

Disconnecting and cutting the invisible cord

by BROCK WEIR

I don't know about you, but that feeling of unease when realizing you've forgotten to do something important, or seemingly important, is one I like to experience as infrequently as possible.

It might not hit everyone the same way, but when it dawns on me that I've inadvertently let something fall by the wayside, it begins with a flush felt on the face, followed almost immediately by a shiver that starts from my instantaneously red cheeks all the way down to my toes.

Perhaps it's some sort of primal mechanism because it certainly helps one be a bit more mindful about what's on one's plate on any given day and how to get it all done ? after all, you don't want to have that sinking feeling any more than is absolutely necessary.

The first time I took notice of this weird gut reaction was in university when, in the last couple of days of my graduating year, I discovered at the eleventh hour ? well, the 1.30 a.m. hour, truth be told ? that I had misunderstood the assignment when it came to the final research paper due later that evening.

Having been confident up until that point that I'd nailed the 10-page paper beyond a reasonable doubt, I had just a few hours to start from scratch, research and all. Thankfully our campus library was open 24 hours at that point because it kept any audible signs of my frustration to a minimum as far as my roommates were concerned. The same, alas, can't be said of the groundhogs who were out grazing at an unusual hour on the uphill route to the library. I hope they weren't too offended by my language.

This singular form of anxiety crops up from time to time to this day, but thankfully with far less frequency, so it was something of a surprise a few weekends ago when it came back, out of the blue, full throttle ? over something that was, in retrospect, of very little consequence.

Usually, I'm very diligent with my email. Like most people these days, I have more than one email address depending on what they're being used for. One is my personal email address that I've had in use long before the aforementioned essay incident, another is for work, and the other for work outside of these newspapers

All three emails are connected to my various devices, and when I'm not logged into my computer, alerts on my phone keep me up to date ? until they didn't.

Walking back in the direction of home from a wonderfully sunny day out with friends recently, I stopped dead in my tracks. It had just occurred to me that I hadn't received any kind of notification over the three previous days and it hadn't occurred to me that this was rather out-of-the-ordinary.

There was that flush-and-shiver feeling again as I whipped out my phone to not only see where and how the notifications became un-synched, but held my breath to make sure I didn't miss anything too earth-shattering. Thankfully, I hadn't, but it certainly made me think, with some degree of dismay, how reliant we've become on these instant delivery systems ? and how we respond to them.

While, once again, I don't want to experience that terrible feeling again, it underscored how calming it was (at least until it wasn't) to be disconnected in a way, without that obligation of constant vigilance over screens large and small.

I guess I'm now on board with a wider trend.

When we hired a new reporter for one of our papers a few years ago, I was a slightly taken aback, albeit pleasantly, by their approach. Evidently they were a night owl, so it was not unusual to receive an email long after most people had clocked out for the

day. But what struck me was their position that even though they were sending something at another eleventh hour, they made it clear in their email they expected no response until the following morning.

Not long after, I noticed a new disclaimer on emails sent from employees of a local non-profit organization with whom I'm in frequent contact: "[We respect] employees' right to disengage from work-related communication and other work outside of normal working hours. Please do not feel obligated to reply to this email outside of your scheduled working hours."

In an era where we're more connected than ever before, at any given moment of the day, at any place on our globe, and more inclined to seek out instant gratification, I have to say I found this approach very refreshing. Even though it's hardly a new concept.

Earlier this week, Australia became the latest country to institute a "right to disconnect" rule, following the lead of several Latin American and European countries. Here, the law allows employees to "ignore communications after hours if they choose to, without fear of being punished by their bosses," says the BBC.

"A survey published last year estimated that Australians worked, on average, 281 hours of unpaid overtime annually," the BBC continued. "The law does not ban employers from contacting workers after hours. Instead, it gives staff the right not to reply unless their refusal is deemed unreasonable. Under the rules, employers and employees should try to resolve disputes among themselves. If that is unsuccessful in finding a resolution, Australia's Fair Work Commission (FWC) can step in."

The FWC can order the employer to then stop contacting the employee in question after hours and, if they fail to do so, fines for a company can be as high as AUS\$94,000."

Organizations representing employees have, unsurprisingly, supported the move, stating this will also benefit employers as workers would be better rested and have a better work-life balance that would lead to less sick days and potentially better productivity.

I imagine employers' representatives might have a different viewpoint, but it's out of their hands for now.

But what about Canada? For better or worse, our country follows a similar work culture as our neighbours to the south with a very lopsided balance between work and life. In many respects, we have been conditioned to it, and employer expectations have been tailored accordingly.

Could an initiative like this take off beyond a company-by-company basis into something that is Province-wide? It's doubtful, but it doesn't hurt to explore the idea further.

It's not necessarily practical for those of us in a newsroom, but if it can improve efficiency and mental health elsewhere, it might be worth a shot.

In our highly connected world, disconnecting can sometimes feel like a treat to ourselves at best or, at worst, even an act of rebellion, but it's hard to dispute that doing so can ironically replenish our own personal bandwidth and forgetting to check in for 24 hours shouldn't leave people with cold sweats or a sinking feeling of dread.