Why a Digital Detox Didn’t Work for Me

I’ve taken steps to reduce my urgency addiction and cut down the time I spend online, but digital communication is a necessity for my work.

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I can be a little obsessive about staying in contact with people electronically. My company uses Slack as a communication and data-sharing tool, and I’m certainly guilty of just “having a look” in a spare five seconds to see what’s happening and what others are working on. On the one hand, it does allow me to keep on top of things; on the other, I do understand — reluctantly but genuinely — that it can put colleagues on edge slightly. My obsession resulted in a radical overhaul where I turned notifications off, and it changed my life.

There’s been a lot of discussion in the media about our over-reliance on electronic devices, our excess connectivity to the world around us — especially to work — and a great deal of hand-wringing about whether we are destroying young minds by allowing our children to use their smartphones and tablets to excess from too early an age. How much use is too much? When do we discipline ourselves and others, and put away our hand-held manacles to embrace nature and reality? Is there a scientific basis for all this concern, or do we simply as a society fret about the latest apparently convenient and labour-saving technology?

A few weeks ago, I was on holiday in Italy with my wife. The mobile signal and WiFi availability wasn't especially good, so I decided to make a virtue out of a necessity and try to ration pretty severely my electronic footprint, just for a week. After all, I've read all the grim warnings and the puff pieces singing the praises of a "digital detox," and I'm always willing to learn from other people. It's an idea that my friend Bruce Daisley, VP of Twitter, had already expounded enthusiastically to me, and which features in his book/podcast, *The Joy of Work*. I told Bruce I was skeptical, but I was prepared to give it a try.

I hated it. It had *exactly* the opposite effect on me to the one intended. I know that if I can log on just two or three times a day and see what's happening, I can keep on top of emails and Slack notifications, and keep my virtual inbox manageable. I accept it must make me occasionally anti-social, but the truth is I work hard in an industry I adore and I try to employ colleagues whose approach is the same. My team is a genuinely enthusiastic and engaged one, so people are willing to go the extra mile, to do that extra hour to get a project over the line or make a proposal that 10 percent better. I do have electronic conversations online, and in any case, as I spend half my time in the US and half back at home in England, the time difference means that I can never guarantee being on the same cycle as everyone else.

That was why it drove me mad. I *knew* that emails and messages would be building up; I could almost see my inbox rising high with imaginary paper, the pile listing increasingly to one side before collapsing and flowing all over the desk. This was not a soothing or relaxing mental picture as I sat by the pool in a sunny Umbria. It certainly made me more tense for longer than simply doing a little bit of work.

Everyone talks about work/life balance now. It's an idea that has concerned management consultants for the past 40 years or so. I get it; if colleagues have a fulfilling life away from

work, then they'll be happier – and, the evidence suggests, more productive – when they're at work. Content people get the job done quicker and better.

That brings me to my point: it's about what suits you. Some people love a digital detox, and would adore these team exercises in which everyone agrees to go without connection for a day or a weekend or whatever. It helps some people to switch off completely, to separate work from life with a sharp divide. I can also see that some industries are more amenable to this kind of system than others.

In communications, we don't have that luxury. Not only do we have clients across the globe, operating in half a dozen time zones, but the very nature of their business means they will often need our support and advice out-of-hours. Problems don't limit themselves to arising between nine and five. We have to be agile and responsive, and that's sometimes at inconvenient times.

I'm not closed to innovation. Try a digital detox if you like. Give your colleagues the opportunity to try it. Provided your business still delivers its essential services, that shouldn't be a problem. Different people will react to it differently, depending on their style and mindset. And if it makes your staff happier and more productive, great, that's a win. But it's not for me. If you need me, send me an email.

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