At the crossroads

The need for a digital rebalance
About us

Promoting positive change in UK banks

The Bank Workers Charity (BWC) exists to support the health and wellbeing of the banking community. We work with banks to complement their existing wellbeing strategies, and aim to assist them in building better workplaces. Our Wellbeing Pulse blog delivers the latest in thinking, research and techniques across the four pillars of workplace wellbeing: psychological, physical, social and financial. We also offer a range of services to build and maintain the wellbeing of bank employees.

Research shows that wellbeing is a major factor in employee performance and productivity, and therefore in organisational effectiveness. We believe a meaningful and sustained employee wellbeing strategy is not an extravagance, it’s a business imperative.

BWC also provides free, independent and confidential support to boost the wellbeing of current and former bank workers, through the provision of information, advice, expert support services and in some cases financial assistance.

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1.0 Introduction
At the crossroads: 1.0 Introduction

Digital technology is ubiquitous, and within a relatively short time it has become embedded in our social fabric. Whether at home or at work, we're surrounded by it. The speed with which it is developing means that the absorption of the technology into our day-to-day lives has occurred rapidly but without the research into its impact that precedes the introduction of clinical interventions.

As a consequence, its wider effects are only now becoming apparent, especially with regard to its impact on us - physically, psychologically and in terms of our overall wellbeing. But the research is catching up and we are learning more about the wellbeing implications of digital technology. This paper will draw on these findings to suggest it may be time to take pause and question whether we need to be more circumspect about the levels of our digital consumption.

It’s only over the last five years or so that we’ve seen research outcomes suggesting digital technology may not be entirely beneficial. Yet it has already transformed the economic and cultural landscape, revolutionising many aspects of society, from the way we access music and how we shop to how we carry out financial transactions. So disruptive is the technology that few areas of our lives remain untouched, whilst many industries are transformed.

So disruptive is the technology that few areas of our lives remain untouched.

In this paper we are going to explore the digital landscape and consider the impact of the technology for good and for bad. We’ll identify the undeniable benefits it confers but we’ll also recognise the growing body of evidence that there may be a technological downside. Finally, we’ll look at its impact in the workplace and at the steps some companies are taking to ensure that they realise the full benefits of digital technology without it being at the expense of the health and wellbeing of their people or of business performance.
The technology and us
2.1 The technology gain

The enabling benefits of digital technology aren’t hard to identify. Our personal lives are enhanced by it in so many ways. Through it, we can keep in touch with family and friends however distant they may be, shop without leaving the sofa, and stream TV and films at the time of our choosing. And the work benefits are equally transparent – it allows fast and easy access to information, the use of high-quality data to make better decisions and it enables us to collaborate remotely with ease. It has also opened up the flexible working possibilities that have been so beneficial to businesses and to employees.

Arguably, without the swift transmission of data and the virtual working that digital technology facilitates, multinational corporations could not so successfully maximise their global presence. At a societal level, the open access to scientific data and to educational resources is removing barriers to progress and greater connectedness is reducing social isolation. Both represent major steps forward.

These benefits are undeniable and to forego them, from a personal or organisational point of view, is as unthinkable as abandoning the motorcar to return to the horse and carriage. And as the digital revolution is global, the benefits can be seen everywhere.

2.2 The scale of our digital commitment

Today, 4.2 billion people1 – over half of the world’s population – have access to the Internet, and that figure is growing by 20% a year. And the smartphone has been a game changer – 68% of people now have mobile phones, more than half of which are smartphones2. Indeed, the strength of our dependence on these devices was revealed in a recent study which found 46% of Americans felt that they couldn’t live without them3. Even allowing for some hyperbole, it’s hard to understimate how much we have come to rely on these devices.

Research from Ofcom suggests that on average we check our phones every 12 minutes4. Getting up in the morning and going to bed at night are times of especially high smartphone usage, with 40% of UK adults looking at them within five minutes of waking and almost as many doing so just before bedtime5.

Meanwhile, the controversy around the use of digital devices by children shows no sign of abating, with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health now recommending that children should cease using devices one hour before bedtime6. Yet the education system is increasingly turning to digital delivery, with an abundance of homework apps on the market and even communication with teachers occurring via email which is often out of hours. Even, as things stand, children in the UK spend six and a half hours each day in front of screens – this includes watching TV, playing on games consoles and using a computer, tablet or mobile phone7.

But UK adults are even more screen bound than children, clocking up an average of 8 hours 41 minutes each day8. And as so many jobs entail being wedded to computers, it doesn’t take much recreational usage for screen hours to mount.

For many of us, social media absorbs a great deal of recreational time. The average social media user is active for over two hours a day9 – and that figure is increasing. And if we look at the time spent online overall, it’s a huge 25 hours a week for adults in the UK10. But there are consequences that flow from this level of usage – there’s been a reduction in the time we devote to other important activities. As a result of being online, 48% of us neglect housework, 47% lose sleep and 31% miss out on time with family and friends11.

2.3 Cultural permeation

One interesting societal manifestation of the digital revolution is the penetration of language, with a whole new vocabulary arising to describe the
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new experiences associated with our use of technology. “Fear of missing out” or “FOMO” is probably the most familiar, often used to justify someone’s continued presence on social media. “Nomophobia”, according to the Collins English Dictionary, is “the state of stress caused by having no access to, or being unable to use, one’s mobile phone”.

Whilst not everyone would describe it in these terms, 40% of people in one UK survey claim they have been “smart snubbed” at least once a week. This involves being ignored by a friend or relative who is so intent on their smartphone or tablet that they don't pay attention to you, and 17% said this happened on a daily basis.

One final example comes from research carried out by LG, which found that 90% of people admitted to feeling “low-battery anxiety”, whilst 32% of people admitted they’d “drop everything” and return home if their smartphone battery died while they were away from a charging point.

These newly-minted expressions reflect the prevalence of digital devices in our culture and in our thinking. With such high levels of engagement it might appear that most of us experience digital connectedness as rewarding and beneficial, yet the reality is our feelings about our levels of digital commitment are more ambivalent.

2.4 How we feel about our digital behaviours

There is mounting evidence that people are becoming concerned about the extent of their digital involvement, or at least some aspects of it. Sixty two per cent of people say they hate how much time they spend on their phones. Whilst parents often have serious misgivings about how preoccupied children are with their devices, they may have blind spots about their own usage. In fact, 51% of UK children think that their parents are often distracted by their own phones when they are trying to have a conversation with them. Many adults are attuned to these concerns – 43% believe that they spend too much time online themselves.

Parents frequently express their disquiet over how the quality of family life has been diminished by the intrusion of digital devices into the home sphere. It’s not unusual to see mobile devices at the dinner table, or being scanned whilst watching TV with the family. The fear is that the intimacy of home relationships will be eroded by the relentlessness of digital activity and that digital interactions will take precedence over real-life connections.

It’s a measure of the generational differences on these matters that there is an attitudinal gulf around social etiquette in the use of devices. Checking phone notifications at meal times is felt to be unacceptable by 83% of adults over 55, but only 46% of adults under 35 agree. Similarly, 62% of over 55s feel that people shouldn’t use their phone whilst watching TV with others but this drops to 21% for under 35s.

A more recent development is the prevalence of texting, which overtook talking as the most popular form of communication in 2007. In 2014, Gallup found that texting was the most common means of communicating with people among under 50s, though this begins to tail off after 50. However, the ambivalence about the technology is evident in an earlier survey, in which nearly two thirds indicated that, though they continue to text, they’d prefer to use more direct forms of communicating.

The concerns expressed in these findings may not be misplaced. There is growing evidence that there may be some risks attached to our preoccupation with our devices. Research, particularly from the field of neuroscience, is warning of the risks associated with excessive use of digital technology.
3.0
Digital technology and wellbeing
3.1 Experts divided

The last five years have seen a plethora of research into the impact of digital devices on our health and wellbeing. Our desire to capture the manifold benefits of any new technology as swiftly as possible means that there is invariably a time lag between its introduction and any appreciation of its wider impact, which may not be entirely benign. As far as digital technologies are concerned, the research findings are now emerging and it’s not all good news.

The experts are divided into two camps: those who feel the benefits of the digital revolution are beyond debate, and those who fear that the adverse impact on our society and individual wellbeing will ultimately undermine the value of the technology. Pew Research undertook a comprehensive investigation into the anticipated long-term impact of the technology, with contributions from hundreds of experts in the field. Almost half felt the benefits would outweigh any downside but a third felt that, over time, the balance would be negative.

One of these voices, Bob Reich from Stanford University, said he was “willing to express a confident judgement that the next decade will bring a net harm to people’s wellbeing. The massive and undeniable benefits of digital life — access to knowledge and culture — have been mostly realised. The harms have begun to come into view over the past few years and the trend line is moving in a consistently negative direction”.

A research scientist reinforced this, arguing that “the next decade will be one of retrenchment and adjustment as society sorts out how to deal with our perhaps over-optimistic construction of the digital experience”.

The reality is, for now, it is too early to say and we may not be in a position to make a balanced judgment for another decade. Nevertheless, a growing number of research papers are telling us there is an unanticipated downside to our engagement with digital technology.

3.2 The impact on our cognitive processes

Some of the most significant research into the impact of this technology has come from the field of neuroscience, which has looked into how being constantly connected is affecting our cognitive processes. And some of the findings do have potentially serious implications for the workplace, touching as they do on productivity, focus and creativity.

An early casualty of this research is the pervasive workplace competency of multitasking. What the research tells us is that despite our predilection for it, our brains aren’t wired to multitask. A fundamental limitation of the brain is its inability to focus fully on more than one thing at a time, unless one of the tasks is completely automatic, like walking.

Each time we shift from one task to another, or break off a task temporarily, like to read an email or check a message, we lose focus. Getting back to the earlier level of concentration takes time. Through the use of magnetic resonance imaging, researchers have been able to measure how much efficiency is lost when a person shifts between tasks.

A University of Michigan study found that multitasking reduces productivity by more than 40%. Multitasking has also been found to be associated with lower levels of creativity, shallower thinking, poorer concentration and higher stress levels. The problem is that the modern workplace, with its formidable array of digital technology, is premised on multitasking.

“Digital overload” is a phrase that has been coined to describe the sense of cognitive exhaustion that comes from being relentlessly bombarded with interruptions in the form of notifications, emails, instant messages and texts. These distractions disrupt the flow of work and train of thought, making it difficult to focus.

It has been suggested that the fragmented work pattern associated with digital technology is resulting in something called “continuous partial attention”. The term originated with former Apple executive Linda Stone, who used it to describe the state of mind that has evolved as a consequence of the endless stream of digital demands on our attention. We end up on constant alert, checking what’s coming in but never devoting our full attention to anything. There is a cost to this. Over the long term, this state of being on
permanent alert stimulates the creation of adrenaline and cortisone, part of the stress response, which is costly for our bodies to maintain.

We have become habituated to read less carefully on a screen than we do with a printed text.

Another byproduct of being constantly interrupted is that our capacity for deep-thinking and sustained focus reduces because we lose the reflection time we normally enjoy when dealing with new information or ideas. Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times journalist Matt Richtel argues that people have filled every available space with digital activity, whether queuing at the supermarket, travelling on a train or lounging around the house. This eliminates boredom, but we lose the empty space in which creative ideas can arrive, sometimes unbidden.

Researchers have also found that the particular way that we absorb written information from a screen creates a different kind of problem. We have become habituated to read less carefully on a screen than we do with a printed text, tending to skim-read and absorb the content less thoroughly. One study found that people reading from a book or a page showed a higher level of understanding of the text, were able to recollect more about the content, and could answer more nuanced questions about it, than those who read onscreen. This clearly has implications for the workplace where the drive to create paperless offices means that many people rarely read from hard copy. The negative consequences for the quality of thinking and decision making are potentially serious.

In university settings, the loss of the capacity to achieve and maintain sustained focus has been noted by academics. Nikki Graves from Emory University believes that “we currently live in a society that fosters attention deficit disorder because of hyper-connectivity. I have been teaching at college level since 1993 and I can see a definite decline in students’ ability to focus on details and in general.”

Studies also suggest that people are suffering a reduction in memory efficiency as a result of “the Google effect”, where we subconsciously delegate responsibility for remembering things to digital devices. Repeated experiments have shown that if information can be retrieved from digital sources, our recollection and retrieval of that data is less efficient.

Nicholas Carr, writing in the Wall Street Journal, observed that “when we restrict our capacity for reasoning and recall, or transfer those to a device, we sacrifice our ability to turn information into knowledge.”

It has been suggested that as our technology use has increased, our analytical and creative thinking skills have declined. The constant stream of interruptions that characterise the modern office creates real impediments to deeper thought. The term “flow” is used by psychologists to describe “the state of concentration so focused it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity.”. Studies have shown that there are strong links between being in a state of flow and heightened creativity.

All the evidence is that the constant distractions we experience from devices limit our capacity to enter and remain in a state of flow, with the attendant risks for organisational performance and productivity.

3.3 Smartphones – distraction and loss of focus

Smartphones have been shown to be an especially potent source of distraction both at home and at work. There is some evidence that people become habituated to enjoy distractions and begin to actively seek them out. The smartphone makes this all too easy. Built into one incomparably convenient device is a radio, a camera, a TV, a communication tool and a research library. It is the smartphone’s versatility, in combining so many desirable functions in one product, that makes it so efficient at diverting our attention away from the task at hand. The growing concern about the attention draining impact of smartphones has led to French schools banning them for children under the age of 15.

But their psychological impact appears to go beyond simply distraction. One study found that when a smartphone buzzes in the middle of a complex task, people lose focus and the quality of their work suffers. And there is growing evidence that the mere presence of
a smartphone is enough to exert a negative impact on performance.

During a study of 520 undergraduates, some participants had smartphones in view, some in their pockets and others placed them in a separate room. Given a complex task to undertake, those with phones in view performed worst and those whose phones were in a different room performed best. This effect has been replicated in a number of other studies. It has been suggested that poorer performance may be attributed to the amount of cognitive resource required to resist the pull of the smartphone.

And social relationships too are affected. In a study examining the impact of smartphones on the quality of interpersonal connections, the very presence of a phone inhibited the development of closeness and trust. Another study found that 25% of smartphone users in committed relationships were distracted by their phones when they were with their partner. This was especially true for people aged 18-24, for whom the figure was 42%.

3.4 The impact on sleep

Digital devices have also been found to impact negatively on the quantity and quality of our sleep. Again thanks to neuroscience, we know far more about sleep than ever before and one thing we’ve learnt is that it’s much more important than we’d appreciated. Getting the right amount of sleep is vital to maintaining good mental and physical health, whilst poor sleep is linked to a range of psychological conditions, as well as physical problems from obesity to heart disease and even early death.

Recent research has found that 47% of adults have lost sleep because of their Internet usage. And we’ve developed some bad habits that really don’t help our sleep quality: in a US study, 95% of people used some type of screen in the hour before bedtime at least a few days a week. This is significant because the blue light from mobile devices has been shown to inhibit the excretion of the hormone melatonin, which we need to sleep well. Many people binge-watch TV – in fact, 32% of us have done so at least once in the last month and missed out on sleep as a consequence. Tellingly, the CEO of Netflix identified sleep as a greater source of competition than rival platforms.

The quantity and quality of sleep is particularly important for the brain and behavioural development of young people. In one study, when teenagers were in front of a screen for more than four hours per day, they were three and a half times more likely to see a reduction in their sleep. Poor sleep would matter less if it simply meant being slightly below-par the next day but, as we’ve seen, it can have serious and long lasting consequences.

3.5 Tech and communication skills

There is also evidence that the use of digital technology has contributed to a decline in the level of interpersonal skills and the capacity to empathise among millennials. Children and young people are spending so much time interacting via technology, and they’re not developing the basic communication skills that were a given for earlier generations. Some of the essentials of face-to-face communication, such as tone of voice, facial expression and body language are all missing when interacting digitally, leading to some millennials acquiring a less sophisticated interpersonal skillset. There is a concurrent loss in their capacity to empathise. Adam Alter, in his book “Irresistible”, argues that people need to study the reactions of others to learn empathy. He says “empathy can’t flourish without immediate feedback, and it’s a very slow developing skill”. This communication gap is now becoming apparent in the workplace, with one major bank having to introduce soft skills training to make

What is digital overload doing to our brains?

1. Reducing productivity by more than 40%
2. Exhausting our minds with constant interruptions
3. Stimulating the stress response
4. Hindering our ability to reflect and absorb new information
5. Reducing our memory efficiency
6. Impeding our creative and analytical skills
7. Inhibiting the development of closeness and trust
up the social skills deficit among their younger employees.

3.6 Physical health concerns

A less heralded problem associated with heavy screen use is the damage done to eyesight. Some researchers suggest that computer vision syndrome is the number one occupational health hazard of the 21st century. Characterised by headaches, dry eyes and blurred vision, it is a direct consequence of employees spending their days staring at computer screens. Research shows that people blink less when in front of a screen and this aggravates the problem, causing dryness of the eyes and discomfort.

There is also a concern that our preoccupation with electronic media is contributing to an obesity crisis, with physical activity in young people being replaced by extended periods of sedentary behaviour.

3.7 Social media and mental health

A large proportion of people’s digital activity is on social media. Worldwide, there are over three billion social media users. Facebook alone has over two billion users and on average, social media users have 8.5 social media accounts. And they spend a lot of time in those accounts – worldwide, the average Internet user spends over an hour and a half a day on social media.

There is a considerable amount of research into the impact of this usage on psychological wellbeing. This is in part because of the very significant amount of time people are spending on social media but also because of concerns over the surge in mental health problems among younger people, who are its biggest users overall.

Some concerning statistics have recently emerged around the decline in mental health of young people. In the 1960s, the average age for the initial onset of depression was 45 – it is now 14. And newspaper headlines towards the end of 2018 drew attention to an NHS study that found one in five young women between the age of 17 and 19 have self-harmed or attempted suicide. Simon Stevens, CEO of NHS England, says that the Health Service is picking up the pieces of an epidemic of mental illness among children, for which social media should contribute to addressing.

Social media is often cited as being a significant contributor to these worrying statistics. However it needs to be acknowledged that whilst repeated studies do show a correlational relationship between the use of social media and an increase in mental health problems among young people, as yet there is little causal evidence.

Nevertheless, studies have established links between frequent use of social media and conditions like depression, anxiety, eating problems and social isolation, as well as increased suicide risk. In one study, almost half of 18-34 year olds said using social media made them feel ugly or unattractive. The Chief Medical Officers review, published in February 2019, investigated the psychosocial impact of screen time on young people. It found that 38% of teenage girls who spent over five hours a day on social media suffered from symptoms of depression compared to 18% among those who spent between one to three hours on such sites. Another study showed that people using seven or more social media platforms were three times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as those who used two or fewer.

And repeated studies have shown that women compare themselves unfavourably to other women’s photos on social media.

One study, which did establish a causal connection, was undertaken by Pennsylvania University. It found that over the course of three weeks, rates of depression and loneliness went down significantly for people who limited their social media use. As these outcomes find their way into the public sphere, attitudes towards social media are changing and Facebook has seen an exodus of young users, with 44% of 18-29 year olds deleting the app in the last year.

As with the research on digital consumption in general, it’s early days. We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that there are also benefits to social media usage, like enabling people to make and maintain friendships, especially over long distances. It’s been suggested that even for people with mental health problems it may be helpful, enabling them to build social connections and reach other communities. Yet there are enough warning signs already to suggest we ought to be circumspect about the amount of time we devote to social media.

3.8 Tech as addiction

Much has been written about the addictive nature of digital technology, but it has yet to be recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of
Mental Disorders (DSM), the bible of the psychiatric profession in the USA. Many feel that it deserves to be, and that it is only a question of time before the accumulation of evidence demands its inclusion. The World Health Organization has recognised gaming disorder, and there are certainly parallels with other addictive behaviours in the ways that people use digital devices.

In 2018, Facebook's first president Sean Parker revealed that the thought process behind the creation of Facebook was “how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” The trick was to hijack the body’s reward mechanism. Social media activates the same neural circuitry as tobacco, alcohol and cocaine, with the express aim of getting people to continue using the platforms. It utilises dopamine, the neurotransmitter that drives us to act in order to satisfy our desires and needs. Dopamine rewards us for these beneficial actions and encourages us to repeat them, and it is this mechanism that social media algorithms exploit. This is also true of the scrolling system on Facebook, which is designed to extend usage by dangling the lure of more compelling content. The approach clearly works, as one study found that merely seeing the Facebook logo is enough to create a craving.

Tristan Harris, an ex-Google ethicist who founded the Centre for Humane Technology, has described the digital world as a “Wild West”. And Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web, has launched a modern-day Magna Carta for the web, to set limits and requirements for companies operating in the tech space. Some experts are recommending that course curricula for software engineers include components on ethics. This would imbue designers with an awareness of the moral dimension of digital creation, to ensure they take account of the social and cultural repercussions of their products. The hope is that this will power a design shift towards tools that seek to enhance the wellbeing of its users rather than spread addictive behaviours. Wellness, it is argued, can be designed into new products.

As more evidence of the negative impact of digital technology has emerged, some of the designers and engineers responsible for developing the technical innovations that underpin digital devices have raised concerns about the impact of their creations. Many are calling for a more human face to the technology and for the wellbeing of the user to be taken into account in the development of these products, so that we’re less reliant on our doubtful ability to resist the addictive features designed into them.

One such designer and the creator of Facebook’s “like” button, Justin Rosenstein, said “it is very common for humans to develop things with the best of intentions and for them to have unintended, negative consequences”. Tech dissenters like Rosenstein have concerns about the damaging effect on our health and wellbeing of what has come to be termed “the attention economy”, which is shaped around the needs of advertising without taking account of the possible adverse consequences for users.

These technologists are limiting their own screen time and weaning themselves off their own products.

It is revealing that many of these technologists are limiting their own screen time and weaning themselves off their own products. Some Silicon Valley employees are placing restrictions or even bans on their children’s access to devices, and in some instances are sending them to elite schools that don’t allow the use of screens. This, in the words of app creator Michael Acton, is to avoid turning them into “dopamine frazzled zombies.”

Many of their views can be boiled down to the idea that creating a healthy digital world shouldn’t be about educating people about the risks of excessive use and encouraging moderation, but about designing products that encourage responsible digital consumption.
4.0
Technology in the workplace
4.1 Time for businesses to act?

With some of the adverse consequences of digital behaviour having clear implications for the workplace, how are businesses responding? Finding an appropriate organisational response to protect staff against digital overload and addiction isn’t easy but it is important to take steps to ensure we manage the technology rather than have it manage us. As we’re in a period where information overload and work-life balance problems are escalating, there is a case for companies helping employees to manage the digital distractions they experience at home and at work.

“It is important to take steps to ensure we manage the technology rather than have it manage us.”

Businesses have invested in wellbeing programmes to create healthy organisations that enable employees to give of their best. It would be entirely consistent with this agenda for them to put measures in place, as part of their overall wellbeing strategies, to educate staff about the benefits and risks of the technology they’re using. A step further would be to develop guidelines both on what represents healthy levels of usage and what the business expects in terms of employee responsiveness outside of standard hours.

4.2 Rethinking email

Some businesses have begun to address the issue by tackling email. The email has been with us since the 1990s, and has rarely been viewed as anything other than a boon to business. Only since the advent of mobile devices, which allowed employees to access their email accounts round the clock, have questions been asked about its impact on our wellbeing.

Now, many feel that unbridled email access is having a detrimental effect on our health and wellbeing, biting into our private time and allowing scant opportunity for rest and recovery from the rigours of the working week. Foremost among the critics is wellbeing expert Professor Sir Cary Cooper of Manchester Business School, who has been prominent in calling for a more responsible approach to managing the email flow. He notes that “there’s a whole field now called technostress, and the evidence is that unconstrained emails, where there is no guidance by employers, are damaging for people’s health.”

This resonates with a commonly-held view that technology has amplified what was already a long-hours culture. There is ample evidence that employees are struggling to manage the intrusion of work into their personal space via mobile devices. In fact, 45% of parents say they feel disconnected from their families, even when together, because of technology. In a Henley Business School study, 61% of managers found that technology made it difficult to switch off from work. Over half said they often check email outside of working hours, with middle managers finding it to be most invasive. More concerning, the managers felt that the constant interruptions introduced by technology negated any performance and productivity gains the mobile devices were designed to deliver.

Professor Sir Cary Cooper advocates banning the sending of emails among people in the same building and suggests replacing them with phone calls or face-to-face meetings. He argues that employees working on emails at night weekends and on holiday is bad for the nation’s health and its productivity.

Any apparent reluctance to address this may be because these email behaviours are normative. In many organisations, a sociocultural expectation has arisen in which employees feel they need to be seen to be responding in real time, to any approaches from the business. The immediacy of emails may be driving an expectation of a swift response, even when that isn’t necessary, with responsiveness being conflated, in the minds of both sender and recipient, with commitment to the business. One study looked at the role of such organisational expectations and found they impacted negatively on employees’ emotional states, leading to worsened work-life balance and burnout.

Millennials appear particularly susceptible to these expectations. A fifth of them believe they would be viewed as uncommitted if they did not respond to emails outside of working hours and a third felt their career progression would stall if they only responded to emails during work time. This is a concern as, by 2025, millennials will represent 75% of the workforce.

Among the first businesses to act on email overload was Volkswagen, when in 2012 they turned off email outside working hours. In 2014, Daimler in Germany introduced an optional program in which emails are automatically deleted when the recipient is on holiday. The sender receives a message inviting them to find an alternative recipient of the email, leaving the employee to return from holiday to an empty inbox.
Since then, more companies have followed suit. Orange, the multinational telecoms company, released the following statement in 2018: “Respect for the private life and the right to switch off are considered to be fundamental rights at Orange. It is a matter of protecting employees from intrusive practices (such as email, SMS or instant messaging services) at any time of the day or night, over the weekend, during days off or during training courses”.

Uwe Hück, deputy chairman of Porsche’s supervisory board, asked that the company’s employees be protected from work-related emails in their personal time and correspondence between 7pm and 6am should be returned to sender. Other companies that have enacted similar policies include French energy company Orano, BMW and AXA. And, of course, in 2017 France introduced a “right to disconnect”, with companies instructed to set out the hours when staff shouldn’t send or respond to emails.

4.3 Working towards digital wellbeing

Although digital wellbeing is yet to become a standard feature of organisational wellbeing thinking, it is no longer peripheral. Many businesses have recognised that it is an issue that demands greater attention. There is a growing sense of the need for digital management strategies, possibly to form part of wider wellbeing strategies. Indeed, some have called for businesses to provide guidance on managing digital distraction at home, as well as at work, particularly as many employees struggle with work-life balance issues. And businesses do seem to be taking action.

A 2018 Economist report on wellbeing programmes surveyed 500 senior HR executives from global organisations about their wellbeing priorities. Around 70% of respondents felt that initiatives that focus on the impact of digital consumption were important, as were polices that promote digital wellbeing. Significantly, over 50% felt they had implemented such measures well or very well. It is encouraging to see that some companies have moved beyond email to address some of the core wellbeing issues associated with the technology.

A highly innovative initiative was introduced by Telenor, a Scandinavian global telecoms company. “Workfulness” is a programme built around ideas from neuroscience, centring on decision making. It operates on the principle that to function effectively at work, the rational brain needs to gain precedence over the impulsive brain.

It focuses on eliminating distractions and incorporates strategies of disconnection for employees. These include tech-free meetings and email free working hours. It also includes disabling pop ups and notifications on smartphones and computers. It introduces “focus time” that is linked to people’s individual energy patterns and allows employees to manage their own availability through autoreply messaging.

The programme is built around a handbook and supported by training sessions. The Workfulness Guidebook states that, “as an operator, we are part of the digitalisation process, and as such we also have a responsibility to ensure that businesses and individuals have a healthy digital working environment. Moreover, we have a responsibility to talk about the consequences of being constantly ‘switched on’, and how we can use technology smartly”.

Importantly, the Workfulness programme isn’t designed to reduce the amount of technology in the workplace. It’s about achieving a healthy balance that addresses the risks to the wellbeing and productivity of the user but doesn’t eliminate the benefits to the business.

It’s about achieving a healthy balance that addresses the risks to the wellbeing and productivity of the user.

Ironically, apps can be a simple and accessible way to address digital overload. Vodafone has provided its 18,000 UK employees with an app to help manage different aspects of their wellbeing. The app monitors their online activity and offers recommendations for healthier behaviours.

A different approach has been taken by the French multinational utility company Engie. They perceive much of the problem as stemming from the ceaseless flow of information and distractions that interrupt work, increase the likelihood of mistakes and exacerbate the fragmentation of employees’ personal lives. They created an action plan consisting of a number of different strands. It included a different approach to email, centring on a communication sent to employees every two weeks, highlighting recommended and discouraged email practices. It also utilised videos and animations.

Another important component of the initiative is a library of different meeting formats, designed for specific purposes. These include team
building, project start-ups, and ideation workshops which are designed to reshape how meetings are conducted. The formats identify everything that’s useful to set up a particular meeting, including collaboration tools, role briefs and physical requirements (for example smartphone boxes or the removal of chairs for stand-up meetings). The centrepiece of the programme is a portal in which colleagues can use and share resources. Tools are also available to measure levels of email and smartphone use and other digital activity.

These are some examples of the different approaches businesses are now taking and there appears to be a real desire to create higher levels of digital wellbeing at work. Tanya Goodin, a leading authority on the impact of digital technology in the workplace, works with major companies to help them to engage with the digital wellbeing agenda. She has “seen momentum building around this issue for a number of years. And as evidence continues to emerge, of the possible negative consequences of our digital over-consumption, I’m seeing more and more companies taking steps to address the issue. I’m convinced 2019 is going to be the year that tackling poor digital behaviour in the workplace goes mainstream.”

Case Study
Tech-Life Balance at Eversheds Sutherland

Technology, whilst it has been great for business, has created an ‘always on’ culture that has the potential to have a profoundly negative impact on wellbeing. It has blurred the boundaries between work and home life and led to expectations around responsiveness and availability, and a perception that good client service means being available 24/7, 365 days a year.

In 2018, Eversheds Sutherland launched their firm-wide wellbeing programme as a key part of their global people strategy. This was a really important step forward for the global legal practice who recognise that their people are pivotal in achieving their global ambitions through sustainable high performance.

They realised that the balance had tipped in a way that meant people did not always feel that they were in control of technology, but rather that technology had begun to control them.

This is not a problem unique to private practice law firms, but the global legal practice noticed their clients were also starting to question whether the way in which the legal sector worked was sustainable and whether there was more that could be done to future-proof the profession for new generations of lawyers to have long, successful, healthy careers.

Eversheds Sutherland decided to take positive action to educate themselves on the impact of technology on wellbeing and productivity, including the use of mobile devices, time spent on screens and email habits. They found that a significant amount of time was being spent checking devices and managing emails, and this was having an impact on finding time for dedicated concentration to engage in deep work, and on wellbeing overall.

They engaged with a digital detox professional to first get to know them as a business. They then conducted a firm-wide survey around the use and impact of technology, and delivered webinars and dedicated team-based sessions to help each individual find ways they could implement small changes to the way in which they used technology to help regain a sense of control and improve overall wellbeing and productivity.

These sessions proved exceptionally popular with employees, and their work in this area has also been popular with clients. People took the practical hints and tips from the webinars and team-based sessions and implemented them both in work and at home. An important message was that there is no one-size fits all and it is important to be flexible and to adapt recommendations to the demands of each employee’s role and the dynamics of their working relationships.

But through some trial and error, perseverance and open dialogue, Eversheds Sutherland are now in a position to make firm-wide recommendations to help improve the tech-life balance of their people, with a view to improving wellbeing and productivity, whilst continuing to deliver optimum client service.
5.0 Conclusion
where we go next
Workplace wellbeing is a relatively young field, and has only recently become a strategic priority for most businesses. But a large volume of research conducted over the last decade has given us a much more sophisticated understanding of wellbeing and the factors that shape it. Five years ago, employee finances and sleep barely registered in most companies’ wellbeing considerations. Now financial wellbeing forms a cornerstone of most workplace wellbeing offerings, whilst educating employees about the importance of sleep is increasingly common. Digital wellbeing is a relatively new area of focus but, as we’ve seen, businesses are already acting to ameliorate the health consequences of the technology.

Of course, digital wellbeing is as much a societal as it is a business issue. The mental health crisis is forcing the Government to look at the underlying sources of the problem, and the impact of digital activity has not gone unnoticed. A high profile teen suicide in November 2018 turned the spotlight on social media again, increasing the pressure on government to legislate to force tech companies to prioritise the wellbeing of users and to remove harmful content.

And in February 2019, the Chief Medical Officer, amidst growing concern about the impact of uncontrolled screen time on teenagers’ wellbeing, made recommendations urging parents to ban smartphones at meal times and in the bedroom at night. She fell short of recommending a specific daily limit for screen time, as it was felt that there wasn’t enough published research to justify such a step. However, social media firms will be asked to contribute to funding for further research.

One ongoing study promises to be helpful in producing conclusive data on which to build future policy. The study is investigating adolescent cognitive brain development over a 10 year period. It is the largest longitudinal study of its kind ever undertaken. Using brain imaging it is assessing the health, including the digital health, of those participating. The outcomes of this research seem certain to shed greater light on the policy needs. Over the longer term some form of guidelines around the use of devices seem inevitable. But for now we remain some way off creating a healthy consumption model for digital activity.

Faced with the expanding evidence base, and in the absence of clear public policy guidelines, businesses have taken a lead on addressing digital overload. Companies are right to say that it isn’t about removing the technology, as much as reframing our relationship with it. Getting the balance right will protect employees’ health, wellbeing and their work-life balance but it will also guard against the loss of productivity and creativity for the business. This is surely attainable and some see it happening through the encouragement of a mindful approach to the technology.

Employees should be encouraged to reflect on how they’re using tech at home and at work, and to be more selective about what apps and devices they use and when. Reasonable boundaries could be introduced around the technology, through work schedules that build in regular tech-free periods. It has also been suggested that HR leaders could collaborate with IT to create programs to gauge how affected employees are by some of the adverse impacts identified in the research.

Clearly digital technology is here to stay. The benefits it confers, at work and at home, are irreplaceable. But to get the best out of it we do need to ensure that employees and businesses appreciate the risks it brings, as well as the advantages. The workplace needs to be an environment that is supportive of digital health and wellbeing and there is a clear convergence of interest for employees and businesses in making it so.

“Digital wellbeing is as much a societal as it is a business issue.”

At the crossroads: 5.0 Conclusion - where we go next
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What is digital overload doing to our brains?


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While every attempt has been made to ensure that the information in this whitepaper is accurate, reliable and complete, the Bank Workers Charity is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or for the results obtained from the use of this information.
**Paul Barrett** is the Head of Wellbeing for the Bank Workers Charity. An occupational psychologist with over 25 years' experience in workplace wellbeing, Paul managed the in-house employee assistance programme for a major UK bank for over ten years. He has written for Chartered Banker, Financial News, HR Zone, The Work Foundation, CIPD and Business Healthy, and presents at leading wellbeing events.

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**The Bank Workers Charity**  
Salisbury House, London Wall,  
London EC2M 5QQ  
Office: 020 3873 8514  
Helpline: 0800 0234 834

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