



Switching off

Being disconnected in an always connected world is a desire met by virtual cocoons at home but real physical solitude becomes an option only for the rich.

In one workshop it was highlighted that, in an ever-present always-connected world, people will sometimes want to disconnect, to switch off and be, for a time, not available. In another it was mentioned that for many professionals today, rather than talk to their spouse, the last thing they do at night and the first thing they do in the morning is check their mobile for messages. While some find this lifestyle attractive and in many ways addictive, for others it has become apparent that it is not healthy and there must be an alternative.

For numerous professionals and knowledge workers, being able to temporarily become isolated from the always-on world is therefore seen as a significant backlash against some of the technological and social advances of the last decade. Whether virtually or in real life, the ability to have a moment or two of solitude is destined to become a prized commodity – but one that, given current trends, becomes less available for many in 2020. As such, for those that can afford it, solitude becomes a luxury.

According to the OECD, the average South Korean works 2,074 hours each year or over 44 hours a week. While this is the extreme, in many countries we typically work over 40 hours and even in France, a country well known for its high living standards, there is a shift to increase the average up from their

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target 35 in order to improve productivity. The EU working time directive imposes a maximum working week of 48 hours everywhere except the UK, which opted out. Overall, the global picture is one where official data shows a slow decline in the time spent working, but in many of the knowledge-based service sectors off-the-clock emails, conference calls and weekend working are considered normal. What is surprising to some is that, even in our leisure time, many of us are choosing to be always connected. According to Nielsen, the average internet user in the US now spends over 70 hours a month online while the average Facebook user is on the site for over 7 hours per month. Generally speaking we are filling our lives with more and therefore the option to have less is becoming a treasured ambition. Time to stop and get away from things is consequently steadily rising up the work-life balance wish-list.

Although economic pressures in many countries mean that earning an income is not an option to be toyed with, there is mounting evidence that, given the

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choice, many workers would prefer extra holidays over extra money. Clearly this is not common globally across every demographic, but in many areas of the economy where the 'money rich/time poor' are present, this is a growing issue. For those who have high disposable incomes through well-paid employment but relatively little leisure time as a result, time poverty is a growing concern. But it is not only the rich: for some of those on low incomes who also endure long working hours, time poverty is becoming as much a problem as money poverty.

Looking ahead, to keep the best talent, some commentators feel that many companies' motivation and reward policies are being challenged to give hard-working employees extra time to be away from the office rather than a bonus to keep them at it. Some organisations predict that over the next decade we will increasingly see time traded for money: workers with unused holidays will sell them to those who want more time and open but informal trading of time off will increase – time itself will become a commodity. The hope, of course, is that this will lead to a healthier, happier and more committed workforce.

When those with the time and the money do go on holiday, the preferred options are increasingly either spa-based resorts or retreats where activities take you away from it all. With cheaper flights, access to centres of relaxation has become easier and visiting a spa has become an increasingly mainstream vacation ingredient – for men just as much as women. Several

mainstream men's magazines and websites regularly feature top 10 spa lists and many see that this popularity is driven primarily by the desire to fully disconnect for a while.

However, for those times when a vacation is not an option and the desire for disconnecting for an hour or two rises, some notable developments are taking place. Second Life's virtual world, for example, provides approximately 18 million people with a means of escaping the real world for a while. Equally, and more significantly, there is the huge popularity of gaming. Online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* regularly have over 10 million participants and also offer a way for many to switch off. Although relaxing for some, others see that these and similar high-impact virtual options are less about solitude, disconnecting and tranquillity and more about getting even more connected in a different world.

For those after controllable, real isolation, there are other options. A Faraday cage is an enclosure that cuts out electrical signals. It is often made from a perforated metal sheet or fine wire mesh that is part of an electric field that cuts down electromagnetic interference within the cage – either stopping outside signals getting in, or inside signals getting out. Traditionally used for computer test facilities and microwave ovens, over the years they have also been built into buildings where having communication with the outside world is undesirable. Dealing rooms and casinos are probably the most well-known applications but, as discussed in one workshop, they are also finding new ones closer to home. A number of private homes around the world are including rooms with in-built Faraday cages that can be switched on to create a space where no electronic communication can get in. Wifi, mobile connections

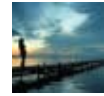
as well as radio and TV signals are all blocked so that, within the room, occupants can really switch off. Not only are such rooms being built into new homes but do-it-yourself advice for building Faraday cages is starting to appear more and more on the internet. Although some may see this as a poor reflection on others' ability to simply switch off their mobile, it is notable how many recognise the issue and are being attracted by the opportunity to have an accessible sanctuary within the home.

Underlying this, one has to recognise that for many the ability to switch off and be temporarily alone is an increasingly scarce luxury. From an economic perspective, as highlighted above, some people do not have the money to be able to disconnect. From a social perspective, we are also seeing the growth in some regions of the multigenerational household: as lifespans are extended and out-patient care is improved, grandparents are around for longer. Equally, as rising house prices in many countries align with increasing costs of higher education, students

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are staying at home for longer. After half a century of families becoming more geographically dispersed, in some areas cohabitation in more crowded homes is increasing and, with it, fewer opportunities for solitude.

Whether through such physical alternatives as electronic isolation or seeking more so-called 'quality time', it is clear that a good proportion of the working population want a bit more solitude. Whether people want more privacy, to be fully alone or to be with family and friends, it is evident that the desire to be disconnected in an always-connected world is on the increase. How far we will have gone by 2020 is open to debate, but the ingredients for change for some are all becoming aligned.



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