

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2020 Edition

President's Message

Learning to Shut Down E-mail

The times are changing

Wouldn't you like to just shut off the world for the weekend? Turn off your laptop. Put your phone on 'Do Not Disturb' mode. If you lived in Europe, you may have that option. Europeans appear to have a more relaxed approach to the intrusion of electronics into the bedrooms and the weekends of the nation.

In Germany, Volkswagen has programmed its e-mail servers to stop delivering e-mail to their employees 30 minutes after work and to begin sending them again 30 minutes before the start of a new work day. Other companies have implemented some approach designed to disengage employees completely from the workplace once the formal work day is done.

In France, which has long been known for its overly generous vacation leave allotments, they have passed a law that gives employees the 'right to disconnect' from their phones and e-mails after working hours. If they require employees to answer outside of this time period, they have to pay them an overtime supplement.

The Europeans are moving in this direction because they have a different approach to work than many North Americans or Asians. The Germans, for example, have the reputation of being strong and focused workers with an intense desire to get things done. They believe that you also need to take time off for self-care and relaxation and return to work ready and refreshed for the next challenge. No one would doubt the Germans success in all aspects of business and productivity.

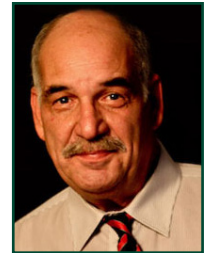
There are also legal frameworks and moral codes in France and other continental European countries that make generous vacation time mandated by law and viewed as a necessary and fundamental aspect of life. Not only do they have lots of vacation time, but everyone is expected to take it all in the year that it is earned- a novel concept to overworked and vacation-deprived Canadians. They also don't go to work sick. They have up to six weeks of paid sick leave and both peers and employers provide encouragement to stay home if employees are not well.

It's certainly different here and not necessarily better. In North America, many of us are cracking away at our smartphones at all hours of the day and night. One study by a major software company in the US estimated that 83 percent of professional workers said that they regularly checked email after work. Two-thirds of those surveyed took their smartphone or laptop on vacation with them. Over 50 percent report that they send e-mails while having dinner with family and friends. What is wrong with us?

We do not have the legal or societal frameworks to help us slow down. We also have an innate drive to try to add one more piece to the great puzzle we are creating. I call this an addiction to technology and working.

More organizations on this side of the Atlantic are trying to change their workplace culture when it comes to the use of e-mail after working hours. In fact, one study showed that about one in four major North American corporations created rules similar to the Volkswagen model on e-mail, including both formal and informal policies and directives to staff. They find that the overall productivity is not dropping as some feared, but is actually increasing.

Who doesn't want increased productivity? Employees are more relaxed when they come to work and thereby more effective and productive during business hours. They are also less stressed and make better



Brian W. Pascal
RPR, CMP, RPT
President

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decisions. They also don't get sick as often which is a direct benefit to their employer with reduced costs of absenteeism, less money being paid out in company health benefits and fewer employees on both short and long-term disability.

It's not easy to break our addiction to working around the clock, but it appears that times are changing in this regard. Vive la difference!

Brian Pascal is President of IPM [Institute of Professional Management].