HYPER-CONNECTIVITY AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL RISKS

The digital revolution promised an interconnected utopia, where information would be ample, easily accessible, and most importantly, free of charge. Latest developments show that reality has turned out to be rather different.

Access granted

Access to information has never been so easy before. There used to be a time, when the actual retrieval of information using physical means was tiresome and time-consuming. Nowadays, every little thing is accessible in the global cloud. Information can be retrieved effortlessly in no time from practically anywhere in the world.

Too much information can however be detrimental and confusing. Even though we acquire information more easily, not only do we appreciate it less, but we also absorb it less efficiently. It is therefore essential to opt out of information we do not need and consciously focus on what is important and useful instead. More often than not, information on the internet is not peer-reviewed or of is questionable quality. Misleading titles and circular-reporting contribute to the spreading of fake news, another by-product of the age of digitalization.

Attention wars

But what happens when information is not sought after but forces itself on us? Articles with flashy titles, moving advertisements, and multiple browser windows invade our every day life through all of our connected devices. As soon as we log in to our device of choice to initiate a task, an intrusive window will soon disrupt our train of thought.

Such activity then becomes habitual and establishes certain patterns in our brain resulting in attention spans getting gradually shorter. There is a positive correlation between extensive internet usage and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) symptoms.[1] The feeling of instant gratification followed by our inability to adequately focus and complete a certain task contributes to the development of addictive behaviour.

Even though digital transformation was supposed to reinforce a carefree and independent lifestyle, it has ended up doing the exact opposite. Nowadays our smartphone is considered the physical extension of ourselves, as we have been assigning an increasing amount of responsibility to it. Without it, the average citizen of the developed world would not be able to interact, navigate, coordinate or even wake up in the morning.

Following this tendency, modern marketing trends impose more aggressive and predatory means of marketing. The images have become faster and the stimuli more intense. This of course exacerbates the problem as it gets increasingly harder to reclaim concentration. This is where generating revenue comes from: a scattered brain bombarded by large amounts of irrelevant information can be especially vulnerable to impulse buying.

Living in glass houses

Being constantly connected to the grid can lead to the feeling of being a digital hostage. In addition, this provides the means for constant supervision and assessment of our actions and monitoring of our every move. We seem to be inhabiting glass houses and privacy no longer seems a right by default.

It can happen that, if one's actions, even after working hours, do not comply with workplace policy or a superior's liking, consequences of said actions may adversely impact on one's professional development. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of people appear to be highly concerned about their privacy, while career advisers warn people about the possible implications social media use can have on their career.[2]

Today's economy is based on data analysis. Social media using the "social" factor as an excuse have persuaded millions of users to wilfully and at no cost submit their personal data. Not only are our consuming habits mapped

out, but, at the same time, we as individuals act as moving advertisements for every product that we have bought and every venue that we have visited.

Tracking is not always voluntary, though. Choosing to withdraw from social media does not guarantee privacy. Through the use of navigation, map services or just a mobile phone, every step we take is being literally tracked down.

Depression at work

Technological advancement takes its toll on work-life balance as well. A couple of decades ago, working life was over as soon as an individual walked out of their office. Nowadays, most companies and organizations provide their employees with smartphones, laptops, tablets and even smartwatches. But what starts as convenience becomes responsibility and then requirement. Employees are expected to be connected and, as a result, remain reachable throughout the day and, in many cases, in the evening and week-end as well.

In order to remain effective, it is essential that we be provided with a safe space where we can disconnect and spend time with self and family. This safe space exists less and less. By agreeing to remain in the network after normal office hours, we are essentially bringing work home, together with all the stress associated with it. The notion of personal life is being eroded and we end up working longer than what is specified by our contracts or staff regulations. This can seriously and adversely affect one's quality of life. Less time to socialize and practise extracurricular activities can most certainly result in impaired social and family relationships and severely jeopardise our mental health.

This situation often leads to emotional depletion, instrumental in causing burnout, a condition defined as "a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform"[3]. In a similar vein, digital burnout is the aftermath of extended use of technology.

In the long term, this equally damages employers or institutions, as work productivity and motivation diminish, while absenteeism increases in the workplace. Digital burnout can be a real threat to human resource management. Whenever managers and employees are faced with amounts of data greater than what their brain can process, they are very susceptible to overload, bringing about poor decisions and mistakes.[4]

Personal Health Implications

According to a major study published in the British medical journal <u>The Lancet</u> on 20/8/2015, extended working hours increase the risk of stroke and coronary heart disease.[5]

By analysing data from studies of 600,000 people from Europe, the United States and Australia, researchers found that working more than 55 hours per week increased the risk of stroke by 33% and the risk of developing coronary artery disease (the nourishing arteries of the heart) by 13%, compared to working 35 to 40 hours per week.

Men and women who had no known cardiovascular disease at the beginning of the study were followed for seven to eight years. Risks were weighted to take into account other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as smoking, alcohol consumption or a sedentary lifestyle.

The authors note that the risk of stroke does not appear abruptly beyond 55 hours of work per week but increases with working time: 10% more for those working between 41 and 48 hours and 27% more for those working between 49 and 54 hours.

To measure the effects on our health, the April Foundation (created by the eponymous insurance group) sought the advice of medical experts and the BVA Institute to better understand our hyper-connected behaviours.[6]

Hyper-connectivity has effects on sleep, because visual and sound stimulation immediately prior to falling asleep is known to disrupt sleep patterns. There are risks of obesity due to sedentary lifestyles, but also because the brain, being overworked, is no longer able to feel satiety. The consequences are also measured in terms of an alteration in creativity and social cohesion.

On 1 January 2017, the Disconnection Act came into force in France. The legislator aimed to protect the time that workers should devote exclusively to rest from work, in order to protect employees against burnout and to better articulate the separation between private and professional life.

Nevertheless, many employees are struggling to disconnect. The survey reveals that 92% of French workers refuse to spend an entire work day without using e-mail. Yet, according to studies, an e-mail interrupts our work every 11 minutes on average (7 for managers). The average time to return to concentration is 25 minutes!

Given that e-mail management represents 30% of a day's work, a real reflection needs to take place in companies as well as our institutions, because we lose efficiency by being interrupted all day long. It has been proven that the brain needs finished tasks. Being in multitasking mode all the time makes us tired and renders it particularly difficult to concentrate and consolidate knowledge.[7]

Social Implications

Balance of Family and Working Life

In the era preceding digitalization, there were distinct boundaries between employees' social and working life. These boundaries are presently becoming increasingly vague, largely due to hyper-connectivity and the so-called internet of things.

As a result, employees are facing increased post-work-hours stress and pressure, and personal time away from the business setting is becoming obsolete. Interpersonal and social relations suffer from lack of quality time spent exclusively on purely recreational activities, which should not include any element of business or corporate communication.

Effects on Industrial Relations

The hyper-connected workplace presents numerous challenges for trade union representatives, human resource professionals and labour legislators on various issues of remotely-performed work activities. Employees in the hyper-connected workplace can do work while at home, before the standard workplace opens or after it closes, or while travelling from home to work, all without the supervision and visibility typical in a standard workplace. A fundamental issue for remote work is whether, and when, work-related activities are, or are not, compensable. Does time spent responding to e-mail, or remotely checking work meeting schedules before the working day starts, count as working time?

The emergence of such newly-defined work activities requires action from employers and human resources managers in particular, who should consider firstly amending policies and procedures, and secondly educating affected employees about these changes. Employment policies, documents, practices and time-keeping systems need to be reviewed, so that all work-related activity may count as working time.

Human resource professionals must also ensure that employees are not overusing the technology made available to them by their own employer. This approach can largely improve employees' well-being and work satisfaction by safeguarding against a hostile and inhumanely-paced work environment.

We, as union representatives, must ensure that all employees are fully aware of their rights as they arise from existing staff regulations and practice. In the majority of cases, employees are justified in saying 'no' to extreme means of digital connectivity outside the work environment and beyond conventional working hours. Having this knowledge and exercising this right ensures that working time is not implicitly - and abusively - extended, jeopardising long-standing trade union achievements.

Let us not forget that our acquired rights of working a five-day, 40-hour week, paid sick leave and annual leave, to state but a few, result from intense, long struggles and sacrifices by many previous generations of workers. They are not to be taken for granted. We must be careful not to allow history backtracking on its steps. We have to ensure a forward movement of progress and improvement of the quality of our working lives, for our own benefit, that of our children, and of society as a whole.

Chrysanthe Moschonaki
Associate member of Executive Committee USB

Footnotes:

1.Yen, J.Y., Ko, C.H., Yen, C.F., Wu, H.Y., & Yang, M.J., The comorbid psychiatric symptoms of Internet addiction: Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, social phobia, and hostility. Journal of Adolescent Health, 41(1), (2007)
2.Paola Tubaro, Antonio A. Casilli, Yasaman Sarabi, Against the Hypothesis of the End of Privacy: An Agent-Based Modelling Approach to Social Media, Springer Science & Business Media, 2013
3.Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1996). MBI: The Maslach Burnout Inventory: Manual. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press
4.Hallowell, E.M., Overloaded circuits: Why smart people underperform. Harvard Business Review, 83(1), (2005)
5.Travailler trop longtemps augmente les risques d'AVC, Le Monde, 20/8/2015
6.Nathalie Raut, Hyperconnexion, quel impact pour notre santé ?, FocusRH, 3/7/2018
7.Catherine Berger-Chavant, Carmela Silletti, Hyperconnexion : quel impact sur la santé des Français ?, Fondation APRIL - Institut BVA, Dossier de presse, 6/2018