

Cyberwork

Information overload Kate Anthony

One of the interesting elements of my work in the field of using technology in mental health is watching the trends in society regarding attitudes to it, and this is particularly relevant to the workplace. From the early ages of mobile technology developing in the 1980s, with Gordon Gekko screaming into his brick of a phone in the film *Wall Street*,¹ through to the arrival of private computers in the 1990s, each time getting smaller and smaller, and to the current practice of carrying a smartphone, laptop, tablet and – increasingly – wearable technology. The trend in the early 2000s has been to get the latest device and wait for it to increase our capacity to remain on top of things.

We can now access an enormous wealth of information wherever we are. WiFi access has moved out of the office to our train journeys and our coffee shops, and has become part of our holiday destinations. Even with no WiFi available, we get the best deals for 3G and 4G mobile data access to ensure we are never out of touch. It takes a strong work ethic to decide to have a week off technology, and even then we spend time worrying about the avalanche of catching up to do upon our return.

In the early part of this decade, I have watched information overload become an additional stress. Whereas the great hope was that continual access would mean managing our time better, the flexibility that remote access to the internet has given us actually means that we are never switched off, rather than being in control of our down-time. The brain gets exhausted by the constant skimming of information available to us, the next email arrival pinging from our phones, and the barrage of news from around the world as events take place, often live via Twitter.

But as we move into 2015, I am seeing a shift in this trend. Mindfulness in the workplace is becoming popular to help us recover the balance that we had, before access to all these devices became part of

our daily routine. At a recent conference at the Microsoft headquarters in London, the keynote speaker talked of his intentionally seeking to spend time within natural environments, and how he is teaching his children the value of harnessing the power we have over the off button. There is a trend to move away from the demanding notification alerts we receive – and to take the view that those alerts are useful but not essential to our wellbeing. Since Google themselves appointed a Head of Mindfulness, Chade-Meng Tan, it has become downright fashionable to demand time and space to pay attention to our emotional fitness as much as our physical fitness.

Being mindful at work also helps us deal with conflicts and move away from the trigger responses to what happens in the office. Perhaps your colleague has really ticked you off with their demand that you give an instant response to the email they sent five minutes ago. Tan points out that it takes effort to turn that angry response to demands on your precious time, into a positive channelling of emotions to a win-win situation. By reframing the response to the demand from anger to appropriate indignation, we can address how we can both manage the response to the email and lose the underlying anger the situation has created. Tan says, 'the difference between [anger and indignation] is power. Anger arises from powerlessness; indignation arises from power. So it's about how we help people reduce fear and increase positive power.'²

By giving our devices our constant attention, we set ourselves up to be angry about not being in control. By choosing both our up-time and down-time intentionally, we can create space to deal with the demands of what communications need our attention in a positive manner.

Next time someone is screaming at you for a response to an email at 1.15pm, gently point out that taking your lunch break under a tree in the park is likely to yield a more fruitful response upon your return at 2pm than were you to attempt it while moving between

meetings in the lift on your tablet. You don't have a gun to your head to take the tablet to the park – so be mindful of your choices around your access to technology, and where you lay the frustration in having made them.

Finally, take advantage of the current trend by introducing mindfulness in the workplace! If the behemoth that is Google is benefitting from using a Buddhist approach to their workplace functioning, it is likely that we can all take a lesson from that and promote a Zen attitude at work rather than a Wall Street one.

References

- 1 *Wall Street*. Oliver Stone (dir). US: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation: 1987
- 2 Confino J. Google's head of mindfulness: 'goodness is good for business'. The Guardian Sustainable Business Hub. 2014. www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/google-meditation-mindfulness-technology



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