

Are You a Candidate for Crackberry Detox?

There's a thought-provoking article in the Jan. 11 Wall St. Journal entitled "Your BlackBerry or Your Wife." The story focuses on the problems that are inherent with device addiction - when people have trouble separating themselves from their iPods, BlackBerries, laptops, etc.

The article points to real-life examples of families that are connected electronically - and yet disconnected from one another. To help break some families' digital dependence, some parents have imposed week-long bans on all electronic gadgets with the exception of work and homework. No TV, no DVDs, no email, no texting, no videogames, etc. You get the idea.

As the author of the article notes, "For all our constant connectivity, electronic devices often keep us apart. Texting causes misunderstandings. Facebook makes us jealous..."

It's a vexing problem. For a news-hound like me, I find it hard to remain detached for long from near real-time news updates online or up-to-the-minute e-mails on my mobile phone. But I know that my wife has our best interests at heart when she encourages me to disconnect during non-work hours. Yet I find it liberating and refreshing when I'm able to do this for long stretches, such as when our family goes camping.

CIOs and other business leaders who are (or allow themselves to be) tethered to their workplaces face similar challenges. When I attend conferences and ask people what they're looking for out of the event, one of the most common responses I hear, particularly from IT leaders, is how CIO or IT management-related events provide them an opportunity to network with their peers and compare approaches to technical, staffing or cultural issues. They also note how conferences offer them a chance to break free from the constant demands of the workplace and open themselves up to free-range thinking. Those types of opportunities are becoming tougher to find.

I have a lot of respect for people who are able to establish those types of boundaries for themselves. We've all been in that type of situation where we're at a conference but we end up spending way too much time in our room on our laptops or tapping away at our mobile devices during a session. Invariably it's unavoidable when emergencies arise.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, I attended a series of annual CIO conferences that were held on cruise ships. On the first of these three-day cruise-to-nowhere conferences I attended, the ship left New York Harbor and quickly bolted off the coast and out of sight of land. Many of the attendees complained about this as this took their cell phones and laptops out of range. Some attendees got downright edgy about it.

In subsequent conferences, the ship would park a few miles off the coast of New Jersey during work hours so that people could remain connected. Then the ship would pull out to sea at night when the casinos were open. Few people seemed concerned about connectivity at night.

Of course, there are other ways to separate from the digital devices in order to provide oneself the time and space for unfettered thinking. I know some CIOs who make a habit of arriving to work early in order to have that kind of personal time to devote to creative thinking and decision-making before the office starts buzzing. Others opt for a mid-day break, sometimes through jogging, walking or other forms of exercise.

The point I'm trying to make is that in an always-on world, it's important for decision-makers and staffers to make the time to disconnect every now and then. It frees the mind. It also helps strengthen relationships with the ones you care about most.