

Is tech good or bad for work-life balance?

 By [Joanne Bushell](#)

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The number of mobile internet devices is set to outnumber humans by the end of this year.¹ There'll be more smartphones and internet-connected tablets and monitors than there are people on the planet.

Africa will be one focal point of the boom in smartphones. Microsoft/Huawei and Samsung are launching new smartphones for the African continent, and Blackberry is already well established there. Over 2012-17, Africa is predicted to have the strongest mobile data traffic of any region, increasing more than 17-fold over the period.²

Clearly, smartphones are hugely empowering for Africa. They'll spur the growth of entrepreneurship and local businesses, and bring improvements to areas of life including healthcare and education. But, at the same time, 24/7 technology brings with it stresses and strains, making workers feel they're always on call.

These feelings may be exacerbated as manufacturers find new ways to keep us online. In the US, Sergey Brin of Google and other early adopters are already wearing the Google Glass - spectacles which allow wearers to use the internet. And it's widely expected that Apple will launch a smartwatch. If we don't even have to reach into our pockets for our phone in order to connect to work, it's going to be harder than ever to switch off.

Positive or negative?

In a recent global survey by Accenture, 78% of workers said technology lets them be more flexible with their work schedules. But 70% said technology brings work into their personal lives. Feelings are clearly mixed.

Technology has facilitated the 24/7 working culture, but other things have fed into it too. Businesses are interacting with customers and colleagues in different time zones, and staff are increasingly expected to be available for late-night or early-morning calls. And the global downturn forced many workers to take on additional duties, which led to them working longer hours.

The positives of work-anywhere technology

So don't let's blame everything on technology. And let's not forget the very positive changes that technology has brought to work and work-life balance over the past decade. Think how much easier it is to do your job when the cloud means you no longer have to go to the office to access corporate information or applications. Remember how video-conferencing has reduced the need for time-consuming corporate travel.

Both those benefits are possible because technology allows people to work anywhere. It's no coincidence that the launch of devices such as the Blackberry in 2003, the iPhone in 2008 and the iPad in 2010 has been accompanied by a steep rise in the number of people using Regus business centres and drop-in business lounges to work. There are now over one million customers in 100 countries using Regus flexible workplaces, because people are choosing to work at locations that suit them and their customers, instead of doing the old-fashioned fixed, daily commute.

In the latest edition of the Regus Work-Life Balance Index, 41% of respondents globally said their companies were doing more to help employees reduce commuting than two years earlier.³ In several African countries, including Morocco, Nigeria, Tanzania and Tunisia, the percentage was higher than the global average. Working remotely can save the average employee 79 hours of commuting each year.⁴ It also cuts their travel costs and car emissions.

It's probable that flexible working and other measures to cut commuting are some of the reasons why 61% of people in the Regus Work-Life Balance Index 2012 said their work-life balance was better than in 2010.

The negatives of 24/7 management models

The negative aspects of 24/7 mobile technology arise because of management cultures. People use mobile devices and technology for work outside office hours because their bosses or clients expect them to. So it's not their phones that are preventing them from relaxing, it's other people.

As smartphone ownership and usage proliferate in Africa, we need to intensify the debate about work-life balance and people's availability in a 24/7 world. Sure, people may need to do late-night conference calls, but they may be happier to do so if flexible working patterns let them cut their commuting time or juggle home and work commitments.

And office workers may need to think about their own habits too. One reason why colleagues and clients can easily reach us out of hours is that we're already online - using social media or checking the football scores. We're more likely to hear the ping of an email arriving, so we're more likely to deal with it. The sender assumes we're happy to work out-of-hours, and bombards us even more in future. It's not just employers who need to learn the lessons about technology, presenteeism (at the desk or on the end of the phone), and how we can work most productively, it's also ourselves.

¹"Cisco Visual Networking Index: Global Mobile Data Traffic Forecast Update, 2012-2017", February 2013.

²"Cisco Visual Networking Index".

³"A Better Balance", Regus, May 2012.

⁴"Productive and profitable: taking the teleworking pledge", Cisco, 4 March 2013.

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