accumulating tension. Short breaks between tasks can be particularly effective, helping you feel like you've wrapped up one thing before moving on to the next. Take a 10-15 minute break every few hours to recharge and avoid the temptation to work through lunch. The productivity you gain will more than make up for the time you spend on break.

**Set boundaries:** Communication technology can enhance your productivity, but it can also allow work to creep into family and personal time. Set rules for yourself, such as turning off your cell phone during meal times, or establishing certain times when you return calls or respond to e-mails. Although people have different preferences when it comes to how much they blend their work and home life, creating some clear boundaries between these realms can reduce the potential for work-life conflict.

**Manage expectations:** Be sure to communicate your rules to others, so you can manage their expectations. If you don't intend to respond to e-mails at all hours of the night, make sure your boss knows that. If you are on your work e-mail all weekend, people will come to expect an immediate response and you may feel pressured to act accordingly. Let technology be a tool that works for you, rather than the other way around.

**Turn off and tune in:** The world is full of distractions that prevent us from living in the moment. By learning to better focus on the present, you can improve your attention and concentration, reduce your stress level, and be more engaged in all aspects of your life. Start by putting away your smartphone for a few minutes each day and focusing on a simple activity like breathing, walking, or enjoying a meal. The skill of being able to focus purposefully on a single activity without distraction will get stronger with practice and you'll find that you can apply it to many different aspects of your life.

**Break bad habits:** Do you fill every empty moment of the day by crushing virtual sweets, slicing pixelated fruit, or launching feathered friends from slingshots? When was the last family meal you had where people actually made eye contact? Can you sit through a meeting or have an extended conversation with a colleague without checking your friends' status updates? Habits form through repetition and become stronger and more automatic over time. Our technology habits are no exception and you may even find yourself whipping out your smartphone and scrolling down to refresh a page before you even realize you're doing it. Work to identify your unhealthy technology habits and eliminate them. Remove the temptation by putting your phone away or turning it off, close or minimize other windows on your computer's desktop, and enlist support from friends and family members to help keep you on track.

**Recharge:** To avoid the negative effects of chronic stress and burnout, we need time to replenish and return to our pre-stress level of functioning. This recovery process requires "switching off" from work by having periods of time when you are neither engaging in work-related activities, nor thinking about work. Our "always on" culture and availability of



mobile technology makes this type of detachment difficult, because work is always within arm's reach and incoming messages repeatedly pull your thoughts back to work, even when you are off the clock. That's why it's critical that you establish some rules for yourself and set boundaries that allow you to disconnect from time to time, in a way that fits your needs and preferences. By periodically eliminating the distraction of your smartphone and focusing your attention on hobbies, community events, sports and fitness activities, healthy sleep habits, and important relationships in your life, you can benefit from better physical and mental health, have more energy and less stress, and perform better in all aspects of your life.

In the end, our computers and mobile devices are just tools. By taking a thoughtful approach to how we use them, information and communication technologies can enhance our lives by helping us achieve our individual and collective goals, connecting us to others, and helping us to be healthier, happier, and more productive. **TEL**



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