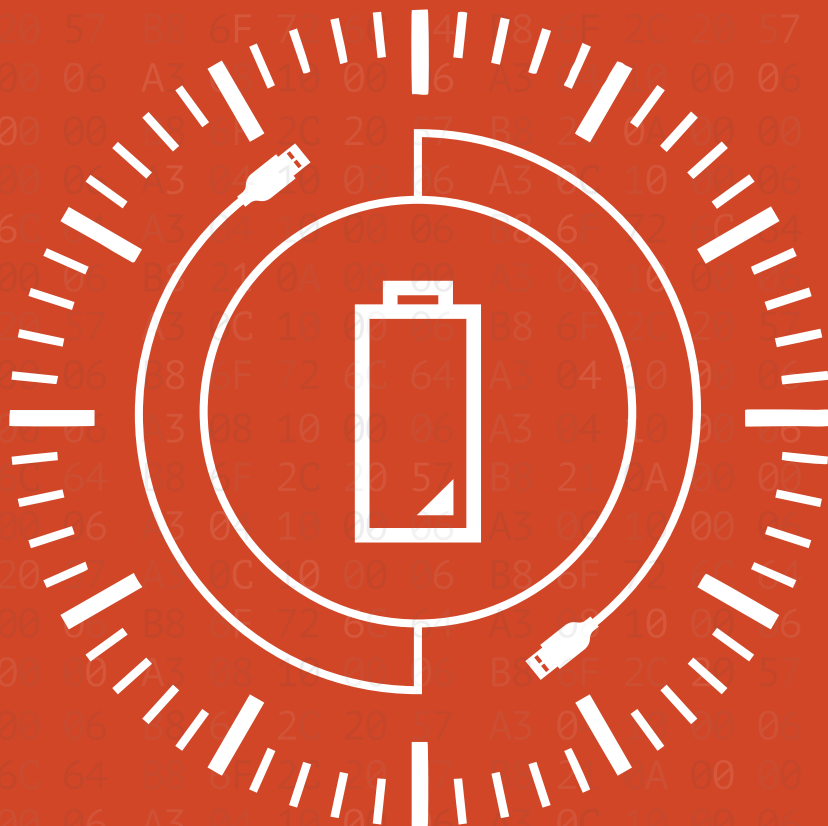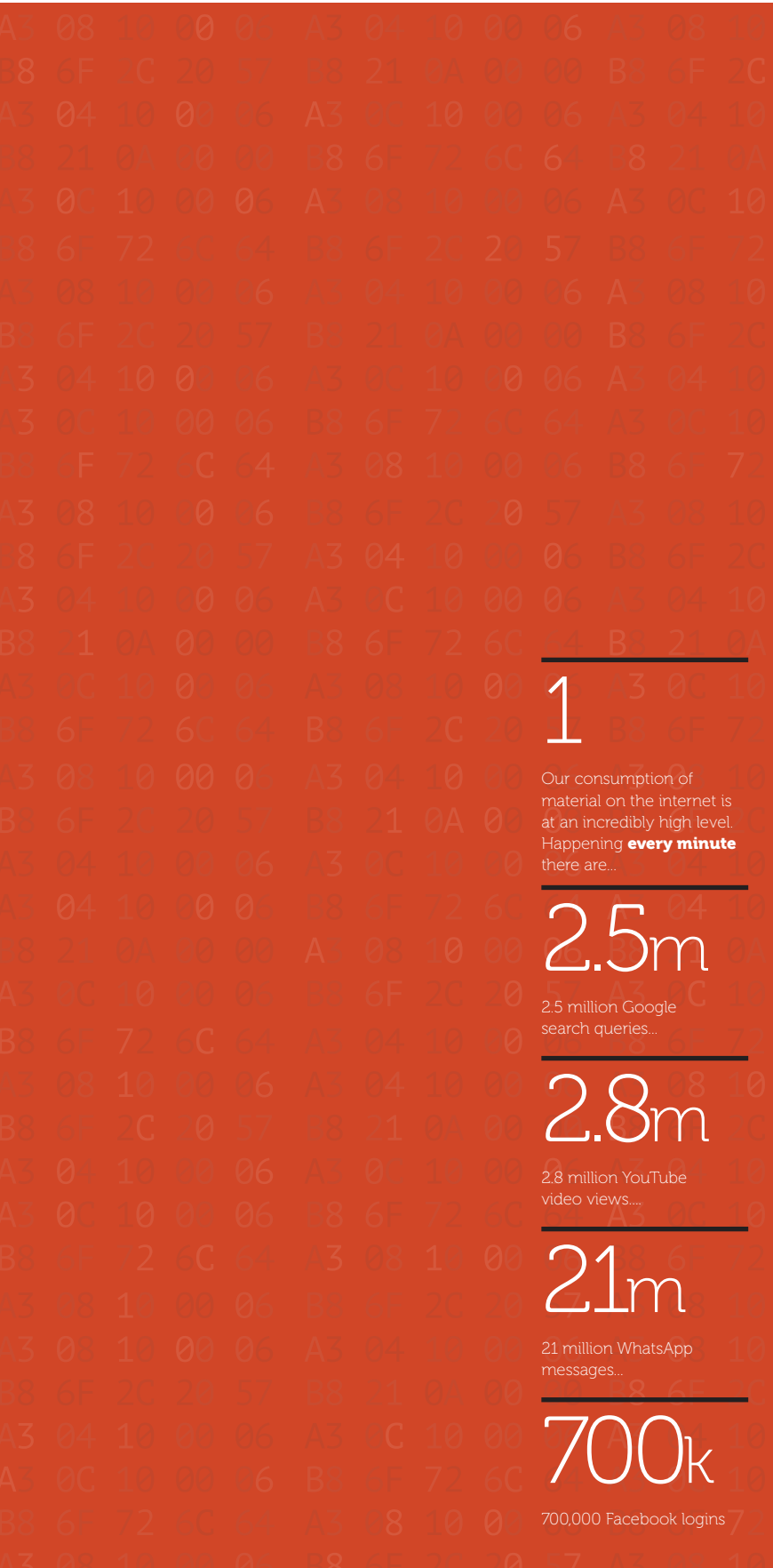**Peter Thomson** points out that our stressful work patterns are not caused by technology but by leaders who have allowed their organisations to develop unhealthy work patterns and are ignoring culture instead of managing it

Time for a digital detox?

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Our consumption of
material on the internet is
at an incredibly high level.
Happening **every minute**
there are…

2.5m

2.5 million Google
search queries…

2.8m

2.8 million YouTube
video views….

21m

21 million WhatsApp
messages…

700k

700,000 Facebook logins

We are living in an era of unprecedented change and transformation. Digitalisation presents businesses with unparalleled opportunities for value creation. New products and services can be offered and commercialised, systems and processes can be optimised, work processes can be automated and digital business models can be developed.

In the world of work, digitalisation has opened up many new avenues for organisations and their employees such as communication and collaboration between employees around the world, improved recruiting, talent management processes and workplace flexibility that allows organisations to adjust to their employees' personal situations, and better performance management.

We are swamped with data

But despite all these indisputable and flexible advantages, digitalisation also brings with it a variety of problems for organisations and individuals.

On an individual level, we are confronted with information overload and constant distraction from our core activities. Our consumption of material on the internet is at an incredibly high level, with a mind-numbing 2.5 million Google search queries, 2.8 million YouTube video views, 21 million WhatsApp messages and 700,000 Facebook logins happening **every minute**.

Employees are being swamped by a "firehose" of information and are having to work longer and longer hours to keep up with it. Instead of technology bringing us a life of leisure, people are forced to be "always on" and stress levels are soaring. This contradiction was the inspiration for us to research the cause of digital overload and propose a solution in our book *Conquering Digital Overload* *.

Why are we all so stressed out?

Stress has been described as the "health epidemic of the 21st century" by the World Health Organisation and its effect on our emotional and physical health can be devastating.

In a recent US study, over 50% of individuals felt that stress negatively impacted their work productivity.

According to a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK, 38% of employees are under excessive pressure at least once a week and almost a third say they come home exhausted either often or always. Increased levels of job stress have been demonstrated to be associated with increased rates of heart attack, hypertension, obesity, addiction, anxiety, depression and other disorders.

Digital technology was supposed to improve the way we work and increase productivity. But what has actually happened?

Overall employee engagement levels are no higher than they were 10 years ago. US productivity since the launch of the iPhone has slowed, so the new tools and technologies we have at work are not making us more productive.

A Deloitte report showed that 65% of executives rated the "overwhelmed employee" as an "urgent" or "important" trend, while 44% said that they are "not ready" to deal with it. Something strange is going on.

Have we learned nothing?

Surely by now we have realised that overlong working hours are detrimental to our health and the wellbeing of the businesses we work for. There is probably over a century of research that confirms that it is bad for our health and bad for the organisations who demand it of us. And, to compound our health concerns, if we think that extending the working day by working while at home as opposed to the office might be better for us, a recent scientific study reported in the UK *Sunday Times*, showed that "dealing with work issues while at home is pernicious to health and directly linkable to cardiovascular disease".

For those who think this will all be solved when the rapidly ageing "baby boomers" finally quit the workforce and leave it to the "Millennials", think again. A report by the American Psychological Association in 2015 found that Millennials had the highest stress levels of all the generations. The problems of stress and depression are not going away anytime soon!

Don't blame the technology

Where is all this stress coming from? Can we blame the technology and tell people to switch it off? Some organisations have tried this, with limited success, but this is just putting a sticking-plaster over the problem. The solution lies deeper within the business and it is something that has to be addressed at senior management levels.

95%

At the Belgian Ministry (FPS) employees decide how fast or slow they want to work. The results after three years' show an incredible number, 95% of employees, prefer this new freedom to the old system with fixed working times.

60%

On top of that, customer satisfaction went up 60% and output by 30%.

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We have cultures that subtly reward long hours. To counter this, leaders have to recognise that work is performed for a purpose. They should agree on goals with their people and measure them against results. They need to reward output and outcomes, not input

We have created organisational cultures that encourage stressful work patterns. Someone seen to be working extended hours is described as "dedicated" and "loyal". The "hard-working" employee is praised.

Consequently, we have cultures that subtly reward long hours. Replying to emails within a few hours, regardless of the time of day, is seen to be good behaviour. Staying in touch over the weekend or on vacation is good for promotion.

Rethink how work is done

To counter this, leaders have to recognise that work is performed for a purpose. They should agree on goals with their people and measure them against results. They need to reward output and outcomes, not input.

This creates a high-performance culture. It shows that people who meet their goals in the quickest time are the most productive and as a result are rewarded for short hours not long ones. The best employees become the ones that leave early and have a balanced life. Ones that have to work long hours are considered to be failing.

One example in our book is the Belgian Ministry (FPS) for Social Security. It has implemented an innovative new working model. Each employee has full autonomy over when, how and where he or she works. They have a work package assigned with a clear number of cases to be solved, a quality

target (maximum number of mistakes) and a customer satisfaction target.

The organisation does not care about working time, which means employees decide how fast or slow they would prefer to work. The results after three years' experience show an incredible number, 95% of employees, like this new freedom better than the old system with fixed working times. On top of that, customer satisfaction went up 60% and output by 30%. A striking argument for this kind of increased flexibility.

Redesign outdated working practices

We need to rethink the design of work so it is not deliberately contributing to poor health. This is no longer an issue for the HR department alone, it is a matter of leadership strategy. If the culture of an organisation is to value the wellbeing of its workforce, it has to be backed up with policies and examples from the highest level.

Just offering subsidised gym membership and healthy food options in the staff restaurant is not enough. Providing training on wellbeing is not very helpful if the leaders are clearly not following their own guidance. Offering employee counselling services for stressed staff is attempting to control the symptoms and avoiding the cause.

We have ended up with outdated structures by building organisations out of jobs, laid out in an organisation chart to show reporting lines and levels of hierarchy. But real organisations are based

on work, not jobs, people, not positions, and collaboration, not reporting. Leaders must understand how cross-functional collaboration produces results, how informal teams develop and flourish, and how networks of people are forming and evolving all the time.

It is too easy for leaders to focus on the tangible factors and ignore the intangibles. Many have reached their senior positions by being good at understanding finances, meeting budgets and issuing clear instructions.

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Culture has to be managed

But just because culture is less tangible than finances, this does not give leaders an excuse to ignore it. In fact, because it is less easy to define, it should be at the top of the list of priorities for leaders. Creating an environment where people are inspired to produce great results has to be the mark of a good leader. Running a business without caring about the culture is bound to lead to mediocre performance at best and failure at worst.

So far, technology has not brought a life of leisure. We have more stress and longer working hours than ever before. The developments in technology have outstripped our ability to adjust. Our research for *Conquering Digital Overload* confirms the negative impact of technology and our work with clients convinces us that there is a new path for leaders to take to solve the problem.

As the true digital natives take over the world of work, perhaps it will catch up. But will this happen with a smooth evolution led by inspired leaders or will it be a revolution with out-of-touch leaders being toppled by a combination of market pressure and employee dissatisfaction?

We hope it will be the former, but without leaders recognising and addressing their cultures, we fear it will be the latter.

*Conquering Digital Overload: leadership strategies that build engaging work cultures **Editors Peter Thomson, Mike Johnson, J Michael Devlin. Palgrave Macmillan, published 15 December 2017.** www.futureworkforum.com/?dt_ portfolio=conquering-the-digital-overload **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Peter Thomson is a Director of the Future Work Forum and an authority on the future of work and its impact on leadership. He co-authored the best-selling book Future Work *and is the main editor of* Conquering Digital Overload. *He is a speaker and consultant in this field and a visiting fellow at Henley Business School, UK.*