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Compass: Can We Survive the Internet?

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“The Hurrier I go, the Behinder I get. . .” (old Pennsylvania Dutch saying)

We’re not worried about whether the Internet will survive. No, the question is whether *we*, as human beings and workers, can survive what the Internet is doing to us.

Of course, it’s also impossible to imagine the future of work without the Internet. We’re not going to wax philosophical here about all the ways online access and the burgeoning global knowledge base have improved our lives and our work. We obviously couldn’t be distributing this newsletter around the world at almost no cost without the Net. And we couldn’t find or afford to pay for even one percent of the information we can now track down every day. Without the Internet it would cost considerably more to order goods and services, process invoices, account for transactions, or create the global virtual communities that have become so dominant in the last several years.

No, we’re not complaining about the incredible resource that we’re all so dependent on. But we are concerned about how we’re turning into a culture of “I want it right now!” and “If you don’t respond to my Instant Message within 60 seconds, our whole business will fail!” It’s the 24x7x52 “always on” world we (all of us) seem to have created that worries the two of us.

We know of an attorney (no jokes, please; he’s a good guy who does useful work) who complained a few years ago about the speed-up in his business. As he put it:

We used to get a letter or a phone call from a client who expected a response within a week or so. Then the fax machine came along and our clients wanted a response within a day. With email and now instant messaging they think we’re at their beck and call all the time. And they expect us to respond with our legal opinions just as quickly as they frame the questions.

We also heard recently about a project manager who is ready to quit and go live on a desert island somewhere. She works for a global firm that expects her to

manage project staff based on at least three continents; she's often on conference calls or web meetings at 5 AM (to Europe) and again at 10 PM (to Asia and Australia). She receives over two hundred email messages a day, and she usually has a dozen or more voice messages when she gets back to the office after lunch. She's just plain tired of the pressure to do everything instantaneously. There's just no time to think anymore.

Sometimes it also feels like there's no time to live at all. A good friend of ours complained a few years ago that she "can't sleep any faster."

One more quick example: the "Crackberry" phenomenon is also part of this story. How many times do you find yourself checking messages right before or after (or even during) dinner, or in the middle of your kid's soccer game?

How many "friends" do you have on Facebook? How many people do you follow on Twitter? We're all afraid that someone out there knows something important that we're not aware of. Sure, Twitter is a wonderful way to stay just a little more "in the know," but each of us has to figure out (and set) our own limits. How much time each day do you spend tracking what other people are thinking or reading—versus how much time you spend actually reading original material yourself, or just plain thinking?

It's no surprise that stress levels are up, mental health professionals have no fears of unemployment, and time management books are selling like hotcakes. And don't forget that no one can actually "manage" time; we each have the same 24 hours every day to use as we see fit.

It's not "time management" but *self-management* that matters. For a short but powerful lesson in personal productivity management, read Bary Sherman's Notes from the Field article in the April 2009 issue of this newsletter: "[Seven Ways to Manage Yourself.](#)"

Which brings us to our basic point. It's time to take charge of our work and our lives again. What makes that easier to say than to do is that we now have so many more many sources of information and so many more choices about what to do and where to do it. We can read, write, and communicate globally with our PC's and smart phones just about any time, from any place. "All" we have to do is to decide where, when, what, and how.

But that's hard because in the past we didn't have to make those kinds of choices—they simply didn't exist. We went to the Office because that's where our

files were, and that's where we had to be to meet with colleagues. Or we went to a client site, or a retail store, to meet with people or to see and buy products. That's just the way it was.

Today, of course, we have all kinds of choices. We can work at the office, at home, in a coffee shop, on an airplane. We can use a Mac or a PC. We can buy a Blackberry or an iPhone or an Android. We can answer every cell phone call, or we can turn the damn thing off and pick up the messages later. Choices certainly enrich our lives and empower us. But we're not yet very good at making those choices in ways that enhance our lives and keep *us* in control, rather than someone else.

Finally, remember that traffic sign, "Speed Kills." In the sixties the watchword was "Tune in, turn on." Today a better guide might be "Turn off, let go, live a little," or "Don't just do something, think." What's your hurry? Life (and work) is a journey, not a destination.

[Please also send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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