

CHAPTER 17

Get Out Of the Technological Time Sinks

“There is more to life than just increasing its speed.”

Ghandhi

Technology can be your best friend or your worst enemy. As we race into the 21st century, bombarded by information from all sides, many people seem to have an irresistible, if not obsessive, need to communicate continually and non-stop with people everywhere – in their personal and business lives.

This incessant, non-stop compulsion to communicate, entailing the continuous use of cell phones, Blackberries, personal digital assistants, Internet – both wireless and connected, and various contact management systems like Microsoft Outlook, Maximizer and others, tends to leave a person psychologically breathless. He or she has no time to stop, smell the roses and collect his thoughts.

You Have a Choice

At the same time, there are many high-powered, hard-working, highly productive people functioning in the dead center of communications technology who are not overwhelmed by technology. They seem to have their lives largely under control.

Bill Gross, Manager of more than 600 billion dollars in fixed income funds and bonds, is famous for exercising regularly and meditating

daily to keep centered while using no technology at all. He turns off his cell phone, cuts off his live phone, leaves his Blackberry in his office, and goes about his daily business without the continuous interruptions of people who have an overwhelming need to stay connected. And he says that he never misses an important message.

For you to stay calm, clear headed and capable of performing at your best, you need to *detach* on a regular basis from the technology and communication devices that can overwhelm you if you are not careful.

Don't Become Addicted

In Washington not long ago, I was at a business luncheon with a roomful of high-level executives. Prior to the beginning the luncheon, one of the organizers stood up and gave a short grace. Everyone bowed their head. When the grace was over, the luncheon began.

However, at my table, four or five out of the eight people seemed to have been greatly affected by the prayer that had preceded the luncheon. They still had their heads down with their hands in their lap, even when they served the food. Each of them seemed to be lost in deep thought over the profound questions of the day.

Then I realized that they were not praying at all. Each of them was intensely focused on their Blackberries, sending and receiving email, working their little keyboards like frantic teenagers playing a video game. They were all lost to the world around them as they messaged

back and forth, some of them with other people in the same room. They had fallen into a technological trap, a deep sink full of information exchange in which they were drowning.

Technology is Your Friend

The purpose of modern technology is largely to increase the speed, efficiency and accuracy of the transfer of information of all kinds. Technology is meant to help us to improve the quality of our lives by enabling us to accomplish our key tasks and communicate with the key people in our world faster and more efficiently than ever before.

But the use of communications technology can quickly become a form of addiction. People get up in the morning and immediately check to see if there were any phone calls or voice mail messages on their cell phones. They then race to their computers to pull up their email to see if anyone communicated with them overnight. They call the office to find out if anyone has done or said anything that they should know about in the last few hours. They check their Microsoft Outlook, their personal digital assistants, their Blackberries and whatever other form of communications technology they are using every five or six minutes to make sure that they are not missing anything. This has to stop before it gets out of control.

Take Back Your Time

One of my clients, with distributors in 19 states, found himself bound and chained to his computer, receiving and responding to emails

several hours each day. The more time he spent at his computer, the fewer of his other important tasks he was able to get done. The stress of these tasks, building up like an avalanche overhang, started to affect his personality, his health and his sleeping habits.

Using the principles taught in Eat That Frog!, we taught him about the 80/20 Rule and how it applies to emails. Fully 80% of the emails that you receive are of no value, and should not even be opened. They should be deleted immediately.

Of the remaining 20%, only 20% of those, or 4% of your emails, actually require an immediate response of some kind. The other 16% can be ignored temporarily, or transferred to an action folder where they can be dealt with one at a time.

Standardize and Delegate

My client felt that there was no one who had the ability to sort out his emails, more than 300 per day, and that he had to do it all himself, no matter how much time it took. We encouraged him to sit down with his secretary and go through his emails, showing her which ones were important, which ones were unimportant and how to deal with the most common questions and requests.

To his surprise, within two hours, his secretary knew enough to handle most of his emails for him. From then on, she would come in each morning and delete the 80% of emails that were of no value. She would transfer the essential emails requesting personal action by her

boss into a separate folder. If there were a question on an email, she would transfer it to a “process” folder for him to look at at his convenience.

At our next meeting, he told me that he had tracked the time savings of this simple exercise and calculated that he was now saving 23 hours per week of work that he could then spend eating his frogs, and getting his most important tasks completed.

This simple exercise transformed his life, reduced his stress levels, improved his health and energy and made him a much more relaxed and positive person.

Here is a question for you: “How would your life change if you had an extra 23 hours each week, with which to think, work, plan, talk with key coworkers or even go for a walk with your spouse?”

Refuse to Be a Slave

A journalist for Fortune magazine wrote recently that, when he arrived back at the office after a two-week vacation, there were more than 700 emails waiting for him. He realized that it would take him a week to get through them all, during which time he wouldn't be able to tackle any of the projects waiting on his desk.

For the first time in his email career, he took a deep breath, and punched the “Delete All” button, erasing those 700 emails forever.

He then turned and got busy with the projects that were really important to him and his company.

His explanation was simple. He said, "I realized that, just because somebody sends me an email, it does not mean that they own a piece of my life in terms of my having to reply to them, now or ever. In addition, it occurred to me that if the email was really important, the sender would send it again." And that's exactly what happened.

A Servant, Not a Master

For you to be able to concentrate on those few things that make most of the difference in your business or personal life, you must discipline yourself to use technology as a servant, not a master. Technology is there to help you, not to hinder you. The purpose of technology is to make your life smoother and easier, not to create complexity, confusion and stress.

One of the best rules in dealing with time, people and technology is to just, "leave things off." Resist the urge to start turning on communication devices as soon as you wake up in the morning. Leave the radio off. Leave the television off. Leave your cell phone off. Leave your computer off until you have planned and organized your day. Deliberately create zones of silence in your life where no one and nothing can break through and reach you. Maintain your "inner calm" by forcing yourself to stop on a regular basis and "listen to the silence."

Sometimes to get more done of *higher* value, you have to stop doing things of *lower* value. Keep asking yourself, “*What’s important here?*” What is important for you to accomplish at work? What is important in your personal life? Of all the things that you could do, if you could only do one or two of them, which ones would they be?

Continuous Contact Is Not Essential

Remember, when you go away for a day, a week or a month, on vacation or on business, if you are out of touch with your communications devices, nothing happens. The world seems to continue revolving whether or not you are in continuous contact with it. Problems get solved, answers get found, the work gets done and life continues to flow along like Old Man River. There are very few things that are so important that they cannot wait.

People often ask me at my seminars, “But don’t you have to keep current with the news, by reading newspapers, listening to radio and watching television?”

I tell them, “If it is really important, someone will tell you.” If something important happens in your life, the country or the world, someone else can spend hours following the news for you, and they will usually tell you on the first possible occasion.

Many people discontinue newspapers, stop watching broadcast news on television and refuse to listen to the radio. And surprisingly

enough, they remain well informed on most important subjects. Someone always keeps them up to date. You should do the same.

Eat That Frog!

1. Resolve today to create “zones of silence” during your day-to-day activities. Turn off all communications devices and technology for one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon. You will be amazed at what happens: nothing!
2. Resolve to take one full day off each week during which you do not touch your computer, check your Blackberry or make any attempt to keep in touch with the world of technology. At the end of a day without continuous contact, except by voice, your mind will go calm and clear, like water. By giving your mental batteries time to recharge, free from the incessant interruptions of communication, you will be more relaxed, aware and alert.