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Experts: Technology blurs work, home life

Workers report constant contact

By Don Fernandez
Cox News Service

ATLANTA - Could someone pass the remote - and the electronic Rolodex, please?

Terry and Pamela Swanson cozy up on the couch together to watch "American Idol" each week, a favorite way to decompress in this household.

But it's no respite.

Side by side, the couple cuddle with their laptops, firing off e-mails, phoning clients and tinkering with real estate listings while rolling their eyes up to catch a glimpse of the musical competition. The dogs get an occasional pet.

"Technology makes you think about your family while you are at work and think about your work when you should be focusing on your family," Terry Swanson said. "It is the new American way."

The advent of digital devices and connective technology - including cell phones, pocket PCs and the infamous BlackBerry - now allows nearly every task once dedicated to the office to be undertaken on the go.

This convenience is heavenly, but there's a price:

The couch has become a cubicle. The kitchen table? A conference room. And the lines between home and work have blurred.

"We haven't got to the point of going to bed with the laptop, but we're not too far off," said Terry Swanson, who raves about the new portable Sony PC he has mounted in his sport utility vehicle.

Conversely, a La-Z-Boy recliner would fit mighty fine with today's office mind-set.

With Internet access that allows personal bill paying and booking movie tickets, one's desk can double as an entertainment hub.

Spherion, a recruitment and staffing agency that operates more than 1,000 offices globally, recently completed a survey to glean the expectations of both employers and employees in regard to how connected workers are to the office.

Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed said their employer expects them to stay connected to the office outside business hours.

Twenty-six percent said staying connected to the office via e-mail or cell phone interferes with their personal life.

Thirty-one percent of men and 23 percent of women said they were expected to stay connected to work outside of business hours.

"Technology has had enormous impact," said Richard Lamond, senior vice president for Spherion. "Work-life balance is the No. 1 career priority for the emerging worker. That balance is going to become more critical, and employers are going to have to pay heed to that."

With Ethernet ports emerging in every hotel room and Wi-Fi, or wireless fidelity, turning every coffee shop and grocery store into an online hub, any stroll down the sidewalk is a potential day at the office.

"Technology makes me too available," said Jeff Coble, a management consultant. "Every time I drop my phone, I hope it breaks so I can be unreachable with plausible deniability. I even took my laptop with me on my honeymoon."

Setting boundaries

A recent study released by the Families and Work Institute reported that one in three Americans is "chronically overworked." Due in part to the access technology provides, one in three employees is in contact with work at least once a week outside of office hours.

The same study reported that more than one-third of employees had not taken and were not planning to take their full vacation time.

Even what appears to be the most leisurely of job benefits - telecommuting - can make the difference between work and home indistinguishable.

Kristie Whit became a mobile employee for IBM several months ago after spending seven years in the company's Atlanta office.

"Initially, I found myself working much more than usual, simply because I felt guilty about not physically going into the office," White said. "I did that for about three months, and I was completely stressed out. Finally I realized that I had to set boundaries."

Disciplining oneself isn't going to get easier.

"It's harder to escape now," said Rip Gerber, chief marketing officer for Intellisync Inc., a San Jose, Calif.-based mobile software provider. "It changes your state of mind. We haven't been trained how to deal with that. There's nothing that's going to stop it."

Cell phones are now being fashioned out of pens. Laptops and cell phones are merging into singular devices. And prices on all of this tech are quickly becoming affordable, which means more consumers are buying - and soon no one will have an excuse to be out of the loop.

"I don't blame corporations; I blame individuals," said Lisa Whaley, the Connecticut author of the upcoming book "Prisoners of Technology." "A company will get as much as they can from you. It's up to each individual to set those boundaries."

On the Net

For tips on how to avoid loss of 'me time,' go to www.MyrtleBeach Online.com