

Wired world makes it hard to leave work

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Vatren Jurin spent his Tuesday lunch hour hurriedly eating his soup and sandwich combo at a local restaurant while scanning a document for his support job at Brandt Consolidated.

Also on the table was his AT&T Palm Treo — just in case.

"I'm always working; it's the nature of my job," Jurin said.

Jurin, who has been with Brandt since 1996, says he's guilty of responding to e-mail and phone messages on weekends and even vacations but said he values the constant contact.

Yet as cell phones turn into smart phones, working professionals are finding it harder to distinguish the line that divides the office and home, according to a new study from the Pew Research Center.

With about 60 percent of the work force using the Internet or e-mail for their jobs, nearly half of them also do work from home — a growing trend that researchers say has become a mixed blessing for workers.

These networked, or wired, workers increasingly do more work from home, with half of them checking their e-mail on weekends and sick days and 34 percent logging in while on vacation.

The Pew Center study found workers in high-income, management or government jobs are disproportionately affected by demands imposed by growing technology. While it makes people more accessible, it also means workers may never get a break.

Clinical psychologist Keith Burton said employees need time to rest in order to be productive.

"We were not built to be constant working machines," said Burton, who heads the psychology department at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Burton said some people have the ability to manage being constantly connected to the office.

"For most folks, this blurring of lines is going to be problematic," Burton said. "For some people, work is a joy, ... but that is not going to be true for most of us. For most people, a break from work is needed to recharge."

Lois McConomy, a licensed clinical social worker with the Mental Health Centers of Central Illinois said many businesses have instituted employee-assistance programs to teach their work force stress-management techniques.

McConomy said her company often conducts these programs for businesses throughout central Illinois, and its clientele list has grown in recent years to nearly 40 companies. She said the Pew Center's findings are consistent with what she hears from workers.

Pew Center researchers found one in five employed e-mail users and half of Blackberry and PDA owners say they are required to check messages when away from the office.

Burton said employees have some responsibility to define what he calls "unreasonable expectations of availability."

"I think the employees need to somehow take control of this," he said, "and to re-establish boundaries between work and personal time."

McConomy said the most dangerous kind of stress is that which goes unrecognized, because it can lead quickly to burnouts and bigger problems.

"To me, it's like if you don't rotate your tires, but at some point, it catches up with you," she said.

Earlier this month, Jurin was unable to charge his phone while in Switzerland on business. He said while his ability to do his job was affected minimally, his family probably suffered the most because they couldn't contact him. However, he said it did not bother him to be without a phone for four days.

"I enjoyed that time with it off," he said.

McConomy said voluntary technology holidays are an important part of any stress management regimen. She said workers must be more aware of the difference between a challenge and stress while on the job.

"Look at the warning signs, and be able to realize how they are feeling physically and emotionally," McConomy said. "People know when they are being asked to do a whole lot that doesn't seem to be reasonable."

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