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THE GREAT DISCONNECT

HOW 24/7 WORKPLACE CULTURE IS MAKING PEOPLE LESS PRODUCTIVE

Jen Fisher & Anh Nguyen Phillips

People use business technologies to become ever-more productive, often to the point of becoming *less* productive.

Let me share an example.

Ellen is a senior executive at a global firm.[1] She manages more than 200 technical and professional people, who work in cross-disciplinary teams at several locations. She has high expectations of herself and her teams. Ellen prides herself on practicing the best management techniques, and she delivers-year over year, her teams are rated among the most accomplished in the company. She takes a hands-off approach, acting as a coach, mentor and strategic thinker and avoiding micro-management. And she uses the latest business technologies to do her work; throughout the day she's on email, teleconference apps and her smartphone. At any moment, she might switch from answering urgent requests, to setting a check-in on her calendar, or write a note of congratulations to her niece, who earned academic honors this semester. There are days when Ellen's mind seems like an extension of all the technologies she uses to stay in touch.

And yet, Ellen has long had a nagging feeling that she is somehow becoming less connected to her team, her work and even her friends. The endless activity online assumes a life of its own—she can't help checking messages even when she's on the phone. While she studies a report or proposal, some part of Ellen's mind is still turning over her to-do list for the day. More and more, Ellen notices that 10 or 20 minutes have passed focusing on some low-priority task, as if she just needed a break from the intensity of minute-to-minute information processing and communication that makes up her 50-hour workweek.

Once she noticed her distractedness, Ellen saw it in everyone around her, from her team to her fellow executives. What was once a deliberate consideration of ideas is now a fast search for the data point that would enable a quick decision. What was once social interaction, in calls or in person, had become a kind of information tennis match, with everyone volleying ideas, data, questions, requests, comments, greetings, opinions and anything that came to mind… nonstop throughout the day.

The situation isn't much different after work hours. In fact, there were fewer hours that were truly walled off from work. Ellen habitually checks emails on her phone "one last time" before bedtime. Lately, she tried to observe a "no electronics after 8PM" rule, only to break it and add disappointment in herself to her never-ending list of stressors. Nobody told Ellen she should never stop working—in fact, her company recommends that people not work 24/7. But the stream of emails, messages and information never stops, and always threatens to overwhelm her and everyone else.

Ellen and her colleagues are caught in a paradox—more connected than ever but actually connecting less.

Several colleagues have confided to Ellen that, while they are performing more activities, and even hitting all their performance goals, they share her sense that they are less insightful, creative or accomplished these days. "We talk about network congestion when there's so much demand for information that our computer networks slow down," says Ellen. "That's how I feel some days."

If Ellen's situation sounds familiar to yours, it's because this is becoming a common picture. We have steadily progressed toward a tech-heavy, information-overloaded, 24/7 workplace culture—from email communication to video conferencing, it feels (literally) like our networks are congested. Even worse, our incoming workforce lacks essential soft skills, which is very much a result of our tech-focused lives. In short, since the industrial age we have adopted more, and more, and more technology, but we haven't adapted all that well to it. Now we're facing the downstream impact: we are overloaded with data and activity, but we have lost meaningful human connection, particularly in the workplace.

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THE MANIA FOR EFFICIENCY

In 1911, engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management*. It was the first modern study of work, aggregating a lifetime's ideas about how any work can be measured and made more efficient. Taylor advocated "scientific" analysis to determine how much work a "first-class" worker could do in a day and to identify the best employee for every job. He believed that planning departments staffed by clerks could map out everyone's work in advance, moving employees "very much as chessmen are moved on a chess-board." Even as he stressed the need to overcome peoples' "natural laziness" he also wrote, "If the workman fails to do his task, some competent teacher should be sent to show him exactly how his work can best be done, to guide, help, and to encourage him, and, at the same time to study his possibilities as a workman."[2]

We might recoil in horror at such mechanistic views of human employees, but Taylor's outlook reflected his time, when increasing efficiency in every business (think railroads, steel mills, sewing machines, telephones, electric lighting) was generating unimagined wealth and new possibilities for material security-at least for those fortunate enough to share in the gains.

Though Taylor's methods are obsolete, his urgent search for efficiency in every working endeavor still permeates our work cultures. We still want to do more, produce more, accomplish more. Our management methods are more humane, but our most successful businesses and technologies still emphasize efficiency—though we might call it "friction-less commerce" (online shopping) or "instant satisfaction" (video streaming) or even "curated experience" (news aggregators).

Now we work on digital platforms that provide tremendous efficiencies by acquiring and distributing information at the speed of light. Software teams around the globe code so that an application is continuously built and tested, refined and deployed. Warehouse systems receive orders, command robots to pick and package items, and maintain inventory while humans supervise the processing of information. Oil rigs pass information on their output to hubs that balance demand and delivery. Office teams continuously update each other on every kind of knowledge work. And every activity, by human or robot or information processor, is continuously monitored and observed against the urge to become more efficient.

This "digital Taylorism" is embedded in daily work even in the most advanced and prestigious jobs. While the 40-hour work week was enacted into law in 1940, it reflected the physical stresses of laboring in factories and fields and applied to hourly workers, requiring overtime pay for more than 40 hours of work. But salaried workers are exempt from overtime rules and generally expected, both by company policy and social pressure, to work as long as it takes to achieve goals.[3]

This is the lifestyle we call workism: Eat lunch at your desk, work late, bring work home, check email before bed and on the weekend. It's a formula for actually working a 50, 60, or even 80-hour work week.

At the top of the economic pyramid, in Silicon Valley and Wall Street and the glass towers of America's business districts, working long hours is now a badge of honor.[4]

Many people can work a long week for a limited time, but studies show that chronic overwork doesn't result in greater output, because after a certain amount of work time (it varies by person) productivity declines.[5] In the long run, stress-related health problems such as depression, diabetes, heart disease and sleep disorders have a huge impact on productivity.[6]

The average knowledge worker receives more than 100 emails a day.[7] We learn new applications and new features, trying to manage the workload, inadvertently adding even more activity. Knowledge workers are interrupted 50 to 60 times a day.[8] Many communication apps adopt a timeline or news feed interface—a continuous stream of call-and-response. If "notifications" are turned on, a flag jumps into view or a smart watch buzzes, setting off a Pavlovian urge to check out the new information. Dan Lyons, author of *Lab Rats: How Silicon Valley Made Work Miserable for the Rest of Us*, cites a familiar scenario: "you have the tyranny of [this app] on your computer all day long, and it's constantly popping up. You're trying to work, and you feel compelled to answer. You get nothing done because you're constantly trying to stay on top of this … conversation or multiple conversations."[9]

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What about multitasking? In the sense of concentrating on several tasks at once, there is no such thing. Research psychologists use the term "task switching" for behaviors like reading an email while talking on the phone and scanning a timeline. The continuous shifting of attention hurts productivity by cramming a number of partially done tasks into one short period of time. Rapid task switching can reduce productivity by as much as 40%.[10] Multitasking at work is about as "efficient" as texting while driving, and there's a reason that's illegal in 48 states.[11]

It takes about 23 minutes to get back on-task after an interruption, and somewhere deep in our workism-trained psyche we sense it. People react to interruption by working harder and longer, resulting in elevated levels of stress, frustration, workload, effort, and pressure.[12]

The theme of doing more in less time is a quiet drumbeat underneath so many company cultures that we hardly notice it. And the promise of efficiency and productivity is part of the pleasure we feel when we discover a new technology that helps us do more… or at least appear to do more. Answering an email, responding to a message, learning a new bit of information can all feel like really accomplishing work. Our brains get that little shot of dopamine, similar to the habit-forming pleasures of social media. And we become habituated to the information torrent so that it becomes our cognitive "new normal," proceeding faster and faster. Only that little nagging sense that we used to get more done in less time interrupts the pleasurable flow of call-and-response.

INNOVATION, EMPATHY, HUMANITY AND... TECHNOLOGY

While efficiency helps productivity, getting caught in a never-ending search to do more and more is actually damaging our ability to focus on the human capabilities that are most valuable in the knowledge economy.

As efficiency was a key tool of the 20th-century industrial economy, the 21st-century knowledge economy requires innovation, empathy, creativity, collaboration, leadership and emotional intelligence. Business journals burst with urgent suggestions for bringing these subjective talents to our workday. In a globalized and heavily digitized world economy, the growth of a business relies on innovation—producing a product or service that is qualitatively better than what's out there. Innovation happens when diverse populations—all kinds of minds—work together to imagine new solutions to problems or create new business opportunities. Disruptive technologies like cloud computing and artificial intelligence power innovation in ways barely imagined just a few years ago.[13]

"Economies are shifting from an age of production to an age of imagination," notes a recent Deloitte report. "In the past, business success relied mainly on deploying precisely calibrated skills to efficiently construct products or deliver services at scale. Today, success increasingly depends on innovation, entrepreneurship, and other forms of creativity that rely not just on skills, but also on less quantifiable capabilities such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and collaboration."[14]

Over the centuries, work has evolved from primarily agricultural to industrial to knowledge work. During the agricultural and industrial age, people worked primarily with their hands, doing physical labor. In the second half of the twentieth century, that shifted

more to knowledge work, stereotyped by the 9-5 desk job. But today, the nature of work is shifting again, requiring an elevated level of mental performance to solve problems and come up with new ideas—and with that a new need for softer skills of communication, creativity, empathy, and emotional intelligence. As Tom Friedman describes it, we are shifting from working primarily with our hands, to our heads, and now to our hearts.[15]

A balance of technical skills and social skills distinguish many jobs at the high end of compensation, prestige and organizational power. For example, as algorithms take over much of the quantitative work of financial analysis, financial managers need strong social skills to talk with customers, investigate their needs and design custom investment plans. Management analysts still need to conceptualize abstract ideas and create spreadsheets, but they also need to understand company culture, habits and social dynamics. Systems researchers and computer engineers, obviously gifted in math, need strong communication skills in order to connect with the business problems they're trying to solve as well as manage teams in today's agile development environment.[16]

Even the most quantitative, fact-based jobs are demanding more and more soft skills. A review of job postings for data science and analysis jobs showed greater demand for creativity, teamwork, problem-solving and even writing than the average of all jobs. More and more jobs are requiring a combination of left-brain and right-brain skills—sometimes referred to as hybrid skills.[17]

The job market is dynamic. Different skills become more valued as the business environment changes. As robots and algorithms take over routine tasks (and entire jobs), people have to shift to different types of work requiring creativity, collaboration, emotional intelligence and connection.

We are just in the middle stages of a transformation. AI lacks emotional capabilities… for the moment. A new set of AI technologies called "affective computing" is attempting to help computers better "understand" humans and to correlate events with human emotions or emotional factors.[18] How will we respond if our technology becomes "emotionally intelligent?" Will we become even more deeply embedded in the demands of our work tools, or be liberated by them? And how steep will this learning curve become as technology more closely resembles real people?

For some the prospect of learning a new set of skills is exciting, but for many the new world of ever-changing job requirements is threatening. The biggest obstacle to success in a transforming work environment might be ourselves. Pressure to perform mounts at the same time that requirements and goals change. A Deloitte review of these changes noted that "with any disruptive transition, we tend to experience fear and stress, generating an impulse to hold on to what has driven success in the past. We must resist that temptation and use the shifts in the nature of work and employment as an opportunity to achieve more of our potential."[19]

The 21st-century knowledge economy requires innovation, empathy, creativity, collaboration, leadership and emotional intelligence.

THE HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Because we've adopted technology faster than we've adapted to it, we're paying the price with our physical, mental and emotional health.

Caught up in the shiny promise of new technologies, and also wanting to keep up with an ever-changing demand for skills, we are setting ourselves up for a number of health problems. That's one reason people are feeling uneasy about the pace—61% of people surveyed agree that the pace of change in technology is too fast.[20]

It's more than the speed of change—it's that the change is still accelerating. "Over the past two to three decades, the pace of technological progress and the speed of its diffusion across countries have been startling," noted an OCED report in 2019. "For instance, while it took over seven decades for phone penetration to go from 10% to 90% in US households, it took only about fifteen years for mobile phones and just over 8 years for smartphones. Such technological leaps have had major impacts on the way people work and live."[21]

Is the 24/7 workplace culture making us incredibly productive? No. In fact, the inexorable ramping up of attention time is making people less productive. And it certainly is making them more anxious, less happy, less healthy and less engaged at work. The consequences of trying to keep up include sleep deprivation and fatigue, stress and depression, strains on family and community life, and shortchanging the other responsibilities and pleasures of life.[22]

To understand why this is, think of the type-A workaholic who shuns sleep for work time. Chronic lack of sleep undermines ordinary cognitive and motor functions. A University of Pennsylvania study found, for example, that people who got only 4 to 6 hours of sleep a night for two weeks showed cognitive impairments comparable to going entirely without sleep for 3 days.[23] Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos suggests the consequences aren't limited to one person's health. He said, "Making a small number of key decisions well is more important than making a large number of decisions. If you shortchange your sleep, you might get a couple of extra "productive" hours, but that productivity might be an illusion. When you're talking about decisions and interactions, quality is usually more important than quantity."[24]

Setting aside sleep deprivation alone, scores of studies associate chronic overwork with depression, anxiety, hypertension, chronic fatigue, heart attack, and increased alcohol consumption.[25]

Heavy use of social media has a variable effect. Studies show that people who perceive their online interactions as negative are more prone to depression and anxiety than people who perceive them as positive.[26]

Because we've adopted technology faster than we've adapted to it, we're paying the price with our physical, mental and emotional health.

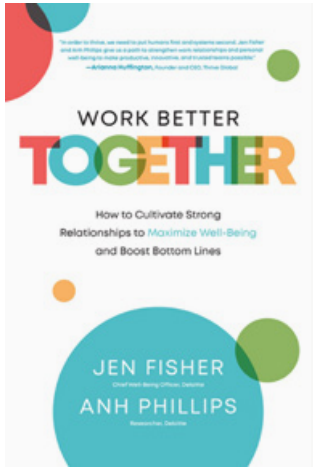
During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many office workers relied on teleconferencing applications to continue working from home. So much time in screen-based meetings caused physical and cognitive symptoms nicknamed "Zoom fatigue." Interacting on-screen reduces the brain's ability to read multiple unconscious cues, such as a person drawing breath before speaking or leaning forward. And watching many people interact on a single screen (or talking over one another) challenges the brain to decode a jumble of unfamiliar signals. No wonder we all complained about exhaustion after a day spent in tele-meetings.[27]

In short, business leaders and employees have focused so intently on efficiency, productivity and technology that most of us are in danger of burning out. While there may be short term performance gains, it is not sustainable in the long term and well-being will suffer. Furthermore, organizations that are simply competing on productivity and efficiency will be left behind in an age of disruption and innovation. Companies need to rely on their people for creativity, innovation, problem solving, collaboration—drawing heavily on cognitive and emotional capabilities that can't perform optimally without well-being.

The system needs an upgrade.

Excerpt from *Work Better Together: How to Cultivate Strong Relationships to Maximize Well-Being and Boost Bottom Lines* by Jen Fisher & Anh Phillips, pp. 3-13 (McGraw Hill, June 2021).

Info



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Endnotes

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