

The Future of Work: Working With Constant Connectivity

The latest entry in a special project in which business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace.

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The phrase “work-life balance” sounds a bit last century. Indeed, in their book *How Google Works*, Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg say that such supposedly enlightened management practices are insulting to smart employees. After all, they have worked with young moms who go completely dark for a few hours in the evening and then, around 9 p.m., the emails and charts start coming in and “we know we have their attention.”

There was a time when work and home were distinct realms. The old industrial clock regulated our lives in discrete blocks of time and space, and we jealously guarded the separation between public and private life. No longer. The constant connectivity of mobile, digital technologies erases time zones and office walls. The traditional time/space of the week and weekend, and their characteristic social relations, are now porous as people increasingly work, play, consume, and interact anywhere, anytime.

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What does this bode for the future of work? How will we maintain the line between “my time” and “employers’ time”?

As a late adopter of the cell phone, I am still amazed by the insatiable thirst for 24/7 connection and communication. Yet at the same time we hear complaints about how these very devices allow work to colonize all of life—that we can't think, sleep, or have meaningful conversations because of perpetual interruptions. The belief has taken hold that digitalization ineluctably leads to the speed-up of work, making us feel rushed and pressed for time.

Such anxieties are based on a fundamental misreading of the relationship between humans and machines. I have been researching technological change for 30 years, and one thing I've learned is that technology never simply speeds things up. Rather, every major technological innovation comes hand in hand with new activities and experiences, creating new ways of working and socializing. Indeed, often as not, its effects are counter-intuitive and contradictory, surprising even the designers. So the very same devices that can make us feel overworked and harried also enable us to work more efficiently and take more control of our time.

In other words, the notion that we are all cyber-serfs, technologically tethered workers, is far too one-dimensional. It attributes too much power and agency to technology itself. While it is true that we have all become "networked workers" equipped with computers, tablets, smartphones, and landlines, how we deploy these devices crucially depends on what kind of work we do, where, and with whom. While I was being driven to Edinburgh airport recently, the taxi driver proceeded to have an argument with his son on his hands-free phone. His occupation, unlike mine, involves a lot of waiting and I imagine that the quality and utility of that time has been much improved by mobile connectivity.

This is not to deny the powerful effects that digital technologies are having on organizational practices. The speed of email, for example, promotes and seems to demand perpetual availability and instant response. We take it for granted that fast broadband drives this behavior, especially for professionals and managers. It is worth pausing to consider how our own attitudes and expectations have been complicit in the establishment of this cultural norm of immediacy. People with too much work to do reach for their electronic gadgets in an attempt to relieve the pressure that the devices magnify, but do not themselves cause.

It is not surprising, then, that solutions to "information overload" take the form of self-help advice about taking a digital diet or detox. This presumes that quality personal time entails escape from the encroachment of work and the technologies that facilitate it. But in my view digitalization provokes a radical re-thinking of the standard terms of the work/life balance debate, which pitch work versus life and public versus private. Smart devices make possible new combinations of previously distinct temporal zones, new forms of mediated intimacy, and new ways of combining work and family.

I love my smartphone and enjoy being able to communicate frequently and effortlessly with my family and friends. Like many, I live in a dual-earner household and find texting an indispensable tool for navigating everyday life. Members of my family all have differing schedules, making it increasingly difficult to synchronize social time together. And the smartphone is a great enabler in that context. Many welcome the permeability of boundaries for the flexibility and control it offers, rather than primarily fearing work intrusion into leisure time.

As Google is well aware, the morphing of work and home life has particularly expanded opportunities for women to combine motherhood with a career. On the other hand, it has neither changed the culture in which paid work is valued over other forms of activity nor radically altered the division of labor and care in society.

In this sense, while the technologies may be radically new, the old problem of how much control we have over our free time as opposed to work time is brought into sharper relief. Apps such as TaskRabbit are hyped as cutting-edge, yet they are premised on an age-old tradition of buying in domestic services.

A politics of work for the future would aim for a fairer distribution of work and rewards, and this is not something that even the Internet of Things on its own will deliver. However humanoid robots may become, it is up to us humans to shape the sort of society we want to live in.

For the [Future of Work](#), a special project from the [Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences](#) at Stanford University, business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace, and what anxieties and possibilities they might produce.