Surviving a Day Without Smartphones

For young adults accustomed to continually checking their cellphones, even a single day without access to them can be anxiety-producing. What are the implications for executives about managing this constantly connected generation?
In contemporary society, many people, particularly those under the age of 30, rely on their smartphones for a variety of important activities, including waking up in the morning, listening to music, following the news, finding bus schedules, and communicating with friends and family. A 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 15% of Americans between ages 18 and 29 were “heavily dependent” on their smartphones for online access. There is no question that smartphones make our lives easier and more connected. But at what cost? Several studies have warned that excessive phone use can affect cognitive abilities, sleep, the quality of social interactions, and the ability to engage at work.

Based on the behavior we observed in our classrooms and the extent to which technology is infiltrating young people’s lives, we discussed what we could do to make our students more conscious of the costs associated with unrestrained use of mobile phones and other internet-connected devices. After reading about various ideas for curbing dependency on phones and devices, we decided to initiate a one-day project in which graduate students in our organizational behavior and leadership courses at the University of Bologna in Italy and the Bordeaux, France, campus of Kedge Business School would be asked to suspend all connectivity and keep a journal about their experience. This article is based on the experiences of 153 graduate...
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students who participated in this project between 2015 and 2017.

Students reacted to the idea with a mix of incredulity and skepticism, although these reactions were often followed by a feeling of excitement. Some students, particularly foreign students, pushed back, citing concerns that family members or partners would worry if they were unreachable. In such cases, we suggested that students inform their families in advance and share the contact information of a friend or professor in case of emergency.

A number of students questioned the very notion that they were in any way addicted to their devices. However, we ultimately decided to make participation in the project a requirement for our courses, and we advised students to inform their families that they would be out of touch.

Anticipating the Challenge

For a number of students, the days leading up to the challenge were both busy and stressful. Individual students were allowed to choose the day they would be off-line and away from their phone, and many were careful about how they prepared. In addition to notifying their friends and family, some students elected to announce their upcoming technology hiatus more publicly, by posting about it on social media. Many students anticipated some of the challenges they would face by printing bus schedules, driving directions, and other materials they usually accessed in real time from their devices. They consulted with friends and roommates on how to handle mundane tasks such as how to wake up in the morning without using their phone alarm.

Students were expected to keep track of the experience for a paper that would count for 30% of their final grade for the course. In the paper, they were to discuss how they prepared for the experiment, how they spent their time off-line, how the experience affected them emotionally, and what they learned about disconnecting from technology for one entire day.

How They Spent Their Time

Many students noted that the unplugged day seemed longer than a typical day. Some saw this as a good thing, as it allowed them to complete projects they had postponed for weeks. A German student said that, despite waking up later than usual (because he didn’t have an alarm), he had more time to read, exercise, and prepare a special meal.

For other students, having more time in the day was viewed as a negative, leaving them with gaps some admitted they didn’t know how to fill. “[Without the smartphone] my breakfast was too short and I did not know what to do next,” one student noted. Another wrote about his frustration at not being able to look at his phone during bus and train rides; he called it “the longest time of my life.” Not having a phone to look at made some students feel exposed. As one put it, “I was feeling uncomfortable, with no possibility to hide behind the phone screen.” One French student wrote, “I was not capable of doing nothing. I was thinking about my phone all the time.” To minimize their discomfort, a number of students elected to do the experiment on a day they knew would be busy. “In this way,” wrote a student from the United States, “I will be distracted and not think about my phone.”

Many students made a determined effort to approach the project as a learning opportunity. A few noted that it was a way to experience what life was like before the rise of mobile devices (or as one put it, to see “how my parents communicated when they were my age”). They reported spending time visiting new areas of the city (“I had been living in the city for six months, and there were still many places I did not know, so that was a fantastic day for me”). “I walked around for a couple of hours,” one student offered, “and it was so relaxing.”

Many participants said the experiment provided time to reflect on how technologies were shaping their lives and social interactions. Several said they experienced more meaningful conversations, which caused them to feel “closer and more connected” to their friends. One student wrote, “My friend and I had dinner in the evening, and we both remarked on how much more present we felt — how we could really hear what each other was saying.”

How They Felt

During the unplugged day, students experienced a mix of emotions. For many, the strongest feeling was anxiety. Students felt anxious about missing something important: What if their parents needed them? What if a dream employer was trying to contact them with a job offer? How would they catch up with all the social media updates they were missing? In anticipation of the experiment, some students reported that they had difficulty sleeping. In order to calm themselves, a few students said they used their smartphones as much as they could until the experiment began. (One wrote, “I spent [the] last minutes checking every communication and my social media apps.”)

A common sentiment was that the phone provided “a sense of safety.” Even when it was turned off, some students said they carried their phone with them in airplane mode just in case there was an emergency. Many noted that they felt the greatest amount of anxiety in the afternoon, when they hadn’t received a call for several hours. One Italian student wrote of her fears about losing contact with people and being excluded: “I am not receiving messages, photos, emails, likes, comments, etc. It feels as if no one is willing to interact with me, thinking about me! I am alone!!”

Students also expressed feelings of guilt at not being able to respond to messages received in their class chats. They were concerned that they were hurting their classmates’ ability to complete class assignments and worried about the repercussions
their disconnection might have on their reputations and social life. A Russian woman studying at Bologna wrote, “Remaining silent for more than three hours is considered abnormal, requiring explanation later. Being fast in responses is a must that is needed in order to be part of social life.” When the 24-hour period was over, many students expressed relief. (As one student wrote, “Thankfully this challenge lasted only one day.”) Some of them even decided to insert screen shots in their papers documenting the number of missed messages, emails, and social media notifications.

What They Learned

Many students came to see that technology has pluses and minuses. Most of them concluded that technology was essential and that living without a mobile phone would be impossible. For example, they acknowledged that connectivity technologies had improved their lives and enabled opportunities (such as the ability to interact with people in other parts of the world) that were once more difficult to access. However, living unplugged — even for a single day — led many to see that control and moderation were important. As one male student from Turkey wrote, “I appreciate technology and the convenience it brings to our lives. However, too much technology can be detrimental.”

Students developed greater awareness about their own connectivity habits. As a Spanish student at Bologna noted, the experiment “was a surprising and revealing exercise that made [me] aware that [my] day starts and ends with a smartphone in my hands.” Even students who didn’t consider themselves overly reliant on their devices realized how dependent they were for simple things such as finding a recipe or setting a timer for cooking. Students also developed a greater awareness of the extent to which they were influenced by their peers. As one student wrote, “Since everybody is on the smartphone, I also do it.”

Finally, some students said that by observing other people in cafés or on trains who were totally immersed in their phones, they became more conscious of the fact that using phones in front of other people can be seen as disrespectful. One student wrote, “My friend checked his phone four times during our 10-minute encounter!! This made me realize how superficial some of our contemporary relationships are becoming.” Inspired by the project, several students have begun scheduling periods of respite when they pledge to be disconnected: “I can’t totally give up all my digital devices, but I’d like to have some unplugged days regularly,” wrote a male Chinese student at Kedge. An Italian woman studying at Bologna noted, “At the end of the day, I was missing neither social media nor having a digital connection. I was happy for the opportunity to challenge my unhealthy daily habits, because this gave me the opportunity to discover a slower, more conscious way.”

Implications for Managers

One thing we found was that young people are more open to adjusting their technology habits than we expected. Rather than being totally fixed in their ways, millennials are surprisingly open to discovering the value of new tasks and duties.

During the time they were cut off from their smartphones, many students rediscovered the value of other forms of collaboration. They found new ways to coordinate with classmates for meetings and sharing class material, class assignments, and so forth. Such flexibility and resourcefulness could give organizations ideas about how to approach their digital strategies and what kinds of limits to impose on internet connectivity. For instance, organizations might find it useful to limit the use of devices during business meetings, meals, or interactions with colleagues, and perhaps to establish guidelines around sending nonurgent emails during non-work hours, as a nod toward employees’ private lives and families. Although text messaging is certainly easy and fast, companies may want to encourage face-to-face communication when possible.

Working without devices for limited periods of time can highlight opportunities for improving self-awareness and self-regulation, two key elements of emotional intelligence. Following the experiment, we noticed that many students voluntarily adopted behavioral rules that limit the use of mobile devices when interacting with others as a sign of respect and undivided attention. One German student reported that he began hiding his phone and keeping it “out of sight” during social interactions to control his deeply ingrained habit of checking his phone or simply playing with it while he was with other people. Considering the pervasiveness of internet-connected devices in contemporary organizations, we hope that the unplugging experiment can be an inspiration for organizations — and especially for their leaders — as they attempt to model the right approach to using mobile technologies at work.

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