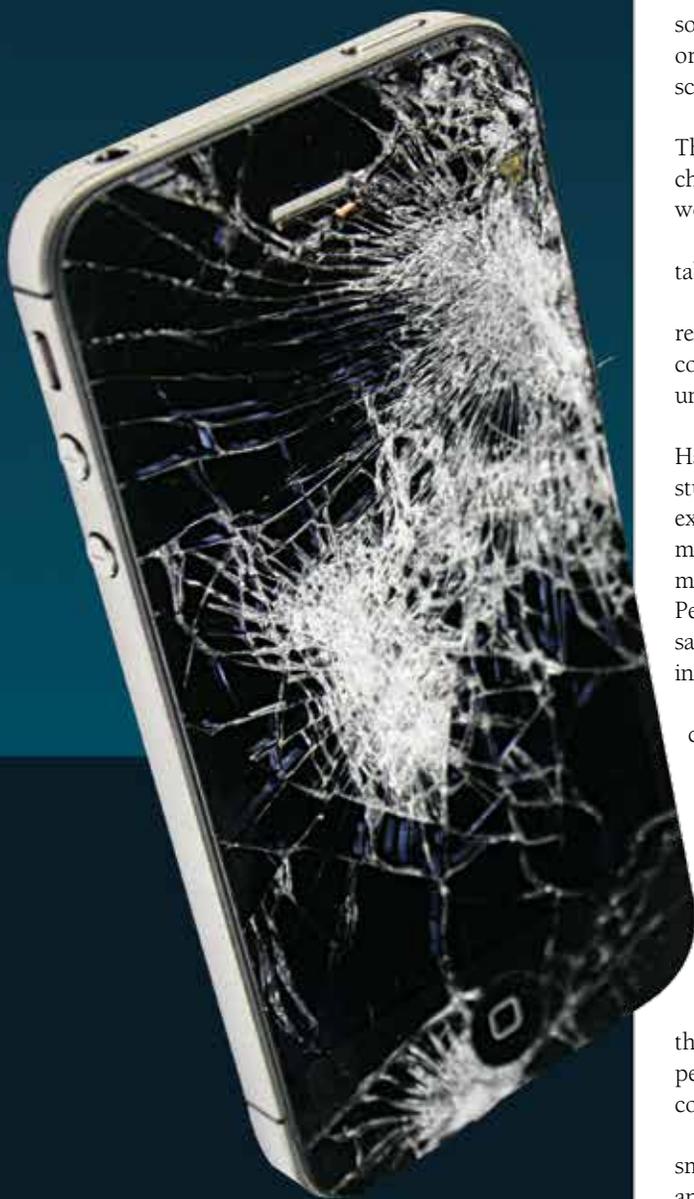


BREAKING THE HABIT

Best Places Companies Encourage Moderation



By Charlee Beasor

After her second child was born, Dawn Reynolds Pettit was in her hospital bed responding to emails and work messages.

“My husband said to me: ‘You don’t work in an industry where it’s like life and death. You need to find your right balance.’ That was a wake-up call for me,” recalls the regional vice president of human resources for Horseshoe Casino Hammond.

“I began saying that to other people. Everybody is more accessible now because everyone is available – Instagram, instant responses, Facebook, Twitter – and I think it’s part of the accepted culture in business. I think we are constantly trying to find the right give and take of that.”

Technological advances have made it easier to stay connected. In some industries, it opens the door for employees to work from home or the local coffee shop. It provides more flexibility in their work schedules.

But many times it becomes a burden. People can’t disconnect. They’re not only returning emails from a hospital bed but also checking voicemail on the beach. And they’re ultimately returning to work frazzled and unhappy.

Companies around the globe are beginning to realize the toll this takes on employees and long-term productivity.

The Washington Post reported in late 2011 that Volkswagen had reached a deal with a portion of its BlackBerry users to stop routing company emails 30 minutes after the workday ended and not resume until 30 minutes before it began again.

A July 2012 article in the *New York Times* tells the story of Harvard Business School leadership professor Leslie A. Perlow and her study, “Sleeping With Your Smartphone.” The article notes Perlow’s experiment with a Boston consulting company that gave each team member one night off per week (clients were covered by another team member). The article explains that the results were more positive than Perlow could have imagined and that team members were more satisfied with their work-life balance. She’s now replicated the program in 14 countries.

So, how do some of the Best Places to Work companies deal with this culture of 24/7 connectivity and encourage a healthy work-life balance?

One issue brought up by a few of the respondents without being asked is the challenge of communicating face-to-face in a digital world (see sidebar on the next page).

‘Choose to manage it’

Striking the correct balance of work and technology versus personal time is something everyone has to control for themselves.

“For me to say technology has allowed us to build a building faster or cheaper, at the end of the day it’s hard to put a tangible on that. What it has done is lent itself to more connectivity; it’s harder for people to check out,” declares Brad Skillman, president of construction management company The Skillman Corporation.

“Just like anything else, you choose to manage it or you let a small electronic device manage you. A lot of it is setting expectations and scheduling your time. It’s no different than anything else.”

For some, complete disconnection is just as stressful as constant connection.

“If I get up in the morning and spend a quick hour reviewing some

emails or responding to text messages, I find that I can relax more easily throughout the day. Completely shutting off connection and communication has always been somewhat difficult for me,” affirms Todd Lucey, general manager of Greenwood’s Endress+Hauser.

D.L. Couch President Dennis Couch also takes a “to each his own” standpoint when it comes to switching off.

“I must admit, I always have my cell phone with me and iPad with me at the same time; sometimes I use both at once. I enjoy it. I love what I do and when I want total separation, then we will go someplace like Dale Hollow Lake and go out in the middle of the lake and have no communication for a while,” he admits.

“For other people, five or six o’clock comes around and it’s family time and we certainly encourage that. All companies have those that are at both ends of the spectrum.”

Peoples Bank SB Chairman and CEO David Bochnowski acknowledges the “24/7 cycle” is still fairly young.

“We take that family approach and try to be understanding. How do you strike life balance in a 24/7 cycle? It’s one that companies are going to spend more time on and pay more attention to,” he grants. “We’re early in our discovery of the impact of the 24/7 cycle on family relationships and the ability of an individual to just get away.”

One way to tackle it could be in-house training on how to achieve work-life balance and relaxation during vacation and non-work times.

“You’ll probably see some of your current award winners (Best Places) are doing that, (and) more and more will be doing it,” he maintains.

Changing customer expectations

As the digital age has grown and most people own a smartphone, laptop or can connect to the Internet fairly easily, customer requests have adapted. Meeting the higher expectations that are now in place is not simple, Bochnowski says.



D.L. Couch President Dennis Couch says some of his employees enjoy being connected all the time, while others switch off at the end of the workday. The company gives all employees their birthdays off from work, among other perks and fun events, to inspire renewal.

“It’s the No. 1 life-balance question that’s out there. On the one hand, we owe it to ourselves to have some private and personal time. On the other hand, if the customer has something where they need a quick and specific answer, they deserve that too. Working through those nuances is a challenge on a day-to-day basis,” he notes.

New Castle-based interior design product distributor D.L. Couch experienced this even before the smartphone age.

“Many years ago ... we opened a satellite office in Indianapolis with same-day sampling to clients, architects and designers in the Indy area. It was received very well, all the clients were tickled to death if we could deliver samples the same day,” Dennis Couch recalls. “You create that expectation and the challenge is living up to it.”

Lucey adds that the need for quick responses is partly a

Pick up the Phone, Already!

With the ability to text, email, update Facebook, send a Tweet and so on, several business leaders are seeing the youngest generation of employees struggling to build relationships through face-to-face and telephone conversations.

“What we struggle with in this workforce generation: Don’t put it in an email, pick up the phone and talk to somebody. You’ve sent 10 to 15 emails and it could have been solved with a five-minute face-to-face,” Skillman maintains.

Lucey notes, “Having face-to-face communication with people or customers resolves complex issues that need solutions and eliminate misunderstandings. Without face-to-face interaction, we miss out on key indicators of effective communication.

“At times it is easy to send a quick email or text, but that does not mean we are articulating our message through the correct channel.

“The challenge,” Lucey continues, “is to put (the younger generation) into scenarios where they are more

involved in face-to-face interactions, so they develop better communication and people skills.”

Reynolds Pettit mentions the impact it has not just internally, but also in interactions with customers.

“People are not as used to picking up the phone and talking to somebody face-to-face because you don’t have to do it anymore,” she asserts. “It doesn’t help in developing relationships and that’s what our business is all about – that’s what keeps employees working here and keeps guests coming here.”

More and more customers now prefer electronic communication only, which can inhibit building successful relationships.

“We’re in the customer service business. There are some customers who prefer to communicate with us electronically. It’s easy to communicate back that way,” Bochnowski contends. “The difficulty is that the nuance of the personality doesn’t come through necessarily. The words are black and white; there is no gray. In all business transactions, there could be some gray.”



Talk about encouraging “getting away”: Horseshoe Casino Hammond recently took five employees and their guests (drawn at random after a customer service incentive program) on a four-day vacation to Las Vegas.

product of new communication vehicles, but also due to the Great Recession. Before, customers had a deeper bench of technical and engineering resources available on staff. Today, those customers are adapting through stretching their resources in search of technical expertise or advice. The Switzerland-headquartered Endress+Hauser supplies industrial process measurement solutions.

“Responding to customers in days and weeks used to be

acceptable, but today – we must respond in hours and even minutes,” he offers. “Today, even minutes could result in a major loss of money or be a safety concern for our customers.”

When it comes to public safety, there can really be no delay in response times, Skillman explains.

“When you’re dealing with construction and renovation, most oftentimes of occupied public facilities, we are available because we have to be. It’s the safety of the public. If there’s an issue, we’re that single point of responsibility for safety and quality.

“And I think that’s not a demand on the owner; that just speaks to the quality of care of our business model and our philosophy of quality care. ... It’s not a question of work burnout, or not being able to detach. It’s just what we do.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Dennis Couch, D.L. Couch, at www.dlcouch.com

Todd Lucey, Endress+Hauser, at www.us.endress.com

Dawn Reynolds Pettit, Horseshoe Casino Hammond, at www.horseshoehammond.com

David Bochnowski, Peoples Bank SB, at www.ibankpeoples.com

Brad Skillman, The Skillman Corporation, at www.skillman.com



To Our D.L.Couch Family,

D.L.Couch was named one of Indiana's Best Places to Work because we have the best people. It takes an extraordinary group of individuals to create such an outstanding and compassionate team. The dedication and passion shared by all for our industry is inspiring. We are thankful for and appreciate each and every one of you.
We can never say it enough –

Thank You.

– Dennis & Lori Couch

■ D.L.Couch