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As Tech Gadgets Proliferate, There's Nowhere To Hide

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If you should ever need to contact Alan Luckow, you'll have a hard time not reaching him. You can connect with the Ben Lomond, Calif.-based graphic designer by regular phone, cell phone, Internet phone, e-mail, Web cam and instant messenger.

Luckow will get your message one way or another, whether on his mobile phone or any of his three computers — two desktops and a laptop. And if he's on the road, no worries. He has been known to drive around Silicon Valley with his laptop open on his passenger seat, searching for an Internet Wi-Fi hot spot. Then he can pull over and check his e-mail, call up a client's Web site or download a big file.

While many of his friends and colleagues consider Luckow among the most wired people they know, he sees himself differently.

"The thing about people who use technology extensively is that they don't see themselves as being completely wired-in. They integrate it into their lives and it becomes a commonplace thing, and it feels right and normal," he said. "If a person feels like they are too wired, they've let technology encroach upon the things most important to them. Technology can become invasive if you let it."

Whether considered invasive or not, computers and a host of other devices are running full tilt in U.S. households all day long.

According to a study on technology usage by the Harrison Group, a Waterbury, Conn.-based market research firm, Americans keep their computers on 9.2 hours a day, TVs on 8.9 hours a day and cell phones on 6.3 hours per day.

President Doug Harrison says that when asked how often they actually used this technology, respondents indicate they tune in to their devices 75% of the time they're on.

Lisa Whaley, a Woodbridge, Va.-based life-work coach and former vice president at **IBM**, ([IBM](#)) believes too many people let technology invade their life. Whaley addresses the problem in her recently released book "Prisoners of Technology — Time to Get Unplugged."

Whaley worked at IBM 22 years before she decided to step back from the fast-paced, tech-intense corporate world two years ago. So she shifted her focus from devices to family and fulfillment.

"We all have all this great technology now that allows us to be accessible and pretty much connected 24/7 — with cell phones, wireless Internet connections, BlackBerrys, Treos — all these gadgets that allow us to connect on demand," Whaley said. "The problem is: We feel that because we can be constantly connected and accessible, we have to be. That's where people get themselves in trouble."

Whaley admits she was one of those overly connected people "I used to IM my daughter just upstairs to tell her to come down to dinner," she recalled. Now she opts for face-to-face communication with the people in her life, or at least in her house.

Whaley asserts she is in no way anti-tech. "Technology isn't the culprit here," she said. "It's the imbalance in our lives we've allowed it to create."

Her recommendation is to keep the technology you find useful, but establish clear boundaries on when you're going to allow it into your life and when you're going to unplug.

Jeff Cable of Saratoga, Calif., whom his friends call "the gadget guy," travels frequently hauling multiple devices, including several cameras, a mobile phone, laptop and iPod.

He also has three **TiVo** ([TiVo](#)) boxes at home and, using Slingbox technology — which brings TV shows to computers, cell phones and handhelds — he can beam his favorite sports and TV shows to himself wherever he is.

Cable, director of marketing at **Lexar Media**, ([LEXR](#)) says he is able to unplug when he needs to decompress. Still, he worries about what's going on when the phone is off.

"The last few days, for example, I was on a personal trip and didn't answer my phone and check my e-mail as often as I usually did," he said. "Even though it was my own personal time off, I felt a little guilty."

Gina Clark of Belmont, Calif., vice president of marketing at **Logitech**, ([LOGI](#)) says she's trying to pare down her technology to two devices — her mobile phone and her laptop — as a means of simplifying her life.

"I found that constantly being connected is not always the best thing," she said. "At the same time, because of the world we live in, I really do have to be available, and I find that my cell phone is almost attached to my ear."

Clark, who also travels often, relies on her cell phone and laptop to keep in touch with her people at work and her family.

She says being inaccessible through her phone and laptop just means delaying all the decisions she has to make when she gets back to the office or home. She adds that she doesn't have the luxury of unplugging.

"I don't think I could handle it," she said. "If I couldn't connect, I would probably just go into meltdown. I would be thinking about it more, worried about not being able to call

someone or not keeping up with what's going on in the world though my laptop."

Marc Auerbach didn't quite unplug, but significantly slowed down when he moved from Silicon Valley to Birkenfeld, Ore., where "some old-timers have never heard or seen the Internet."

Auerbach, who worked for **Apple Computer** ([AAPL](#)) for more than seven years and several other tech companies in Silicon Valley, traded in his broadband connection for a "tenuous dial-up" in his new rural home.

Now he spends his days helping local civic organizations, doing Web work for nonprofits and restoring the 60 acres of land he lives on.

He hasn't given up technology, just changed his focus from computers and gadgets to engines that run on biodiesel, solar panels and inverters, and UV water purifiers, "technologies that might actually change the world for the better," he said.

Auerbach says he now lives on a quarter of the income he had in Silicon Valley. "Freedom comes at a price," he said, "but in my book, it's a bargain."

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