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“I HAVE AN IPHONE, BUT NOT AN AGENDA!”

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Linda walked into a meeting beaming. She'd just won an iPhone! She'd stayed up the night before playing with it, learning how to use it, and enjoying her good fortune. Clearly tickled with her prize, she and her coworkers had a good time oohing and aahing for a few minutes then got down to the business at hand.

“Okay, I'm ready,” Linda joked. “Anyone know what we're doing?” Since she had called the meeting, the others raised their eyebrows. “I know I was supposed to have an agenda, but I didn't get to it.” She laughed. “I have an iPhone, but not an agenda!”

Even though she was joking and eventually ran a productive meeting, her comment sums up a trend in global leadership. Everyone's plugged in and connected, everyone's got their gadgets, everyone's got the technology...but does anyone know what we're doing?

Executives everywhere are more connected to their technology than to the people around them. They are fiddling with their BlackBerry® during presentations. They are endlessly on the phone in the airports. They are literally attached to their laptops and headphones. Presumably, they're connected to their technology because it's connected to their work. But is it really? This article highlights a few common technology dilemmas and solutions for how to balance the efficiency of technology with the importance of your work.

PROBLEM Your PDA is on all day and night, and you never seem to be able to get away from work.

SOLUTION Time away from work is essential to being your best. The solution sounds easier than it is: you've got to turn it off. Choose a reasonable schedule for your PDA and stick to it. Maybe you turn it on from the time you leave for the office until you get home at night, turn it off for a few hours of R&R, and give yourself thirty minutes to check in before bed. This may be a 24/7 world, but humans are not created to function 24/7. We need rest. Turn it off.

PROBLEM Problem: Email piles up all day long. You feel you have to respond immediately to stay responsive and keep that list from getting a mile long, but it's hard to get anything else done.

SOLUTION You wouldn't let a stream of people follow you around all day and tap you on the shoulder every few seconds yet incessant email has the very same effect. Every time that "new message" tone chimes, you get a little distracted, making it very difficult to complete projects of any depth. Our brains can focus at optimal capacity for about twenty minutes at a time. When you're trying to get some "think time," give yourself at least twenty uninterrupted minutes email-free to focus your full attention on your work. Even better – work up to several hours or even half a day of focused time, then check your messages all in one shot. You'll have a much better attention span for your projects and those emails.

PROBLEM You've got to schedule meetings around everyone else's calendar to accommodate time zones and travel schedules. You end up attending meetings all day long then starting "your real work" after hours.

SOLUTION To avoid the sixteen-hour work day and maximize your energy, you must get to the work of substance before 5:00. Make a standing meeting with yourself at a time that's relatively light for meetings – say, first thing in the morning, or Friday afternoons. Set aside at least a couple of hours. Commit to using that time in the way that will have the most valuable impact, and don't allow anything to move it off the calendar. Whether you have this kind of "meeting with yourself" every day, once a week, or twice a month, it will become one of your most productive methods of completing your tasks. This will leave you free to meet with everyone else when it's convenient for them.

PROBLEM You know the importance of innovation and collaboration for staying ahead of the competition, but moving to a flatter organizational structure has become incredibly time-consuming. All this consensus-building may be good for business, but sometimes you just want to make the decision.

SOLUTION Aim for collaboration, not consensus. Consensus means everyone must agree before anyone can act. Collaboration means you gather as much input as it's practical to do within a given time frame, then you make a decision and move on.

Whenever I hear people touting the benefits of technology, I remember my very first boss. He brought his organization into the 21st Century long before its time with his three most important goals:

Technology,

Technology, and

Technology.

Despite the efficiency, creativity and connectedness we gained as a result, he one day realized the limitation of its goals. He had spent a week in Portugal with his son's international exchange family in a town where you could barely get electricity, to say nothing of WiFi. After seven days of long meals, laughter, and friendship, Charlie gave us the advice I now give to you: remember to put people first. Technology is meant to support business, not the other way around.



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