

Smarter working: Am I working right now?

4th December 2014



It's Sunday morning. I'm having a cup of coffee, listening to music on the radio and writing a blog about technology and its impact on our lives – which will be published by my employer. Am I working right now?

You're reading this blog, learning about my perspective on work. Will this activity benefit you personally or professionally? What time of day is it – the classic 9 to 5 or outside of that? Are *you* working right now?

As technology becomes more available in our lives the definition of “work” continues to evolve. As I've [written about many times](#) before, I'm a huge advocate of “[Smarter Working](#),” where work is what you do not where you go. Remote tools that can be accessed from PCs, tablets and smart phones allow us to be productive from wherever we happen to be. While this has been a tremendous benefit to both employers and employees, one downside is that the definition of when one is working has blurred quite a bit – causing a major conundrum. Just because you can read and respond to a work email from wherever you are – should you?

This situation is creating a significant culture clash in some regions. A [law was passed in France](#) limiting the “digital work week” to 35 hours, requiring that employees ignore emails and calls from work unless they occur between 9am and 5pm. Germany has [enacted similar guidelines](#). These actions are meant to address the fear that employees constantly exposed to work will burn-out or will be pressured to work more hours than they are compensated for.

Could an employer abuse technology and cause an employee to be overworked or otherwise mistreated? Of course. However, I’ve found that the most appropriate test to apply to social and cultural questions about technology is to remove the technology and ask again. Could an employer abuse and/or overwork an employee without technology? Absolutely – it regrettably happens everywhere and every day. The way to address problems like these is not to ban the use of the technology but rather ensure that managers are subject to a [360 review process](#) that helps weed-out the abusive ones. Technology doesn’t cause bad managers.

The reality of working today is that unless one is a laborer, the idea of a 9 to 5 job is long gone. There are many reasons for this. The most obvious is globalization. If I am part of a global team how could I be short-sighted enough to restrict my working hours to only those of my own region – when my global colleagues might be asleep or having family dinners? But even more than that obvious example, modern workplaces foster a culture of respect for “[work-life balance](#).” What that means in this case is that an individual with both personal and professional responsibilities is best qualified to manage them – and should be empowered to do so.

When it works correctly, being available via smartphones and other remote tools outside of the 9-5 workday is what we as employees offer up in exchange for the tremendous value we get back in the trade. As for me personally, yes, I will respond to an email from a client, colleague or supervisor that I see on my smartphone at 10pm or 6am or when out with my family or even once in a while when on vacation/holiday. Who am I to judge that their issue is less important than what I’m doing at the moment without seeing what it is? How can I reach out to them for help when faced with a crisis/deadline/late running project if I’m not there for them when they need me? Most times the reply is a brief answer and I get back to what I was doing pretty quickly. I see this as more than a fair trade for attending a child’s sports game or teacher conference or running an occasional personal errand during the day. Excellent, modern mobile technology makes being effective from wherever I am possible. I realize that this is a personal decision that every employee must make. Being known as the “go-to” person by clients and colleagues is my choice. It is one that I know is respected and appreciated.

In addition, I find that not having the backlog of requests to wade through when I do sit down at my desk to start my workday makes me more relaxed and productive. Coming back from vacation/holiday and knowing that I’ve already classified and prioritized the messages (and dealt with the urgent ones) ensures no stress will come from any surprises.

So the question “am I working right now” really becomes moot. Am I meeting my personal and professional responsibilities? Are my efforts appreciated by my employer, clients and

colleagues? Do I have the freedom to take care of personal issues that arise without question? If the answer to those is yes then the rest doesn't matter. As far as working is concerned, I'm with [Confucius](#) – I love what I do and have never worked a day in my life.