

---

The digital age was supposed to be a dream come true: a life of leisure filled with easy access to rich information and inexpensive but productive technology. In reality, it is more like a nightmare

---

Peter Thomson

TECHNOLOGY • STRESS • DIGITAL OVERLOAD • LEADERSHIP • DIGITAL AGE

---

# Why are we all stressed out?

---

## Welcome to the Digital Age dream:

At last we have the life of leisure we've been waiting for. Since the dawn of the Internet some of us have been predicting a form of 'technology heaven'. We have been anticipating a world where all the routine work is done by computers and the humans just get the interesting stuff. We have looked forward to the three-day week and four-day weekend. We have been preparing for work-life imbalance to turn into life-work harmony, where technology allows us to choose how we fit our work around the important things in life. We left stress behind in the Industrial Era and are all more relaxed about work. Now Artificial Intelligence (AI) is about to deliver the final pieces of this perfect picture.

## Wake up! It's a dream.

Look around and the real world looks more like a nightmare! Instead of bringing shorter hours, digital technology follows us around 24/7. We have our smartphones at the dinner table in case there's an urgent message. We take our laptops on vacation with us so we can keep in touch. And we take hours of our day simply trawling through the email inbox finding the important messages from amongst the hundreds coming in every day. Instead of giving back control over our lives, technology has taken over. Instead of contributing to our peace of mind, it has increased stress levels.

The World Health Organization,<sup>i</sup> (WHO) having called stress 'the health epidemic of the 21st Century,' has recently stated that 'depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide' and also, even more worryingly, predicts that by 2030 'there will be more people affected by depression than any other health problem.'

“Why are we not all enjoying the life of leisure that was predicted?”

Why on earth is this happening? Why are we not all enjoying the life of leisure that was predicted? Surely technology has taken over some of the routine work leaving us with the more

stimulating things to do? Flexible working has been around for a while now; surely it must have improved work-life balance?

It's clear that something has gone wrong on the road to the promised land. Yes, we now have technology that gives us flexibility in the way we can work. We are no longer tied to a desk for long hours because our office travels with us in our pocket. You might expect that the 'presenteeism' culture, that drives long hours at work, has disappeared.

Unfortunately not. We are still expected to turn up to meetings at our employers' premises and in most cases still expected to spend 'core' hours at a workstation typically staring at a screen or talking on the phone. Despite the ability for knowledge work to be done anywhere, the predominant model is still based on a fixed workplace.

We have simply added digital communications on top of the physical pattern of work. So instead of just dealing with the 'in-tray' on the desk and leaving it behind at the end of the day, we now have the email 'in-box' that follows us around.

The presenteeism culture, that had people sitting at their desks into the evening to impress their boss, has now been replaced by 'virtual presenteeism' where the boss now expects replies within an hour to his/her emails almost any time of day or night, any day of the week.

“Something has gone wrong on the road to the promised land.”

## How have we allowed this to happen?

This was the question faced by the Future Work Forum<sup>ii</sup> two years ago when one member of this group of consultants raised the problem. It seemed that many organizations were suffering from 'Digital Overload' and were struggling to understand why. This observation triggered a collaborative effort from sixteen

contributors to get to the bottom of the problem, and the result is a book published earlier this year.<sup>iii</sup>

The key conclusion from this research was that the 'problem' is a leadership issue. Leaders set the example, and that is reflected in the behaviour of the people beneath them. Organizational cultures that encourage long hours and ignore the impact on the rest of peoples' lives are the cause of the problem. Digital technology is simply a tool that amplifies that reality and is the catalyst for increasing stress levels.

It is too easy for leaders to ignore this problem until it reaches a crisis level. Because 'culture' is an intangible subject it gets lost at board level amongst the hard financial figures and real operational problems. Executives will invest in capital equipment and would not deliberately run machinery above maximum speed/capacity knowing that it will break down as a result. They will ensure routine maintenance is carried out on equipment so it will work effectively and reliably.

But when it comes to the human resource they throw out these sensible guidelines and allow people to become overloaded. To further exacerbate the problem, they set an example of working long hours themselves, which encourages unhealthy working patterns.

Investing in human capital and using it productively is a key business goal. But it is one that often drops down the gap between the chairs around the boardroom table. The HR Director may have responsibility for attracting and retaining people. The Finance Director may be looking at the labour costs in the profit and loss account. The Real Estate Director will be focussing on occupancy costs and space utilization. Operational directors may be worried about achieving their goals with the resources at their disposal. But who is responsible for maximising the productivity of the workforce as a whole?

Now that we are entering the age of the 'gig economy' we have an even bigger question for leaders. Why do you need employees at all? Running an enterprise involves sourcing work from people and providing products or services to customers. Traditionally this was done by dividing the work into jobs and filling them with employees on fixed terms and conditions.

Now you can source the work from someone on the Internet and serve the customer through an app, so why have the burden of an employed workforce getting in the way? Maybe not every industry sector is as open to this approach as the ones occupied by Uber or Airbnb but many areas of work can now be sourced

without the need for employing people directly.

If employment continues to be a source of stress and poor work-life balance, more and more people will be voting with their feet. Thus, it is important that organizations create an environment where people have freedom and control over their working lives and don't have to quit the 'rat race' to enjoy life as a whole.

This perspective involves a changed view of work. We have moved away from the era of Taylorism, where jobs were deliberately boring and repetitive. We now understand that employees will be engaged if they are trusted to use their judgement and given freedom to choose how they work. But we still operate a model where the employer defines the tasks and rewards the hours spent doing them. This is an 'input'-based reward system where effort is applauded, and long hours are seen as dedication.

The gig economy has shown us that there is an alternative

approach to getting work done. Instead of rewarding effort we can reward output. In this model the person who is smart enough to get the work done in the shortest time gets more time with the family and is less stressed than the long-hours worker. But this approach conflicts with most corporate cultures, where being seen to put in extra effort and time is the key to success. And in the Digital Age that means being 'always-on.'

The organizations that will be successful over the next ten to twenty years will be those who recognize this change. They will still have employees, but they will measure them much more on what they achieve, not just on hours worked. They will give people freedom to choose how, when, and where they get the work done and not insist they come to a fixed workplace. When they do come to the 'office' it will be for a specific purpose. They will have chosen this as the best environment to perform some work. For some people that may be daily attendance as there is no other option. But for many it will be less regular as they find suitable alternatives.

Instead of technology being intrusive into people's personal lives it will become liberating. Under the control of the individual, the smartphone brings a choice of when and where to work. But more importantly it brings the choice of when NOT to work. Being measured on output means the pressure is off from being available all the time and instead is on delivering results on time. People end up with better life-work balance because *they* are making the choices.

**“ The presenteeism culture, that had people sitting at their desks into the evening to impress their boss, has now been replaced by 'virtual presenteeism' where the boss now expects replies within an hour to his/her emails almost any time of day or night, any day of the week. ”**

Hold on! We started this article by saying this dream of a digital utopia hasn't emerged so far. Why is it going to be any different in the future?

Like many changes in society, it takes time to build up pressure for change. But once the dam is broken change is likely to flood in. The retail market is a good example. We have had Internet shopping for twenty years, but it is only now seriously impacting the high street. Major retail chains are in trouble because it is easier and cheaper to buy online. They have to adapt the shopping experience to attract footfall in the stores and introduce their own Internet outlets to compete for the home-based customers.

So it is with the 'work' market. If I can get paid as well, or better, by providing output directly to customers and I can do it on my terms, then that looks attractive. I might be able to advertise my services on the Internet directly or use an intermediary to provide me with work. I have a choice to stick with conventional employment or try the alternative. As with retail customers, we might soon see a time when people who are 'customers' of employers no longer like the offering and prefer an alternative.

The smart leaders will avoid this conflict by recognising that they are managing work rather than employees. They will make work attractive and may well buy outputs from individuals instead of buying their time. They will see that their competitive advantage is tied up in the quality of work produced and the value for money they are getting from people, regardless of whether they are employees or not.

This, however, is not the death of the organisational culture, it's the reverse.

Instead of relying on culture to spread throughout the organization under its own steam, culture must be explicitly managed. When everyone was working under the same roof at the same time that was easy. The behaviour of senior managers could be seen by everyone, and culture was what people experienced on a day-to-day basis.

Now that employees are working virtually, they cannot absorb culture from their surroundings in the same way. And many of the people working for the organization are no longer employees but are contractors or suppliers, so the values of the organisation cannot be left for people to discover as they sit at their desk in the company office. Values have to be communicated clearly to

**“ Who is responsible for maximising the productivity of the workforce as a whole? ”**

staff at all levels and be backed up by managerial practices that demonstrate them.

It's not sufficient to have a set of values written by senior management and simply posted on the notice board. Saying

that the company cares about its employees and then allowing them to suffer from stress is poor leadership and will result in high staff turnover. Saying that work-life balance is important and then rewarding long hours in the office will result in low engagement levels. Organisational leaders must review formally-documented working practices to ensure they reflect the culture the leaders desire.

Many organizations are in the process of moving from the 'Command and Control' culture of the 19th Century to the 'Trust and Empower' climate suitable for the 21st Century. They have introduced agile working schemes and redesigned their workspace to allow for more flexibility. They may have a wellness programme with healthy food in the restaurant and subsidised gym membership.

But if people are grabbing lunch on the run and don't have time to go to the gym it's all a bit pointless. Unless there is a tangible change in behaviour nothing has really altered. And this reality provides a new challenge. How do you transmit culture to a distributed workforce through channels other than face-to-face experience?

How people today identify with their 'employer' is no longer through the beautiful corporate building or fancy furniture. They may spend more time working from home or at a hub than in the corporate office. And when they are there they could be at a different desk each time. So now they experience the culture from the way they are treated by their manager and colleagues. But most of these interactions are electronic. They receive hundreds of emails from people they've never met and have team meetings on conference calls because no one is ever in the same place at the same time.

**“ How people work, and the freedom they have to choose their own work environment, is critical for today's knowledge economy. ”**

Thus, the atmosphere in the virtual workplace replaces the impression from the physical workplace. If the technology is slow, the information flow is intermittent, and the content is irrelevant, then it's hardly surprising if engagement is low and productivity falls. If the email inbox is filled with copies of emails with long distribution lists,

it can be demoralising. If team members appear to be sniping at each other or trying to score points, it doesn't help cohesion. And if there is an unwritten rule that all emails get answered

within a few hours, it doesn't support a healthy stress-free life.

We need to take some lessons from the physical office and apply them to the virtual one. In designing office space we think about the well-being of the occupants and how conducive the

workplace is to productive work. Why don't we do the same when designing the online working environment? When introducing a new technology, do we ever ask what it will do for the mental health of the users? Yet we are very concerned about the physical health of the occupants of our workspaces.

One solution that is now being tried by many organizations is mindfulness. The concept is too easily dismissed as some strange Buddhist meditation practice that has no place in the serious organisation. But companies such as Google point out that in the last century nobody paid much attention to physical fitness as being a concern for employers. Now they are viewing mindfulness as 'fitness for the mind'.

It makes business sense for employers to invest in improving the quality of brainpower in the workforce.

**“ We need a new discipline of ‘work design’ that combines understanding of psychology, sociology, and technology. ”**

This perspective also aligns with the wishes of the next generation of workers who are looking for quality of life, with work integrating into a meaningful and satisfying existence.

How people work, and the freedom they have to choose their own work environment, is critical for today's knowledge economy. We need leaders to think through how people can be most productive and what constitutes a healthy working experience.

We know, for example, that concentration drops off rapidly if people are tied to a desk for long periods. But how do we stop people from being tied to technology instead? That question is not being addressed by the IT department or HR.

There is no equivalent to the office designer in cyberspace. We need a new discipline of 'work design' that combines understanding of psychology, sociology, and technology. This is the key to the successful 21st Century organization, and it's about time leaders took some notice. **W&P**

## References

Maitland, A. and Thomson, P., *Future Work: Changing Organizational Culture for the new world of work*. Palgrave Macmillan, second edition (2014).

Thomson, P., Johnson, M., and Devlin, J.M. (editors) *Conquering Digital Overload: Leadership strategies that build engaging work cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan (2018).

<sup>i</sup> World Health Organisation, (2017) "'Depression: let's talk' says WHO as depression tops list of causes of ill health." (<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/world-health-day/en/>). Accessed 14 May 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.futureworkforum.com>

<sup>iii</sup> *Conquering Digital Overload: Leadership strategies that build engaging work cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London (2018). See also the book review by Terri Griffith in this issue of **Work&Place**.

## **i** Peter Thomson

Peter Thomson is an expert on the changing world of work and its impact on organisations, leadership, and management. He regularly speaks on this topic at conferences and has worked with many groups of senior managers to inspire them to change their organisational culture. He is a director of the Future Work Forum, a 'think tank' of leading consultants. He headed up the HR function for Digital Equipment for Northern Europe for 18 years leading up to the dawn of the Internet. On leaving DEC, Peter became a Visiting Fellow at Henley Business School. At the same time he formed Wisework Ltd, now a leading consultancy in the field of smart working. Peter is also co-author, with Alison Maitland, of the business bestseller *Future Work*, now in its second edition.



**w** <http://www.peterthomson.uk.com>

**e** [peter.d.thomson@me.com](mailto:peter.d.thomson@me.com)

**l** <https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-thomson-2a2612>

**t** @peterthomson