



Five steps to a balanced business comms diet

by Dr Nicola J. Millard



How to be productive in a distracting world

Over the years, the boundaries of the 9 to 5 day have been gradually eroded. When our home is our office, and our devices are always on and always on us, the compulsion is often to work longer and longer hours. The issue is that long hours often make us tired, more stressed, and we miss out on the vital mental downtime for us to be productive, healthy and creative.

The problem now is not connection, it is disconnection! It's this seemingly simple act of switching off that the 'balanced communications diet for business' aims to tackle.

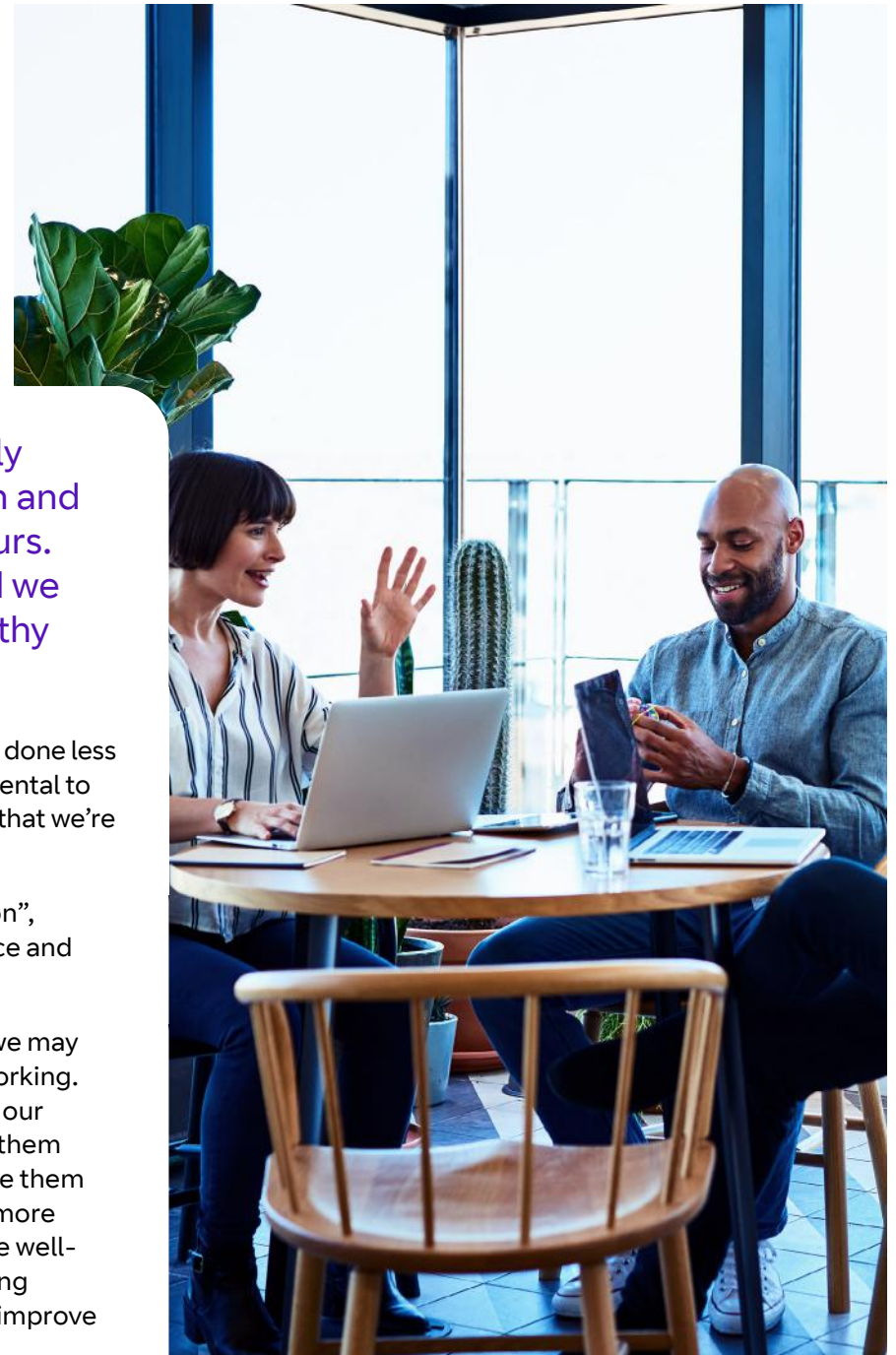
It should be easy to find the mental off switch but our Neanderthal brain hates missing out and is wired for distraction. Beeps, flashes, meetings, email, colleague / family member demands... all of these things disturb our concentration during an average working day (once every three minutes, if research is to be believed!). The problem is that these distractions destroy productivity. If you're doing a complex task, it can take between 12 and 20 minutes to recover after an interruption.

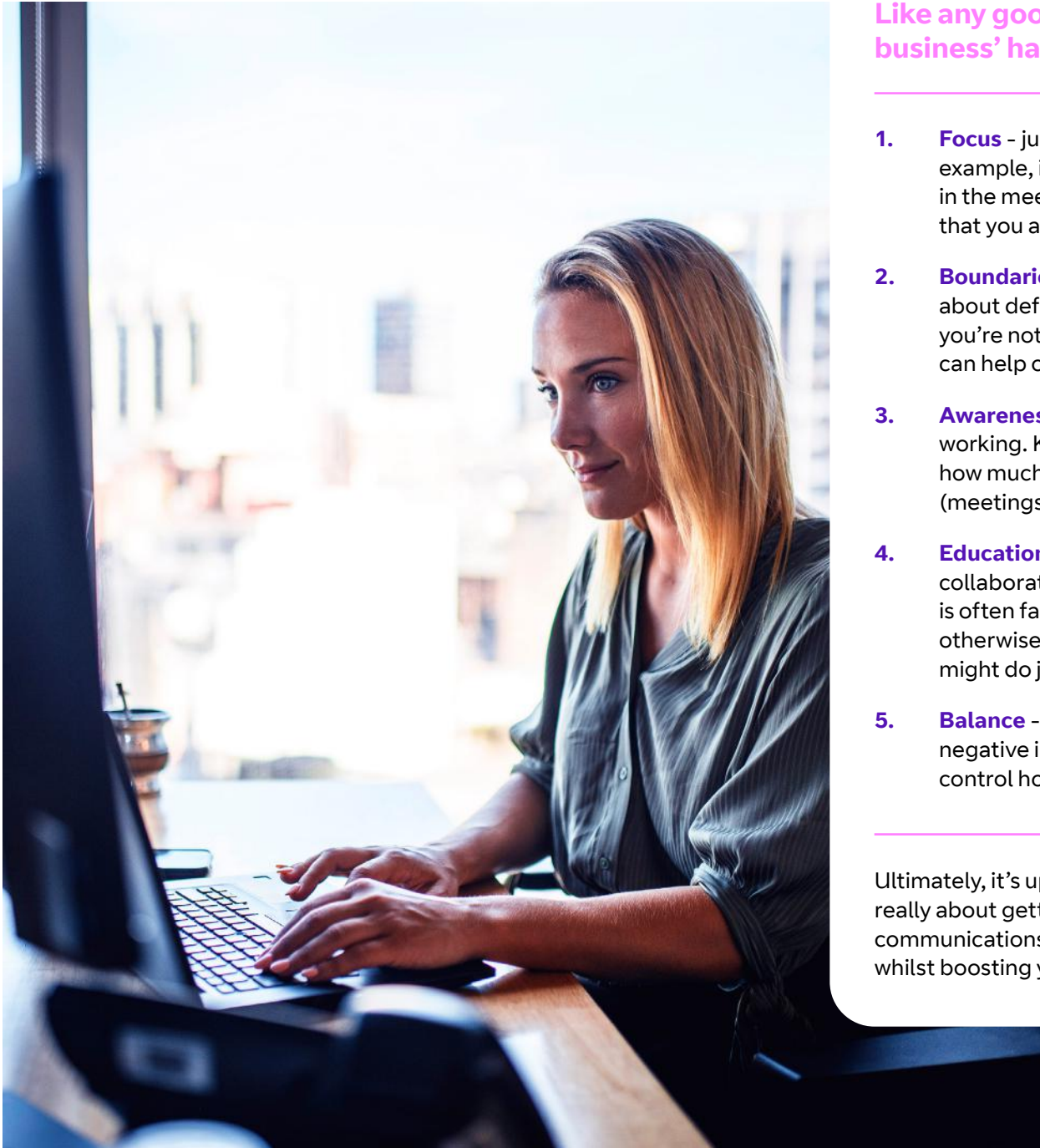
To combat this, we multitask. Actually, we don't really multitask, we time-slice multiple activities

– which means all of these activities are done less efficiently. Multitasking is hugely detrimental to productivity – even though we may feel that we're more productive when we're doing it.

Add to this the pressure to be “always on”, particularly if you're away from the office and we feel out of control.

For those of us struggling with all this, we may need to look at changing our ways of working. Technologies can significantly improve our working lives, so we can't simply throw them away, but changing the ways that we use them could result in better productivity and more time to ourselves. To improve employee well-being, we need to look at how we're using technology and whether or not we can improve how we use it.





Like any good diet, the ‘Balanced communications diet for business’ has five steps:

1. **Focus** - just because we can work anywhere doesn’t mean we should. For example, if you’re in a meeting and doing your email, choose to either be in the meeting, OR leave and do your email, because doing both means that you aren’t giving your full attention to either.
 2. **Boundaries** - set times when you’re ‘on’ and when you’re ‘off’. This is about defining boundaries and knowing when you’re working and when you’re not. Making your diary public and publishing presence information can help others to know when and if you’re contactable.
 3. **Awareness** - understand how you’re using technology when you’re working. Keeping a diary of how you’re using it can help you understand how much time you’re spending on certain activities – beware the M&Ms (meetings and mail!)
 4. **Education** - we tend to assume that everyone understands how to use collaboration tools because we use them outside the workplace. This is often far from the case. Establish group norms for communication – otherwise it’s easy to get overwhelmed by meetings, when a message might do just as well instead.
 5. **Balance** - if we want to become more productive and lessen the potential negative impact of technology, we need to make a conscious effort to control how we use it, rather than it controlling us.
-

Ultimately, it’s up to us to maintain a healthy communications diet and that’s really about getting a balance that suits us as individuals. The balanced communications diet for business will help you to slim down your working day, whilst boosting your productivity.

The challenge of constant connection... and constant interruption

Interruptions have become part of the fabric of our lives. The extent and effect of these interruptions on our productivity and wellbeing are being explored. One study¹ showed that during an average working day, we're interrupted once every three minutes...oh, hang on my phone just pinged... now, where was I?

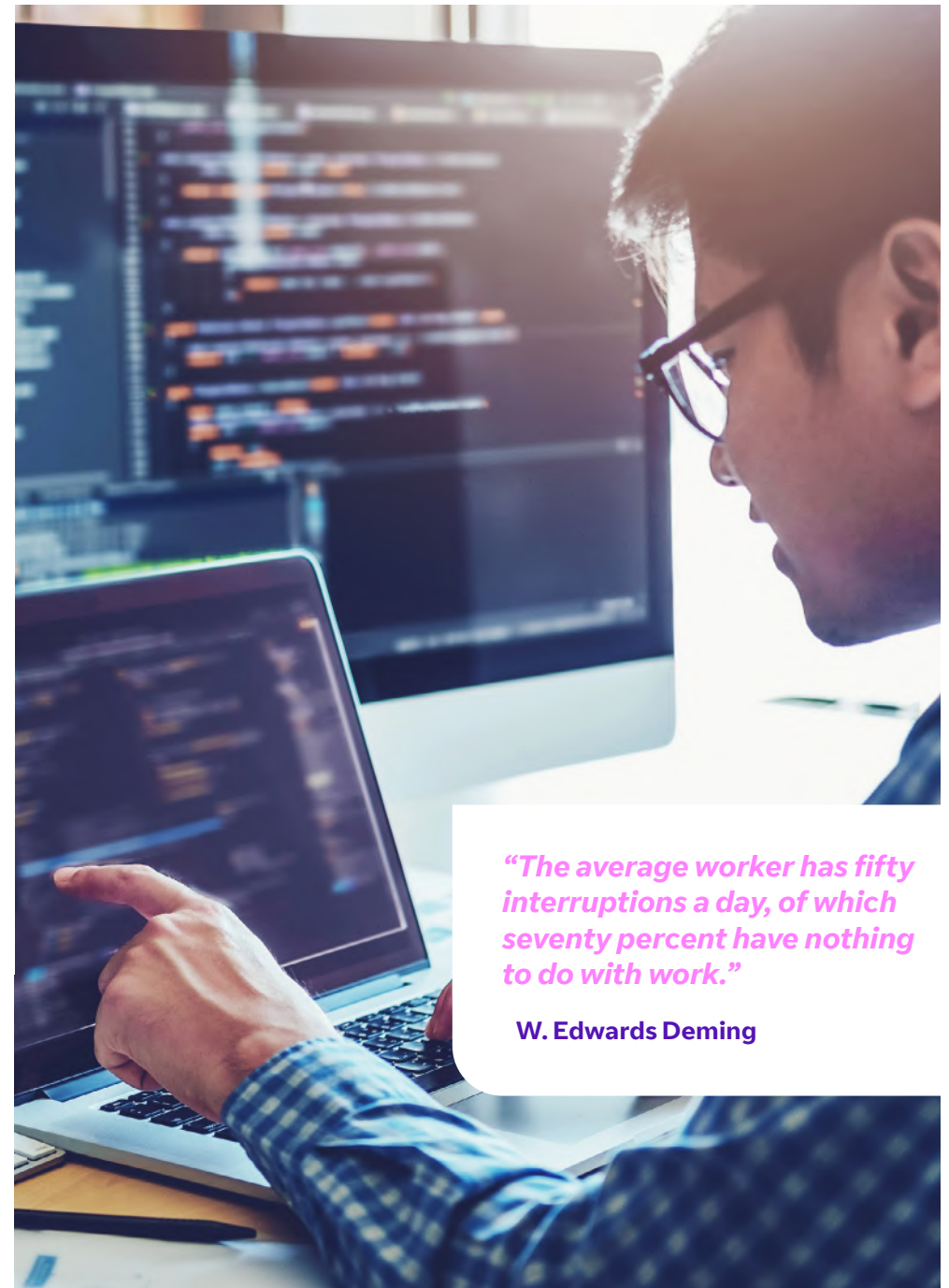
During our daily lives, we have to navigate our way through a multitude of beeps, buzzes and blinks and cope with the pressure of responding to all these like Pavlov's Dogs did to a ringing bell. The trouble is that, once connected, it's easy to get addicted.

We probably couldn't live without the internet. But how do we learn to live with it better? Communication is essential for healthy life and good business decisions but being overwhelmed by communication

is not. Just like food is essential for survival, too much of it can be bad for us. The pressures associated with FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is creating anxiety about technology overload.

Don't get me wrong, these technologies have made our working lives better in many ways. For a start, they put us in control of where, when and how we work. This can make us more satisfied, productive and efficient. The challenge isn't connection anymore; it's disconnection. It may be easier to stop using technology outside the workplace but, when our workplace is also our home and we carry our offices around with us in our pockets, it's much more difficult to disconnect.

How do we get an analogue-digital balance to match our work-life balance? Are there simple rules to help us to become healthier and more productive in work? How do we prevent work from consuming the rest of our lives? These are the aims of the 'Balanced communications diet for business'.



"The average worker has fifty interruptions a day, of which seventy percent have nothing to do with work."

W. Edwards Deming

Mistaking activity for productivity

In employee interviews conducted by BT and Cambridge University², there were a wide variety of answers to the question “Where, when and why are you most productive at work?”

“I find I get a full day of work done between 6:00 and 9:30 in the morning. For my sanity as well, knowing I can get at least two productive hours of work in before breakfast, makes a huge difference to my day.”

“In the evening, hands down. Less interruptions and my natural time clock is at its peak then”.

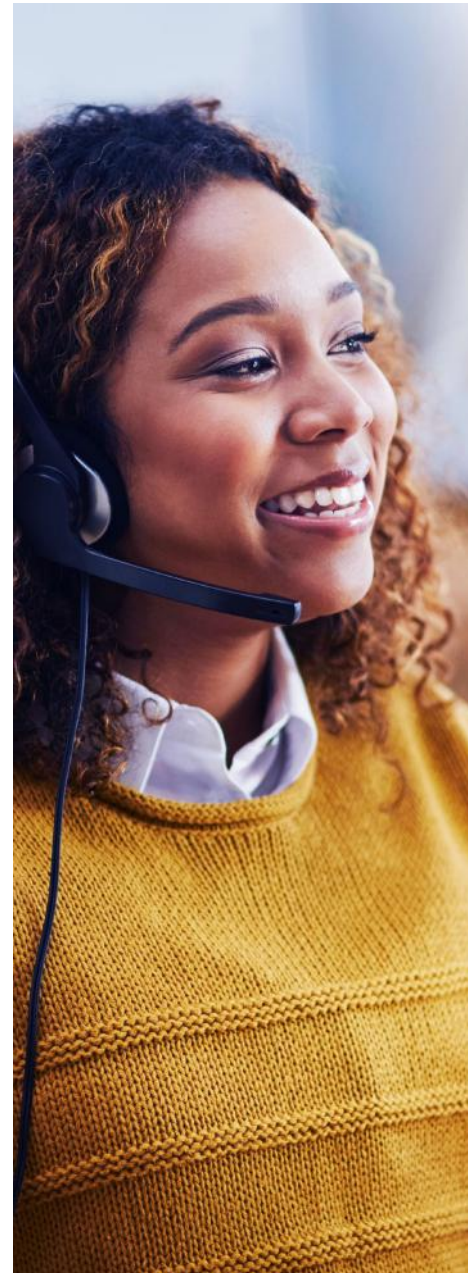
“For ideas – it’s before 9.30am. For acting on those ideas, 10am to 3pm”.

“I need peace and quiet – interruptions just jumble my brain up and I get nothing done”.

“On a plane – it’s the only safe haven now from calls and emails. Sadly, even that’s changing now!”

“I do all my thinking in the car – I have an hour’s commute – once I get to the office it’s all go, go, go! Do I want to work from home? No, I’d lose all that thinking time!”

“I can tell you where I’m NOT productive - being tugged in all different places sitting in a “team” set-up office with no privacy or physical barriers between myself and others”.



The general theme that emerges from these answers – aside from one size doesn’t fit all – is that people see themselves as most productive when they aren’t interrupted. This is often outside the traditional 9 to 5 day. The problem is that all the talking about work makes it difficult to actually get it done.

If you rephrase this question and ask people what motivates them about work (over and above the money they earn), they say that they “like the people that they work with”. These people, one assumes, are also generally the source of many of these interruptions!

A significant amount of research supports the idea that having time to think and reflect each day does a great deal for well-being, and constant interruptions can counter this^{2,3,4}. This is the time we seem to value, if the answers to these questions are to be believed. People who are always “plugged-in” often don’t get this vital mental downtime. By consciously taking time out, it’s likely that we can improve well-being and productivity at work. We all seem to recognise that we sometimes need peace and quiet to just think. But finding the time to do this can be easier said than done!



Classic psychology⁵ tells us that high levels of demand and low levels of perceived control results in stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion.

One of the biggest issues is simply the definition of ‘productive work’. We attend meetings (both online and face-to-face) without necessarily knowing what the agenda is, or why we’re there, because it makes us feel busy. Being reflective and taking time out to think is incredibly valuable but it looks too much like staring into space, because business is so concerned with action and activity – things that are easy to measure.

This “cult of busy-ness” also means that we tend to get tugged in all directions during our working day. We feel out of control. People are most likely to become enthusiastic about what they’re doing when they’re free to make decisions about the way they do it. Classic psychology⁵ tells us that high levels of demand and low levels of perceived control results in stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Control is easier on some communication devices than others. It’s easy to find the off switch on a laptop; but less so on a phone. Because we often can’t be seen at our desks, or in the office anymore, there can be a pressure to be always on.

Control can take other forms, though. By actively minimising distractions and interruptions, we could control our own productivity and also decrease our stress levels.

The multi-tasking myth

We humans are wired to be distracted by new things in our environment. It was a means for survival in Neanderthal days. But it's no longer a sabre tooth tiger that grabs our attention, it's a buzz, red dot, or beep. Most of these alerts lead us to irrelevant, routine, or junk stuff. But there's the occasional "reward" – something important, or good news - that keeps us checking our devices when we should really be paying attention to other things (like walking in a straight line or being in a meeting). It's also easier to feel a sense of accomplishment when we reach the end of our email inbox or send that witty tweet rather than tackling those other, more complex tasks on our 'to do' list.

One problem with this is that the frequency of distraction is inversely correlated with productivity⁶. Compulsively checking incoming messages means we get less productive. A number of studies have also spotted a close relationship between stress and the amount of times we check our devices [e.g. ^{7, 8, 9}]. Turning alerts off is an obvious solution, but the most stressed people can even imagine 'phantom' alerts and compulsively check their devices even when there's nothing coming in¹⁰.

One of the big reasons that technology is more distracting now

than it used to be is that the alerts from devices are increasingly social in nature. These social alerts are hard to tune out. You can ignore the ping of a washing machine, but it's more difficult to ignore your boss. This tends to result in us attempting to multitask or, even worse, task switch.

Task-switching is when you start one task, get interrupted and then either attempt to regain your original chain of thought or simply forget what you were doing and move on. If you have ever closed your laptop down at the end of the day and found a multitude of half-finished email replies, chat sessions and half-completed documents, you have probably been the victim of task switching!

Multitasking is a myth. We juggle a set of single tasks. One concern with this is that we become increasingly unable to concentrate and complete complex tasks because we continuously leap from one thing to another, without finishing much. It has less effect on simple, or familiar, tasks because they take up less cognitive resources.

Research from Stanford University¹¹ has shown that people who regard themselves as good at multitasking are generally worse at judging the quality of information they're reading and worse at recalling what they've done. This means they're often less

productive than people who are single taskers.

Multitasking can also be exhausting. Paying attention to one thing whilst doing another means that we need to do more work to maintain any level of attention on either task. Sitting in a meeting doing email on your phone generally means either the meeting or the email gets short shrift.

Multitasking is not the ultimate productivity killer, though. Task switching is. Academics have long known that task-switching impedes memory and knowledge retention, particularly for interruptions mid-task. Interruptions reduce our ability to pay attention¹¹, complete tasks, reduce task accuracy¹², and increases the time we take to complete tasks¹³. However, having the self-control to close everything down and concentrate on a single task until it's finished is probably our biggest challenge.

Ultimately, much of this boils down to stress because of the sheer number of things which are simultaneously competing for our attention – 'information overload'¹⁴. Being able to prioritise in overload situations is extremely difficult and can result in us becoming horribly unproductive as well as extremely tired.

Multitasking can also be exhausting. Paying attention to one thing whilst doing another means that we need to do more work to maintain any level of attention on either task.



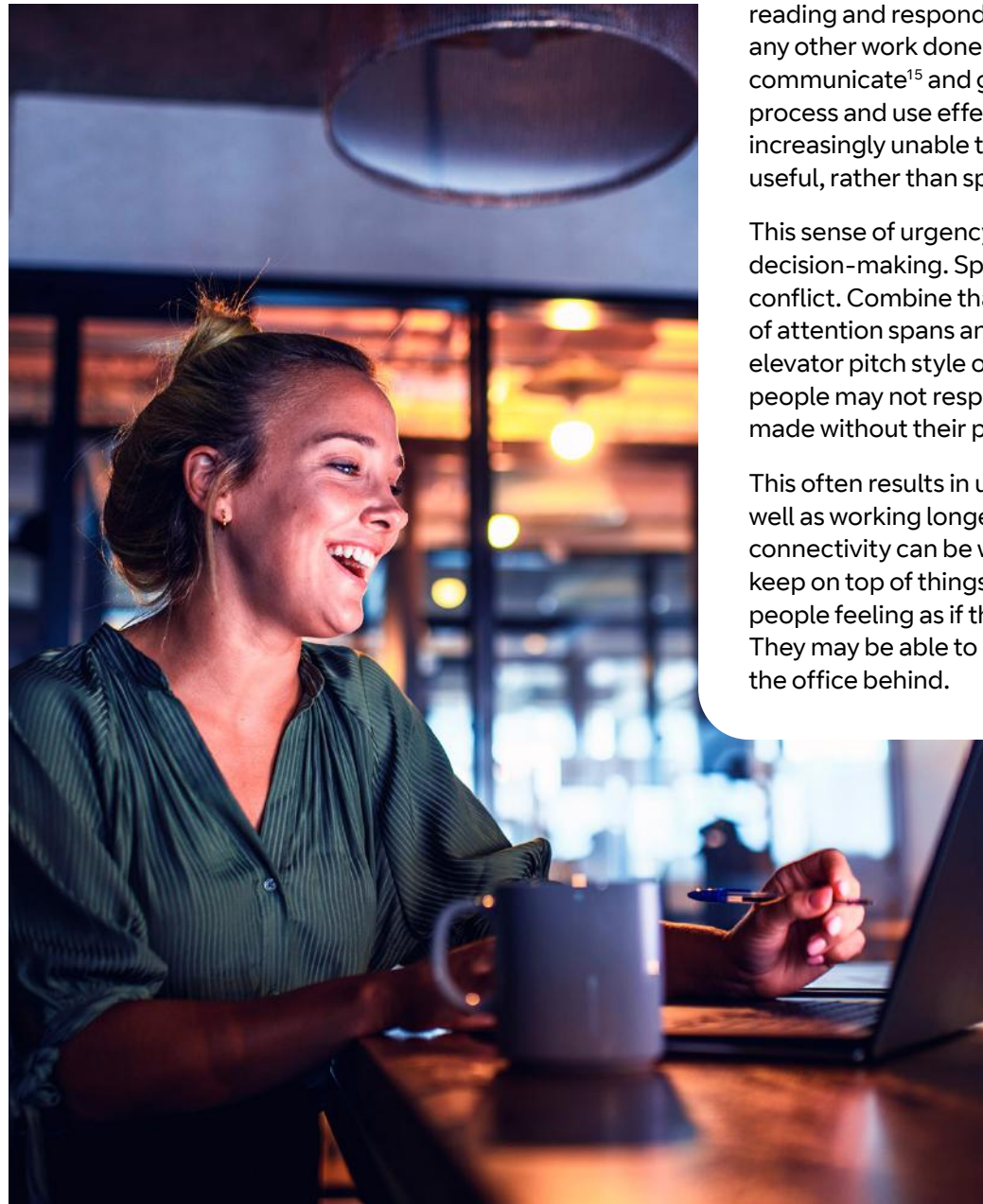
How do we prefer to communicate at work?

Face-to-face communication is the easiest way of building trust and delivering important or emotionally sensitive messages. But getting people in the same room together can be almost impossible, especially in highly virtualised and globalised businesses (and particularly when facing a global virus pandemic). Inevitably, much of our business conversation is shifting onto digital channels.

Text-based communications – especially chat – are great for pure information exchange. They're an easy way to get messages to a mass of people with minimal effort. But it's difficult to convey much in terms of nuance and emotion in text, unless you pepper it with emoticons, or you know the people well enough to read between the lines.

It's also very easy to get overwhelmed by text-based communications. It used to be bad enough with just email, but now we have multiple chat and social media sessions to deal with as well. This is sometimes called 'techno-overload'¹⁴, or 'stream stress'.

Our ability to communicate in real-time has created a false sense of urgency, puts pressure on us to respond fast (with no time to think carefully about our responses) and means that we can spend more time



reading and responding to things than actually getting any other work done. It can also lead managers to over-communicate¹⁵ and give us more information than we can process and use effectively¹⁶. We also tend to become increasingly unable to identify information that's actually useful, rather than spam.

This sense of urgency can also impact the quality of decision-making. Speed and quality often come into conflict. Combine that with the inevitable shortening of attention spans and we get a shallow, 180-character elevator pitch style of communication. Worse still, key people may not respond in time and decisions are then made without their potentially critical input.

This often results in us getting both tired and stressed, as well as working longer hours. The productivity benefits of connectivity can be wiped out by the resulting pressure to keep on top of things. This 'techno-invasion'¹⁴ can result in people feeling as if they're tethered permanently to work. They may be able to leave the office, but they can't leave the office behind.

The productivity benefits of connectivity can be wiped out by the resulting pressure to keep on top of things.

Introducing the 'Balanced communications diet for business'

To improve the quality and productivity of our working lives, small changes may be needed. We can't simply throw away our technologies but changing the ways we use them could result in better productivity and more time to ourselves. To improve employee well-being, we need to look at how we're using technology and whether or not we can improve how we use it.

What can we do to achieve a better communications diet for business? There are five things to consider:

1. Focus
2. Boundaries
3. Awareness
4. Education
5. Balance



Focus - location is becoming a very key aspect to ensuring that business communication is effective. Just because we can work anywhere doesn't mean we should.

Work can literally be defined by space. That space could be an office, a home, or a co-working space.

Home working, especially, can bring with it issues around boundaries. If you live and work in the same place, establishing a distinction between the "office" and the "home" is important. Setting aside a dedicated place to work – whether it's a room, a shed, or a table – is vital. Closing the office door at the end of the day is a powerful way of exerting control. Some people dress for work and change clothes when the workday is done. Others "commute" between rooms.

In offices, allowing people to choose appropriate locations depending on their preferences and what they're doing can improve productivity. Splitting collaboration and communication spaces (which are, by definition, noisy) away from concentration and contemplation ones (which need quiet) can create less environmental distractions.

Another way of exerting a degree of control over location is to move from being always on, to choosing when you're on. Turn your phone off when in meetings so that there's no temptation to be distracted at inappropriate moments. Turn alerts off rather than having them continuously nagging you to look at them. This means you have to consciously log on to access them rather than simply flick from one window to another. Disconnect when you're doing complex or concentrated tasks so that you're forced to focus on a single task rather than succumb to the temptation to surf.

Boundaries – establish rules for yourself. Set times when you are ‘on’ and when you are ‘off’. Many people carry two devices around; one for work and one for personal activities. Aside from the inconvenience of an extra slab of technology to carry around, this can strictly partition working day from family time.

Making your availability public – particularly through presence information - provides people with a guide as to when’s the best time to contact you. Appearing offline on instant messenger is not a crime, email doesn’t need to be answered immediately, and ‘busy’ really does mean that you don’t want to be interrupted. Book placeholders in your diary for concentrated activities, so that you don’t get deluged with meeting invites.

To avoid “death by meeting” days, ask yourself whether you need to be at the meeting at all, whether there’s an agenda, a leader, and what contribution you might be able to make. If there’s no reason for the meeting, and / or you have nothing to say, don’t be at the meeting!

Awareness – understand how you’re using technology when you’re working. Most people appear to be unaware just how much of their day they spend staring at screens and how habitual their use is. Try recording the ways in which you’re using technology at work for a few days. Some apps will automatically record screen time for you to save you having to think about it. You can then try to aim for a more ideal level, whatever you define that level to be.

Education – educating the workforce, establishing best practice guidelines and creating cultural norms around acceptable use of communication channels are all vital. We tend to assume that everyone understands how to use collaboration tools because we use them personally, but this is often wrong. Our research has shown that 50 percent of employees don’t know what collaboration tools they have, or how to use them in a work context.

Collaboration technologies are, by their very definition, collective. A network of one is a lonely one, so getting channels aligned with the needs of the people that are using them is a must. This is about establishing group norms for communication. Establishing hints and tips for technology use questions like “Is this the right tool for this message / task?”, creating conventions such as “No email after 5.30pm” and allowing individuals to tell others their comms preferences all help to navigate an often complex and confusing landscape of tools.

Behaviours often come from the top, so it’s critical for leaders to lead by example – and they may well need training too!





Balance – as with everything, moderation is key. Self-control plays a huge part in this. If we want to become more productive and lessen the potential negative impact of technology, we need to make a conscious effort to control how we use it. The larger problem is that we're really not aware of when we're in control of technology and when technology is in control of us. There's no perfect way to exert self-control. We're better at controlling ourselves in certain situations than others. Those of us who are more easily distracted by technology must, first, become aware of it before they can start to control their behaviour.

Many of the concerns about what communications technology is doing to us are about the degree to which it stops us talking to each other in a traditional way. Emailing or IM-ing the person sitting opposite us in the office makes no sense and yet there's evidence that's what often happens. This could be due to lack of privacy in the office space we're in¹⁷, or simply that we can establish an audit trail of the conversation.

Establishing a balance around communications use at work is vital. Anyone who has sat through a seminar catching up on their email and social feeds on their smart phone only to suddenly realise they have no concept of what's actually happened in the real world needs to ask themselves why they were at that seminar. This is sometimes called "continuous partial attention"¹⁸. In meetings, both face-to-face and virtual, switching everything off should be acceptable behaviour.

However, the point that balance is achieved is probably unique to each and every one of us. Some people feel lost without their smartphones, whilst others ignore them with glee. Regardless of your preference, one significant benefit to wellbeing is to have at least some technology down time. Taking a tech break can also reduce feelings of dependence on technology.

Future implications

We're entering a 'post-PC' era where we throw away the keyboard and the mouse and enter the world of swipes, voice interfaces and ubiquitous, always-on devices. There are many advantages to this. However, as employees also further blur the lines by working from home, and bringing their own devices, apps and tools to work, there's a risk that switching off from the digital business world entirely will become more and more difficult.

Ironically one thing that's coming along to help us navigate this ocean of technology is more technology! Intelligent personal assistants are evolving to help us prioritise and aggregate multiple communication channels and alert us in any situation where someone needs an urgent response. There are also smart applications evolving to help us establish rules and prioritise incoming contacts.

Ultimately, it's up to us to maintain a healthy communications diet and that's really about getting a balance that suits us as individuals. Establish rules that help you to become more productive and educate people as to where, when and how it's best to contact you if there's a genuine need for speed. However, don't forget to build in some "me" time – time each day to "unplug" and unwind.

Now, what just beeped?

If you'd like more information about the tools available to help your organisation communicate and collaborate better and how to better deploy these tools to help your people with their 'balanced communications diet', please get in touch. You can find more information at: www.bt.com/global



References

1. Mark, G., Gudith, D. & Klocke, U. (2008), The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress, Proceedings of CHI 08, Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM: New York, p.107-110

2. Mieczakowski, A., Goldhaber, T. and Clarkson, J. (2011), Culture, Communication and Change: Report on an Investigation of the Use and Impact of Modern Media and Technology in Our Lives, University of Cambridge Engineering Design Centre

3. Tams, S., Grover, V and Thatcher, J.B. (2018), Concentration, Competence, Confidence, and Capture: An Experimental Study of Age, Interruption-based Technostress, and Task Performance, Journal of the Association for Information Systems, 19(9), 857-90

4. Galluch, P.S, Grover, V and Thatcher, J.B. (2015), Interrupting the Workplace: Examining Stressors in an Information Technology Context, Journal of the Association for Information Systems 16(1): 1-47, January

5. Karasek, R.A. and Theorell, T.G. (1990), Healthy Work: Stress, Productivity and the Reconstruction of Working Life, New York: Basic Books

6. Duke, É. And Monta, C. (2017), Smartphone addiction, daily interruptions and self-reported productivity, Addictive Behaviours Reports 6, Elsevier, 90-95

7. Lee, Y., Chang, C., Lin, Y. and Cheng, Z. (2014), The Dark Side of Smartphone Usage: Psychological traits, compulsive behaviors and techno-stress, Computers in Human Behaviour (31), 373-383

8. Brod, C. (1984), Technostress: The human cost of the computer revolution, Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley

9. Thomée, S., Härenstam, A. and Hagberg, M. (2011), Mobile phone use and stress, sleep disturbances, and symptoms of depression among young adults - a prospective cohort study, BMC Public Health

10. Kruger, J.M. and Djerf, J.M. (2017), Bad vibrations? Cell phone dependency predicts phantom communication experiences, Computers in Human Behaviour, Volume 70, May 2017, Pages 360-364, Elsevier

11. Ophir, E., Nass, C. & Wagner, A.D. (2009), Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers, <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/106/37/15583.full.pdf>

12. Montag, C., & Walla, P. (2016). Carpe diem instead of losing your social mind: Beyond digital addiction and why we all suffer from digital overuse, Cogent Psychology, 3(1), 1157281

13. Cellier, J., and Eyrolle, h. Interference between switched tasks. Ergonomics, 35, 1 (1992), 25-36

14. Tarafdar, M., Tu, Q. and Ragu-Nathan, T.S. (2010), Impact of Technostress on End-User Satisfaction and Performance, Journal of Management Information Systems, Winter, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 303-334

15. Davis, G. (2002), Anytime / Anyplace Computing and the Future of Knowledge Work, Communications of the ACM, 45, 2, 67-73

16. Fisher, W. and Wesolkowski, S. (1999), Tempering technostress, IEEE Technology and Society Magazine, 18, 1, 28-33

17. Bernstein, E.S. and Turban, S. (2018), The impact of the 'open' workspace on human collaboration, 373, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, <http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0239>

18. Hemp, P. (2009), Death by information overload, Harvard Business Review, 87, September, 49-53



Offices Worldwide

The services described in this publication are subject to availability and may be modified from time to time. Services and equipment are provided subject to British Telecommunications plc's respective standard conditions of contract. Nothing in this publication forms any part of any contract.

© British Telecommunications plc 2020. Registered office: 81 Newgate Street, London EC1A 7AJ. Registered in England No. 1800000.

June 2020