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Dear Reader,

What is your relation to work? Passion, responsibility, mission, effort, stress, obligation, all of the above? This month I examine how technology, volume of work and left-brain prominence all come together to create a dangerous trap.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Men for the sake of getting a living forget to live."

Margaret Fuller
(Journalist, Critic & Women's Rights Activist, 1810–1850)



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The Unseen Slavery

by Isabel Rimanoczy

Over the past months I had a number of conversations with different individuals in a variety of contexts which all had something in common. Everyone spoke to me about their struggle to keep up with their commitments. "I have over 200 unread emails in my inbox. I don't read emails, I cannot keep up with them AND the work I have to do", indicated Chris, VP of R&D. "It's a terrible feeling, said Dani, a woman working in Marketing. I have so much on my 'to do' list, that I am coming earlier to work now, and leaving later. I'm putting in 14 or 15 hours a day, getting home by midnight, and still I cannot get it all done. My boyfriend complains I answer emails on vacation or during the weekends, but my boss just has high expectations and I hate not to comply."

The trend continued. "I don't know what is happening", CFO Bill commented. "Things are multiplying and the more I do, the more it seems I have on my list". And Berenice confessed, "With

the upcoming restructuring, I've been given so many more projects to manage, that I simply cannot keep up with all of them"; she went on to add that just before a restructuring is announced it's not a good idea to say no to work. "I may be on the list of those to be outplaced".

In the past, an email that didn't get a reply meant something serious. Today, the percentage of emails that gets replies is low, and we all have heard, or said ourselves, phrases like "I don't think I saw your email, could you please resend it?"; "I believe I saw your message, but it got lost under the pile". And again, "I know I owe you a response, but I've been traveling. Can you remind me what it was about again?" I have received some surprising emails on a Sunday, responding to some message I had sent out many months before. Someone had taken on the task of cleaning their inbox on a weekend, I concluded. Like a spring cleaning.

Then there is Blackberry. A portable device that accompanies an individual wherever s/he goes and in every situation. Buzzing to alert you about messages, it helps people stay connected, tuned in, on top of every event. It's the constant companion, and it cannot even be turned off.

Human creativity, motivated by the challenge of finding the next revolutionary communications gadget, develops new technology that helps us do things faster and connect farther, and we find ourselves hurtling along as if on a water park ride, wild and unstoppable, and impossible to jump off. How many people do you know who don't do emails, who don't even own a cell phone? Maybe not even your grandmother falls into that category. Among all the people working with organizations, I know only one person, Anders, who doesn't do emails. He is a very special—and successful—consultant, and many of us always had a mix of amazement and wonder at how he manages to go through life without doing emails.

On my part, I just made a courageous experiment the last three working days: I didn't check emails. It felt like being on an island, while I was dealing with feelings of guilt, questioning myself if it was irresponsible, at the same time excited by the experiment. In the midst of my technological fasting I wrote down a list of all the emails I had to send out as soon as my experiment ended. It felt like holding one's breath under the water while snorkeling, seeing wonderful fish, before surfacing to catch the air again with joy. It helped that I didn't get close to any computer—which would have made it extremely difficult or even impossible to resist connecting to the internet.

But what is happening here?

What is this strange combination of excitement and guilt that the new gadgets provide? Why can't we resist the temptation of taking a rapid glance at the Blackberry held under the table during a meeting to find out what message just came in, almost like illicit peeping? Why do we experience this combination of guilt and defiance when we don't answer? Why the compulsion to check it every so many minutes? Why this dangerous addiction that leads people to use it even while driving? How does one manage these dual feelings of attachment and slavery at the same time, one's dependency on it and fear of remaining disconnected from the world when leaving the gadget at home or losing it? The most recent ad for Palm speaks to that: "Life moves fast. Don't miss a thing". A friend at whose home I spent an overnight was leaving for work, and was tapping on the "equipment": the badge, the keys, the blackberry, all attached to her belt. It reminded me of a cop going on a patrol.

Slavery is a strong word, yet who is in control here? Dani shared with me her anxiety about not being able to be a "good professional" because she wasn't able to do her job—all of it. "The more things I do, it seems that I create even more!". This brought back in my mind a conversation with a CEO in the mid 1980s. His executive team was complaining that they had too many meetings, and couldn't get things done. After listening to this complaint, he decided that he would space the meetings. Done.

It seems a long while ago when people actually had control over a situation and were able to do something about it. Today, technology seems to provide us with the structure and the tools, the frame and the processes, and we fit ourselves into it. We believe that technology was invented for our comfort and to ease our lives, to make us more efficient, to do more with less. However something different seems to be happening. The more issues we take care of, the more messages we reply to, the more emails we send out or calls we make, the more we're setting in motion the continuation of that issue/task. Imagine a machine slowly throwing tennis balls at us. Now we've a new machine, that is able to send them faster at us, and bionic rackets that also are lighter and make our returns six times faster. The more we play, the faster the game goes, the more balls will be

coming back. And if we are returning them into different directions, like in real life, we're all together multipliers. No wonder the more we do, the more our 'to do' lists grow, and with ours, the lists of all the others around us.

More than a gadget issue

It was a Monday after work, around 7 pm. I was visiting with friends working in the city and had been anticipating this leisurely evening together. As I sat there I saw their tired expressions, the rings around their eyes. Americans seem to be suffering an epidemic of chronic fatigue, I thought. This may not be new, and technology is not carrying all the blame, it just made things worse. Isn't there something wrong when a restaurant is called Thank God It's Friday? When Happy Hours are offered on Fridays, we dream of vacations and Sunday evenings are popular depressive times, while a thirty year old song already stated that "rainy days and Mondays always get me down"? What is this telling us about how we are living our lives, or how we are working?

A few weeks ago a colleague mentioned that he was asked by a client to prepare a session on 'work-life balance'. What is that? I asked, intentionally naïve. He replied: people in the client's organization are stressed, burned out, work too much, don't have a good work-life balance, and the leader who contacted me is concerned and wants to have a session to address this serious issue.

I nodded. Well—may be the problem is to think of it as work-life balance. We tend to think it's about the volume of work, and how we can work less, set limits, make more space for other things in order to have a more balanced life. True, volume is an issue. But also, the problem is to think that work and life are two different things. What are we doing, if we are not alive during the 10 hours we spend at our worksite? Who is there, if it's not us? Ghosts? The term work-life is certainly interesting, in that it is describing a real situation. When we go to work, we leave our life at home. Well, we need to bring certain things with us, such as our mind, our intellect, rational analytic thinking, goal orientation, energy to get things done. In short, our left-brain features that help us be efficient and productive. So what is exactly the "life" we leave at home or check at the door? Mostly our feelings, our playfulness, our artistic expression potential, our intuition and spirituality, our timeless loving interactions with those we love. Our right-brain features. Yet these are precisely the things that make us feel in sync with nature and the world, connected with self and with others, that are profoundly satisfying while extremely simple. No wonder we think that work and life are two different, separate entities. But it's not in the outside: We are the ones fragmenting ourselves.

Going beyond the symptom

Frank Lipman, founder and director of Eleven-Eleven Wellness Center in New York City, is a physician from South Africa who brought into his practice a variety of healing methods. He explains that there "is a continuum between optimal health and disease where different grades of sub-optimal functioning can appear. Before we develop a disease, or even symptoms, there have usually been months or years of progressive wearing down of optimal functioning. Our body has a large reserve, which it uses to maintain health, and as every natural system, is prepared to heal itself. When this doesn't happen, something is impeding the healing. When we feel stress, fatigue or physical symptoms, we have to ask our body what it is trying to tell us. Lipman indicates that health is more than the absence of disease. "It is a total state of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being." Thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and belief systems affect our physical well being, and a dysfunction in the body affects our mind and emotions. "In addition, all the body parts are connected and influence each other," Lipman observes.

"In conventional medicine, we doctors are trained to suppress (or eliminate) symptoms. And although treating symptoms may make patients feel better temporarily, looking for the underlying cause or dysfunction is preferable. When you're driving your car and the oil light goes on, you don't put a Band-Aid over the oil light and drive on. You make sure you get your car to the mechanic to see why the oil light went on. Symptoms should be seen this way, your body is giving you a message that something is off, that there is an imbalance in the system. Looking for the underlying cause of the imbalance and creating balance are more important than simply treating the symptoms."

In conventional medicine, if you have a headache, you take Tylenol; if you have heartburn, you take Nexium, if you are depressed, you take Prozac. This kind of approach, explains Lipman, can lead one to begin to think that headaches are Tylenol deficiencies, heartburn a Nexium deficiency and depression, a Prozac deficiency. "Sometimes it is necessary and helpful to treat symptoms, but it is always important to realize that we may be masking some underlying problem." The underlying

problem, I wonder, may be connected to fragmenting who we are.


Bringing the full self to work

Talking about health, Lipman invites us to embrace music, movement, relaxation, food, plants, optimism, having meaning in one's life, pets and many other things that have extraordinary healing powers. "These are all simple, ordinary things we can do for our health that are more valuable than the high-tech, expensive options that are out there." And for connecting with others, consider Ubuntu, Lipman recommends. "Ubuntu is a Xhosa word which serves as the spiritual foundation of African societies. It articulates a basic understanding, caring, respect and compassion for others. Ubuntu is a belief in a universal bond of sharing that unites all of humanity—the conviction that no person can be truly full while his neighbor remains hungry. It represents a world-view that sees humanity as a web of family, rather than a mass of individuals. This philosophy affirms that a person is a person through other people. In other words, what makes us human is the humanity we show each other." This is what we know as compassion, compassion for ourselves, our families, our community, the global community and the earth. Contrary to conventional thinking, there is not humans and Nature: We are nature, and we humans are a microcosm of the universe, the macrocosm. So if our world is polluted, we become polluted, if our family around us is not happy, we are not happy. In turn, how we live our lives impacts others and the environment.

This sounds like a far statement from being trapped in endless to-do-lists, from seeking satisfaction in the next purchase and from the Sunday blues. But awareness is the first step of the journey.



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