

Creating Balance in a 24/7 Digital World.



Do you reach for your phone as soon as you wake up? Do you experience high levels of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) if you have to turn your phone off in a meeting? Do you leave your email and social media notifications on all the time even during the night? Is your phone the last thing you look at before bed and do you use your phone as an alarm so it's always on anyway? Do you use your phone or keep it on the table with the sound activated when you're eating with friends and family? Do you keep checking your work phone relentlessly and receive or dial work-related calls while on holiday? Does your work require you to deal with several different time zones? So you're always on?

If so, you are not alone. Technology has brought major advances in the last 20 years and is ever-increasing but being always on 24/7 can be detrimental to our brains and we can find it such a challenge to switch off.

Deirdre Murray Executive Coach with PEOPLE RESOURCES explores the challenges for employees in interacting with social media and the internet on a 24/7 basis. She outlines practical techniques to take good care of your brain and to create boundaries around the use of social media and the internet in the modern digital environment we live in.

In this article we will explore 3 key aspects:

- 1. Why do we need to switch off?**
- 2. What's happening to our brains when we're always on?**
- 3. What can we do to create digital balance?** Here, I outline **5 key tips to reset your use of technology** that will help you achieve a sense of balance in both your personal and professional lives.

Currently there are almost 5 billion phone users on the planet and on average they check their phones over 88 times a day and use social media for over 2.5 hours per day. Some companies can use up to 200 different apps so the challenge of keeping up is never-ending. Social media exposes our brains to a constant stimulation and our brains are firing all day long, which makes it very difficult for us to switch off. In Ireland, almost 90 % of people use social media daily. The Huffington post found that 58% of people won't be able to last even one hour without checking their mobile phone.

Why do we need to switch off?

The concept of work-life balance is a misnomer. With the plethora of emails and social media posts, it is so difficult to carve out time just to reflect and take stock. Even on holidays we use the phone to check the weather, plan trips, check out map locations and follow social media posts, never mind tapping into work emails, despite our best intentions. The most we can hope for is a sense of work-life integration, where we can set boundaries and refocus our attention on the issues that matter most.

A recent study by Harvard Business Review, (HBR 2017), revealed that over 108 billion emails are sent daily and that we can be interrupted in our daily tasks 87 times. We check our phones 74 times a day and switch tasks on the computer 566 times a day. (Dr. Gloria Marks) The brain can only focus on one thing at one time and when we are disrupted it can take us on average 23 minutes to refocus. That's a lot of lost minutes.

What's happening to our brains when we're always on?

As Daniel Goleman in his excellent book, *Focus*, tells us, 'Overloading attention shrinks cognitive control.' Digital media overload can cause migraines and headaches, repetitive strain and can lead to depression due to complete cognitive overwhelm. Our attention span a decade ago was 3 minutes, now it's down to 45 seconds. Tony Schwartz, CEO of The Energy Project emphasizes the need to manage our energy, not our time. As I always remind people, we only have one battery, and we need to be mindful to recharge it on a continuous basis.

You might be thinking, I manage social media and communications as part of my job, so it's impossible for me to switch off! No matter what job we're in, the use of digital media plays a huge part, whether it's the internet, emails, messaging, or social media. While it may be a challenge to switch off totally, there are ways in which we can set boundaries on our use of digital media that will have a huge positive impact on our health and on the quality of our sleep. The CEO of Netflix was recently quoted as saying that our competition is Facebook, You Tube and sleep!

Sleep is critical to good brain health, as it regulates our emotions, consolidates long-term memory and our physical repair, and even more importantly, it flushes harmful toxins from our brain through the glymphatic system and allows us to awake refreshed the next day. Disrupted sleep is the biggest contributor to all-cause mortality in illness and accidents. According to the Centre of Protection and Control, 1 in 3 people now are sleep-deprived (CPC, March 2022) and this impacts not only our physical health but also our mental acuity.

Social media has many positive attributes as it can foster speedy connection and instant communication. However, it is also designed to be extremely addictive, using very clever algorithms that keep us connected. Apps such as Facebook and Twitter can also perpetuate hostile or angry communication threads that incite even more angry responses. When we see a 'like' or a positive 'retweet', the reward centre of the brain is activated as the chemical dopamine is triggered in the brain. On the other hand, not receiving 'likes' or retweets, have been shown can lead in some instances, to anxiety and depression. Studies show that feeling of rejection affects the same part of the brain as actual physical pain. When we hear the 'ping' of an email or see the notification icon light up, the pleasure molecule dopamine is released and is particularly harmful in addictive behaviours such as online gaming or online gambling. You'll always notice that the episode on Netflix or Amazon Prime always finishes with a dramatic ending to keep us hungry for just another episode. Studies show that often the younger generation under 30, can be consumed by exaggerated self-

representation and comparison with others and this can lead to over-analysing relationships and slights and result in diminished self-worth and self-esteem. (University of Kansas)

What can we do to create digital balance?

Here are 5 Key Steps to Achieving a Digital Balance in a 24/7 world:

1. **Limit your screen time on social media where possible.** Allow yourself a certain time to engage but keep it limited. Researchers suggest that overuse of social media can lead us into expecting a constant stream of new content and thus reduces our attention span generally. We can also struggle to commit information to memory because we are so bombarded.
2. **Adopt a digital sunset.** As we go through the day our sleep drive increases and as darkness approaches our level of the hormone melatonin is enhanced and thus promotes sleep. Melatonin is extremely important as it also is a powerful antioxidant. Blue light from phones and laptops does the opposite affect and disrupts our natural sleep cycle and increases cortisol which is a stress hormone. Put your electronic devices to 'sleep' or on 'airport mode' from about 8-9pm. Use an old fashion alarm or radio to wake you instead of your phone and preferably, leave your phone to charge outside your bedroom. Studies have shown that even the light emitted from someone else's phone can trigger our brain and thus impact our sleep.
3. **In meetings, or if you are with your family or friends, put your phone on silent** and close off notifications, unless it's an absolute emergency. Parents can lead by example by banning mobiles from the dinner table as they are often the worst culprits! Then you can truly listen and interact, not just wait for the phone to distract you. One manager I worked with always brought his phone into a team meeting and asked a colleague to ring him on the half-hour, so he'd have an excuse to leave! Not very respectful to his team and would certainly not make them feel very valued.
4. **Prior to taking leave, implement an out-of-office notification** on your email system. Send a 'holding' email to colleagues or customers to let them know when you'd be back, rather than immediately engage in work issues. If there is some burning issue, set up a particular time in your calendar to take a call rather than disrupt the whole holiday for your family or friends.
5. **Put your phone on airplane mode when out walking** and enjoy nature around you to let your brain rest or listen instead to an interesting podcast or your favourite music instead. Even taking a few minutes to practise some mindful meditation can be extremely beneficial for the brain and allows you to be completely present in the moment. At night-time, turn your phone off and preferably put it out of reach or outside the room. Studies show that even when we're trying to resist chocolate, the fact that it is high up and out of reach means we are 70% less likely to look for it!

The internet and social media have allowed us to communicate and remain more connected than ever and offers huge advantages in global reach. However, if we set up some useful personal boundaries, we can achieve a sense of control and balance in how we interact with it in our daily lives.

About the author:

Deirdre Murray, Founder and Director of PEOPLE RESOURCES, partners as an Executive Coach, Trainer and Facilitator with leading multinationals and public sector bodies across all sectors. She works with leaders and teams to maximise their potential through focused and timely coaching and leadership development.

Deirdre is co-author of "Emotional Intelligence (EQ) – A Leadership Imperative!" Her second book "Communicate with Impact - Communicate and Influence Successfully," is out now at www.peoplresources.ie. She is a regular motivational speaker at conferences, seminars and on radio broadcasts and provides journal entries for leading business magazines.