

Breaking the Smartphone Addiction

Published: May 14, 2012

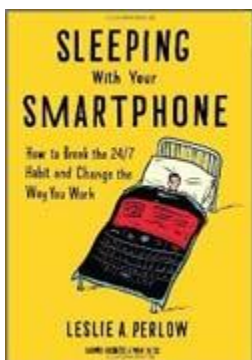
Author: Leslie A. Perlow

Editor's note: Check out the crowd at a concert, a movie, a school play, a beach—heck, even a funeral—and you'll likely see several people sneaking prolonged peeks at their smartphones. They just can't help themselves. Ringtones and message alerts are siren songs that lure them back to the world of work, no matter where they are.

"Let's face it," writes HBS Professor Leslie Perlow. "When that phone buzzes, few of us have the mental fortitude to ignore it."

In her new book, *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, Perlow explains how a small group of high-powered consultants made a concerted effort to disconnect from their devices for a few predetermined hours every week—and how they became more productive as a result. The following excerpt from the book describes how the scheduled disconnecting process, dubbed "predictable time off," helped these phone-addled employees to take better control of both their workdays and their lives.

Excerpt from *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*



It all began with an experiment that my research associate and collaborator, Jessica Porter, and I initiated in order to explore whether one six-person "case team" at one of the world's most elite and demanding professional service firms—The Boston Consulting Group (BCG)—could work together to ensure that they each could truly disconnect from work for a scheduled unit of time each week. This modest experiment generated such powerful results—not just for individuals' work lives but for the team's work process and ultimately the client—that the experiment was expanded to more and more of BCG's teams. Four years later, over nine hundred BCG teams from thirty countries on five continents had participated.

Sleeping with Your Smartphone shares BCG's story. It also serves as a guide for anyone who is on a team or leads a team—whether a junior or senior manager, from big organizations or small, in the United States or abroad—and wants to make the impossible possible: turning off more, while improving the work process itself. *Sleeping with Your Smartphone* proposes a way to make exactly that happen: a process tested successfully by BCG teams in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. A process I have seen implemented with good and not-so-good managers; on big and small teams, with tight deadlines and less pressing deliverables. A process that I have come to call "PTO"—because at the core, when people work together to create "predictable time off," people, teams, and ultimately the organization all stand to benefit.

To be clear, PTO won't solve all your problems. Nor is it about being always off in a world that is always on. Rather, it is about incremental changes that promise to improve your work-life and your work in ways that make them notably better.

Creating Change Where No One Could Even Imagine It

I chose to conduct the original experiment at The Boston Consulting Group because there was widespread skepticism about the possibility of such hard-charging professionals turning off. "It has to be this way," explained one consultant, echoing many of his colleagues. "It is the nature of the work. Clients pay huge sums of money and expect—and deserve—the highest-quality service."

Most consultants simply accepted the resulting demands on their time as the price they had to pay for annual salaries of well over \$100,000 for recent business school graduates to millions of dollars for the most senior partners, as well as for unequaled exposure to colleagues and clients of the highest caliber working together to tackle pressing problems faced by the world's leading organizations, not to mention résumé building work experience. Moreover, many actually thrived on the intensity of the work and did not want it to be different. Even those who wanted more time for their personal lives presumed they had no alternative but to leave the firm to achieve it, and many did, including some of BCG's most talented consultants. I figured that if change could be fostered here, it could be made to happen most anywhere.

Imagine my delight then, when four years after we conducted our first experiment at BCG's Boston office, 86 percent of the consulting staff in the firm's Northeast offices—including Boston, New York, and Washington, DC—were on teams engaged in similar PTO experiments. These team members were much more likely than their colleagues on teams not participating in PTO to rate their overall satisfaction with work and work-life positively. For example:

- 51 percent (versus 27 percent) were excited to start work in the morning
- 72 percent (versus 49 percent) were satisfied with their job
- 54 percent (versus 38 percent) were satisfied with their work-life balance

We also discovered that significantly more of those on PTO teams found the work process to be collaborative, efficient, and effective.

- 91 percent (versus 76 percent) rated their team as collaborative
- 65 percent (versus 42 percent) rated their team as doing everything it could to be efficient
- 74 percent (versus 51 percent) rated their team as doing everything it could to be effective

The happy result for BCG was that individuals engaged in PTO experiments were more likely to see themselves at the firm for the long term (58 percent versus 40 percent) and were more likely to perceive that they were providing significant value to their clients (95 percent versus 84 percent). BCG clients reported a range of experiences with PTO teams from neutral (nothing dropped through the cracks) to extremely positive (they reaped significant benefits). According to BCG's CEO, Hans-Paul Bürkner, the process unleashed by these experiments "has proven not only to enhance work-life balance, making careers much more sustainable, but also to improve client value delivery, consultant development, business services team effectiveness, and overall case experience. It is becoming part of the culture—the future of BCG."

The Cycle of Responsiveness: The Root of the 24/7 Habit

The reason PTO can be so effective for both individuals' work-lives and the work itself: busy managers and professionals tend to amplify—through their own actions and interactions—the inevitable pressures of their jobs, making their own and their colleagues' lives more intense, more overwhelming, more demanding, and less fulfilling than they need to be. The result of this vicious cycle is that the work process ends up being less effective and efficient than it could be. The power of PTO is that it breaks this cycle, mitigating the pressure, freeing individuals to spend time in ways that are more desirable for themselves personally and for the work process.

The initial discovery that illuminated all of this emerged from one of the surveys we conducted of sixteen hundred managers and professionals.

Of this sample, 92 percent reported putting in fifty or more hours of work a week. A third of this group was working sixty-five or more hours a week. And that doesn't include the twenty to twenty-five hours per week most of them reported monitoring their work while not actually working: 70 percent admitted to checking their smartphone each day within an hour after getting up, and 56 percent did so within an hour before going to bed. Weekends offered no let-up: 48 percent checked over the weekend, even on Friday and Saturday nights. Vacations were no better: 51 percent checked continuously when on vacation. If they lost their wireless device and couldn't replace it for a week, 44 percent of those surveyed said they would experience "a great deal of anxiety."

And 26 percent confessed to sleeping with their smartphones. Simply put, people were "on" a great deal.

We defined on as the time people spent working plus all the additional time they were available, monitoring their work in case something came up. And, we discovered that those whose workweek was more unpredictable tended to be on more. That was not surprising. What caught our attention was that the more people were on, the more unpredictable their work time seemed to become. By being constantly connected to work, they seemed to be reinforcing—and worse, amplifying—the very pressures that caused them to need to be available.

Our respondents were caught in what we have come to call the *cycle of responsiveness*. The pressure to be on usually stems from some seemingly legitimate reason, such as requests from clients or customers or teammates in different time zones. People begin adjusting to these demands—adapting the technology they use, altering their daily schedules, the way they work, even the way they live their lives and interact with their families and friends—to be better able to meet the increased demands on their time. Once colleagues experience this increased responsiveness, their own requests expand. Already working long hours, most just accept these additional demands—whether they are urgent or not—and those who don't risk being branded as less committed to their work.

And thus the cycle spins: teammates, superiors and subordinates continue to make more requests, and conscientious employees accept these marginal increases in demands on their time, while their expectations of each other (and themselves) rise accordingly. Eventually, the cycle grows (unintentionally) vicious; most people don't notice that they are spinning their way into a 24/7 workweek. And even if they begin resenting how much their work is spilling into their personal lives, they fail to recognize that they are their own worst enemy, the source of much of the pressure that they attribute to the nature of their business.

Imagine instead that people were not so accommodating and decided to find alternative ways to do the work. Imagine the upside of no longer having to accommodate to all the pressure to be on.

Imagine if in the process of making this possible, new ways of working were discovered that were more efficient and effective. Consider the win not just for individuals but also for the organization. The power of PTO is that it makes this all come true—by breaking the cycle of responsiveness. **WK**

Reprinted by permission of Harvard Business Review Press. Excerpt from *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*. Copyright 2012 Leslie A. Perlow All rights reserved.