

How Do You Unplug?

Business owners have to work harder than most to carve out time for themselves. Here are some strategies to help you balance work and your personal life

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Owning a business has always involved working long hours. But with our 24/7 world of global business, PDAs, cell phones, minuscule notebook computers and wireless hubs, “taking a break” is harder than ever for business owners and senior executives. In fact, when I told my family I was writing an article about “unplugging,” my 14-year-old daughter snorted and quipped, “Are you really qualified to write about that?” I’ve been busted on more than one occasion sneaking a peek at my BlackBerry in a restaurant or glancing at my cell phone when it rings during dinner.

According to a recent survey by CareerBuilder.com, approximately one quarter of American workers bring work with them on vacation. That number would probably be higher if the population surveyed was composed exclusively of business owners and executives.

The New York Enterprise Report polled more than 100 entrepreneurs and executives for this article, and most admitted that they struggled with disconnecting from their work obligations. The good news is that most had developed very specific techniques for teaching themselves to “stop and start.” That phrase was, in fact, used by Cali Williams Yost, author and founder of Work+Life Fit, a consultancy specializing in work/life issues. She admits that she herself has to deal with today’s always connected expectations.

Set Rules and Follow Them Business people have become slaves to their various devices. Many admit to never being without their PDAs or cell phones. It’s true that the technology enables users to make use of time that would otherwise be unproductive – time spent on the train, perhaps, or waiting for a meeting. But connected executives are wise to set limits that enable them to enjoy other aspects of their lives. “It’s all about choices,” asserts Deborah Benzil, M.D., a brain surgeon. “I turn my BlackBerry off when I get home and never carry it on vacation. I don’t answer the phone during a family dinner, unless I am on call.” Many business owners reinforce the importance of turning devices off, not just putting them away. Wendy Parsley, founder of Quint Strategies, a marketing agency, says that if her computer isn’t off, she’s distracted by the “little ding” every time a new e-mail arrives. Several professionals admit to leaving their PDAs and cell phones in the car when they get home, so they will not be tempted by them. Lisa Jacobson, CEO of Inspirica Tutors, goes so far as to tie a string around her home office door when she quits for the day. “I do everything I can to not untie it,” she says. Although more often than not the string stops her, she admits to having snuck in on more than one occasion.

Planning for unplugged time is critical, whether it’s just a few hours or several days out of the office. Howard Greenstein, senior director at New York University, uses his commuting time (more than an hour) to check e-mail and finish documents. “By the time I arrive at home, I’m ready to be present with the family and enjoy that time. I use later evening time to compose e-mails and set up to-dos for the next day, so I’m taking advantage of time when others are asleep to gain hours in the day.”

Effective small business owners have realized the importance of delegating and preparing those around them for times when they are “unplugged.” “Know who in your organization will do each critical task and will make big decisions while you’re away,” advises Greenstein. “Do some scenario walk-throughs so people will know what decision you’d make in a bind, so they’re not improvising 100% without you.” Stella Inserra, a professional wedding planner and founder of Simply Dazzling Events, stresses the importance of preparing clients for your time away as well. “I tell my clients as soon as my tickets are booked,” says Inserra. She lets them know exactly how often she will be checking her e-mail. “I meet with some clients a week or two before I leave, just to make sure details are in place.”

Develop Distractions and Make Family Time Miriam Silverberg, president of Miriam Silverberg Associates, a boutique PR firm, treats her social appointments with the same level of importance as work appointments. “I write them in my book and don’t break them,” she asserts.

Most of the professionals interviewed stress that getting away physically from work-related spaces is very important. “While Turks & Caicos is the gold standard, I’ll settle for something as simple as an organized basketball game,” says Daniel B. Koffler, managing director of the Downtown Auditorium. “Get away from the visual and mental reminders of what you should be doing,” he advises. Parsley does mindless errands. The bank, post office, corner market and gym all relax her mind. Les Schachter, president of Memcrafter Group, Inc., finds road trips to be helpful. “It’s not so much where I’m going, but it’s the trip itself I try to make invigorating. I’ll make the trip leisurely, with a preference for back roads as opposed to highways. This slows down the speed of my normally busy life and puts me in touch with the real world,” he says. Sports events, the gym, social activities, museums, art galleries and other device-free environments were also suggested by many as ways to escape.

Some admit to taking even more extreme measures to force themselves to disconnect, choosing signal-free activities like cruises, white-water rafting and kayaking, remote mountain hikes and even drives through tunnels to avoid “device temptation.” “If your business goes down the tubes, you’ll recover. If your family life goes down the tubes, your business won’t be worth your time and effort,” says Inserra.

Several professionals feel just as passionately about the importance of preserving family time. Although some business owners believe in putting work away completely when they are with their families, others find they can leverage technology to enable them to spend more time with their loved ones. Lamonica Brown, president of Gilcrist Entertainment Marketing Services, confesses, “If I want to engage in an enjoyable activity that has nothing to do with my business, I pack up the BlackBerry and my son and go. This past summer, I was able to complete two of my best marketing plans while relaxing at the beach, keeping a third eye on my son while he played. He really felt like we spent those days together.”

Readers who are concerned about the long-term impact of parents’ multi-tasking may value advice from New York psychologist Dr. Susan Davis, who says, “Kids need to feel that they have their parents’ undivided attention. It communicates to them that they are very important – just as or more important than work. Pragmatically, it’s not always possible, so a certain amount of multi-tasking doesn’t hurt. Parents need to weigh their child’s sensitivity, [the parent’s] capacity to pay attention to more than one thing, and the realities of their career demands.”

Whether your PDA is permanently fused to your body or you are in the “turn it off and walk away” camp, Cali Yost has some solid advice: “Manage technology. Don’t let it manage you. Once you’ve established your ‘fit’ (how work and the rest of your life can co-exist and support each other), use technology to achieve it. Don’t let technology drive what that fit looks like.”

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