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Too Much Technology?
Boundaries & Limitations at Work & at Home

Technology can be a great thing in many ways. We can Google something in the blink of an eye, and have access to information that would have taken hours to research in a library decades ago. I remember looking up books for college term papers, and it was not uncommon to scour through and check out multiple books just to piece together enough information for a single topic. Talk about time consuming!

Technology also drives communication like never before. We can talk to, listen to, and even see people anytime, anywhere on our smart phones. It still blows my mind that someone could be in Boise and receive a text from a business colleague in Shanghai.

These are among the significant advances to life in the 21st century and THEY ARE great developments in many ways!

Communication: Face to Face is still Best

But it's also necessary to examine some of the drawbacks – first and foremost among them pertains to *communication*. It's ironic that in a day and age with more "communication" than ever before, there is conversely less "interaction" than ever.

Consider: When you "press the flesh," you get to meet a peer in your field, to actually "know" this person … especially over time when you see some of the same people at some of the same meetings and other events. You are able to build relationships by engaging in important face-to-face networking … as well as the professional development you're able to gain by attending conferences and other trainings. But you can only do this *in person*, not online.

In this day and age you can go to a conference and find scores of people more interested in keeping their head down, scrolling through their screens, than they are in getting up, strolling around the premises, looking for potential opportunities for people to meet. What kind of interpersonal skills will tomorrow's business leaders have?

Conference Takeaways: Boundaries & Limitations

The next time you are at a conference.... seminar... workshop.....whatever the specifics, be sure to:

❖ **Introduce yourself to at least three new people**. Current acquaintances don't count – it needs to be someone new!

❖ **Along similar lines, take more notice of your surroundings**. Spend the time you'd otherwise spend on your smartphone by "absorbing" your environment. Who in the room (large or small) is smiling? Laughing? Engrossed? Not very engaged? Take note of roughly how many people are in the room, and so on.

❖ **Cut back on the time you spend texting or otherwise focusing on your mobile device**. (Set limitations for yourself – say, twice an hour – one at the bottom of the hour, and the other at the top of the hour.) Unless you are expecting a call from an important client, do not use your device in between. Who knows? If you master the "twice-an-hour" limitation, you just might be able to set a new boundary for ONCE an hour for checking your mobile device!

❖ **Generally speaking, take advantage of all of the face-to-face opportunities you can**. Don't kid yourself: Even if you are able to limit the amount of time spent on your mobile device, you will *still* have loads of *time* for engaging your mobile device, so while you're at a conference or other event, take advantage of all the face-to-face opportunities you can. There

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is no reason to be "disengaged" when you can be *en*gaged! You won't regret spending time conversing or other interaction.

Point to Ponder: Ask employees to share their experiences at a recent conference, seminar, or similar event. To what extent were they truly engaged? Did they meet new people in their field? If not, why not?

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Addressing Phone Addiction

Conferences and other outside-the-office events aren't the only ones in which our mobile devices are driving us to distraction. A survey by Careerbuilder found that more than half (55%) of employers blame mobile phones for decreased productivity. More than 80% of workers said they keep their smart phones within eye contact at work, and roughly two-thirds (66%) say they use their phones several times throughout the workday.

Workplace Takeaways: Boundaries & Limitations

Part of the problem is that too few workplaces have a social media policy in place, and even when they do they're either not realistic or properly enforced. *"I don't let my employees use their cell phones or other devices at work!"* John might say. Now it is certainly possible that John's policy at XYZ Widget "might" work, but how much animosity would it create? Are employees still sneaking peaks at their mobile devices when the boss isn't looking?

❖ **Institute a well-thought out social media policy**. Establish *boundaries* for using mobile devices such as: 1) at the beginning of the workday;

2) on breaks; and 3) during the lunch hour. Unless there is an emergency, that is <u>it</u>. At other times, mobile devices are to be turned off and outside of arm's reach.

❖ **Make sure the policy is fair and realistic**. Whatever the specifics, the boundaries need to be realistic. If they are too strict, you may create more angst than it's worth. But it's important to point out that workers should not have carte blanche to have their devices on and close at hand all day either! There needs to be some middle ground.

❖ **Enforce the policy**. This is the tricky part, but it has to be done for the policy to truly work. If Christy and Jane look the other way when Heather is texting or scrolling half the morning away, it is that much easier for Barb or Julie or Dan or Tim to violate the policy, too. *"If Heather can get away with texting so much, why should my smart phone be shut off?"* Since many people still don't like to snitch on their co-workers, even if they're doing something wrong, consider implementing something like a…

❖ … **1-2-3 provision**. If someone clearly sees Heather (poor Heather, we keep picking on her!) texting or using her mobile device during a non-designated time, that is strike #1. At strike #2, her device gets taken away until the next scheduled break. At #3, it is taken away for the remainder of the day.

❖ **This ties us back to the first point: instituting a well-thought out policy**. If the punishment is seen as too arbitrary or harsh, employees are likely to balk, and everything might well fall apart, and the workplace is back to square one in which it isn't clear whatsoever if or when employees can (or can't) use their mobile devices. However, if something like a 1-2-3 provision is stated clearly in the policy, then Heather knows in advance what the consequences are for being "on her cell" too much. Management must also be prepared to follow through as necessary. *The point of 1-2-3 is to simply point it out as an <u>example</u>. Something else might work better in <u>your</u> workplace.*

❖ **If all else fails, consider using something like a "Lazi box."** Based on the concept of a Faraday cage, Israeli attorney Yuval Lazi developed an enclosure that blocks external electric fields. It's the blocking aspect that makes the device so valuable, according to the inventor. "If somebody can shut off his phone and not look at and put it away, that's great," Lazi told Tribune News Services. "…How many meetings have you been to where people were asked to silence their phones but didn't?"

If this idea seems a bit extreme and impractical, you might consider having employees place their mobile devices in a box when they enter a meeting room. Doing so might seem harsh, but it's also likely to send a message that workers are not going to be distracted.

Point to Ponder: Is there a social media policy in your workplace? If not, what is productivity like? How much time do employees seem to waste on their smart phones? Should limitations be in place? What would be the fairest way to implement such a policy?

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The Modern Home: No one Knows what Anyone Else is Doing

Imagine the following scenario at Jane's home. (Jane is in sales at XYZ Widget Co.) Allyson is texting Jamie about tomorrow's volleyball practice. Jacob is jamming away to Bruno Mars, earbuds firmly in so the volume doesn't bother anyone else in the room. Meanwhile, Mom is using an electronic calendar to plan tomorrow's to-do list. Finally, Dad is relaxing, reading the newest book from his favorite author he just downloaded onto his Kindle.

So what, you might say? Just family life in the 21st century, right? Perhaps, but when these scenes play out day after day, after day after day, after… Is this a good thing?

Takeaways in the Home: Boundaries & Limitations

❖ *Be sure your kids "tell" you what is going on in their lives*. Is such cases, as opposed to just texting her teammate about it, Allyson could actually be telling her folks about her big practice tomorrow with the season's biggest volleyball match less than a week away.

Or what would be wrong with Jacob excitedly telling his folks what his sister, Allyson, already knows, that Bruno Mars is the best musical entertainer since, well…. (You fill in the blank). Mom and Dad might not agree, but at least they would become aware of something going on in their son's life – that being his love of music and his favorite artist in particular – as opposed to having no clue what he is listening to on his earbuds. If this doesn't work at dinner time, ask them in the morning, whenever you are all together.

❖ *Mom and Dad must adhere to the rules!* Of course, none of this works if Dad is still plugged in to his Kindle night after night, oblivious to the other goings-on in the household, or if Mom is simultaneously working on an electronic list or texting the URL to a great new recipe to her best friend. Mom and Dad need to communicate what they are doing, too.

❖ *Set an electronic curfew*. Points #1 and #2 only work if you devise some type of electronic boundaries. Only you and your family know what the best limitations would be, and of course it would also depend on your kids' ages. However, it's a good idea to set one time for school nights during the week, and a slightly more lenient policy on weekends.

Summary

It's true that many of us, whatever gender, age, nationality, or workplace, overdo technology, which is why it is so important to devise boundaries and limitations. After all, technology is supposed to be a tool that *we* are in control of, and not the tool in control of *us*. ∎

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Setting Boundaries Online

Good boundaries are important for healthy relationships, but when it comes to our online lives, we rarely think to create clear-cut borders. Regardless of whether you're using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or any other social media website — or even just writing emails — it's important to proceed carefully about time spent online. Psychologist Dana Gionta offers some suggestions:

❖ *Establish boundaries concerning time*. Let's face it: Sites like Facebook can become a black hole, sucking your time into its abyss — if you let them. It's easy to feel powerless, especially if you're using social media sites professionally and want to build a supportive circle. The Internet is like a moving target, and with that comes the expectation that we need to respond to people's comments right away, return email within a day or even hours and stay plugged in so we're continuously in the know.

But remember that you *do* have a choice, and "there is no requirement," Gionta said. Rather, figure out what works best for you. Blocking out 15 minutes a day for catching up on comments and your community can still help you make and maintain connections — without feeling stressed and overwhelmed, she said.

❖ *Think about your purpose online*. According to Gionta, what helps when setting boundaries is thinking ahead about how you'd like to use social media.

Ask yourself: What purpose does social media serve for me? Are you using Facebook to keep in touch with friends, to network professionally or both? "What would make you feel safe in terms of how many people you allow [as your friends]? Do you want an open or closed profile? [Are you going to] not put up much personal information and limit access?"

Remember that if you've got 800 friends on Facebook — many of whom, it's safe to say, are acquaintances, at best — all 800 are privy to your personal facts. And that can be risky, Gionta said. So consider what kinds of information you want out there.

❖ *Ask for clarification*. Without verbal cues, it's easy to misinterpret a person's message online, Gionta said. If you're iffy about someone's comments, simply "respond and ask for clarification." You could say, "It's my understanding that this is what you meant. Is this correct?" Or, "Is this what you meant when you said that?"

❖ *Honor <u>your</u> feelings and comfort level*. At the end of the day, boundaries are about how something made *you* feel, Gionta said, so pay attention to your own emotions and comfort level— and proceed from there. ■

Additional source: PsychCentral. More of Gionta's advice can be found at https://psychcentral.com/lib/10-tips-for-setting-boundaries-online/