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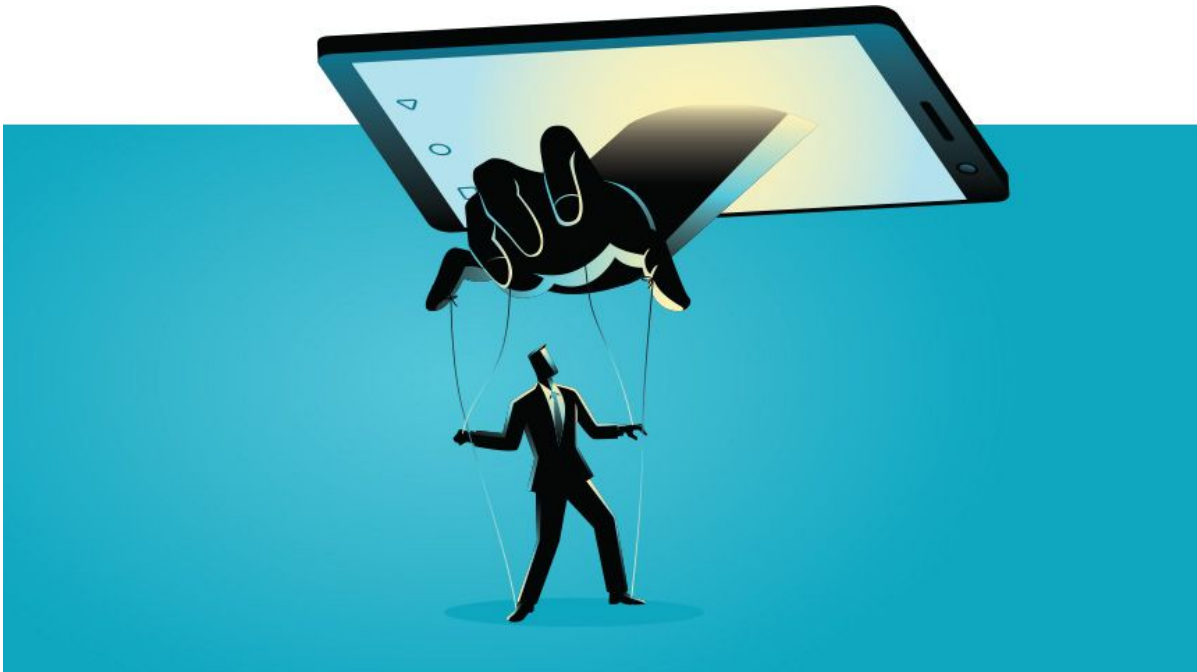
Addictive Technology

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The concepts of well-being, wellness, self-care, life balance and mindfulness remain extreme challenges for legal professionals. Relentless workloads, rigid deadlines, clients' expectations and the overall pressures of practicing law are more challenging than ever.



Perhaps no single development in the last 30 years has increased pressure on lawyers more so than advances in communications technology. In today's world, a hyper-flow of information comes at lawyers and judges via "screens" (smartphones, smart watches, iPads and computers) that we monitor continually, sometimes day and night.

Looking at how we now live technologically, it is hard to really remember what it was like before cell phones, and then smartphones, linked us perpetually to information. The internet went live in 1991 and by 1999 there were 400 million users online. Cell phones also emerged in the 1990s. The first successful smartphone, the Apple iPhone was introduced in 2007, only 15 years ago. At about the same time, in 2004, Facebook was being designed. Worldwide, six billion people now have a smartphone.¹

To put this in context, Modern History is defined as the year 1500 to present, which means we are now in our 521st year of Modern History. Only in the last 30 years of Modern History have we benefited from the internet, smartphones and social media, etc. Even though it may seem like we have had these levels of technological access for a long time, in reality this experiment is in its infancy as to realizing long-term benefits and risks.

As the technology boom of the last three decades unfolded, it appeared overwhelmingly positive. Smartphones have delivered in full measure all of the great advantages we all excitedly expected such as instant emergency communications that facilitate safety and security, never having to look at a paper roadmap again, being able to keep in touch at all times with family and friends, increased profitability via instant business communications, and immediate access to the internet and its universe of services,

information and entertainment. Life without a smartphone is now unimaginable for billions of users. Like it or not, this new technological way of life is here to stay and will keep accelerating.

All that said, and fully acknowledging all of the absolute advantages of smartphones, there has not been a lot of focus heretofore on the negative effects of all this technology. We've heard a lot about the opioid epidemic and the perils of drug addiction. But there is another "addiction" emerging out there that is even more widespread: Addictive Technology. And it too can be deadly. For example, the use of smartphones and not being able to resist texting while driving, has significantly increased traffic deaths.²

Social psychologist Adam Alter was the first to take on this topic in his 2017 book, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. According to Dr. Alter, many of us are literally addicted to modern digital products: "In the past, we thought of addiction in terms of being hooked on chemical substances. But now we are seeing an epidemic of behavioral addictions."

In the 2017 New York Times article "Why We Can't Look Away From Our Screens,"³ Dr. Alter spoke further about addiction to digital devices and social media. Surveys indicate that 60% of people keep their smartphones next to their beds and 50% check emails during the night.

The truth is that smartphones deliver a constant stream of addictive media. Many people's lives have been disrupted by an obsession to continuously monitor incoming information: texts; emails; Instagram; Facebook; Twitter; national and local news; weather; and, all that advertising constantly pointed at us personally, based on our current searches and profiles.

According to Dr. Alter, an addicted person's dopamine brain activity looks the same for a heroin user, a slot machine player and a video game player. He also finds it telling that in a 2010 interview Steve Jobs said his kids didn't have iPads, and that many Silicon Valley titans refuse to let their kids near such devices. One private school in the Bay Area does not allow any tech devices — no iPhones or iPads. And 75% of the parents who send their kids there are tech executives.

Another book of interest, also published in 2017, comes from San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood —*

and What That Means for the Rest of Us.

Dr. Twenge illuminates the urgent need to understand today's rising generation of teens and young adults born in the mid-1990s. This generation does not know what life was like before smartphones. In their adolescence, social media and texting have been their prominent activities, and they spend less time with their friends in person. This has caused unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness.

They are distinct from every generation before them in how they spend their time, how they behave, and in their attitudes toward religion, sexuality and politics.

iGen's are also growing up more slowly than previous generations: 18-year-olds look and act like 15-year-olds used to. According to Dr. Twenge, we all need to understand iGens and that their new viewpoints and communication styles will have to be explained to their older peers.

Against the backdrop of all this, we can all take steps to minimize the perils of addictive technology. For one thing, "quiet time" should not include monitoring a smartphone.

If you want to take your pulse on just how "addicted" to technology you may be, test your comfort level with being totally away from all technology.

Can you ever leave your smartphone at home? Can you turn your phone off and put it in the console of your car while driving? What about turning it off or placing it in silent mode while charging in another room at night? Can you ignore after-hours business emails until the next day? Can you leave your smartphone in the car while in a restaurant or at the movies? For some, thoughts of being "off the grid" for more than one minute produces extreme anxiety.

The younger generation may not believe it, but despite not having smartphones people have led fully rewarding lives for centuries. In 1969, a man even landed on the moon, and we all got the news despite not having a smartphone. Not that long ago, a car ride meant automatic mindfulness, being in the "present moment" and fully focused on the beautiful, natural, real world around you, instead of being focused on trying not to rear-end another vehicle while managing your smartphone that keeps "you-hooing" notifications at you.

Dr. Alter suggests that folks need to deliberately carve out time for a return to mindfulness: “In general, I’d say find more time to be in natural environments, to sit face-to-face with someone in a long conversation with no technology in the room. There should be times of the day where it looks like the 1950s or where you are sitting in a room and you can’t tell what era you’re in. You shouldn’t always be looking at screens.”

It’s Even Harder for Lawyers, Judges

This whole issue is very tough for lawyers and judges. Their interest in information is supercharged compared to the general public’s. Deadline-driven and often on the edges of their professional seats, lawyers demand access to work-related information as soon as possible. And, in between work-related communications, they are fully engaged with all of the other streams of information that has the general population so hooked. It’s a double-whammy.

Some lawyers are becoming overwhelmed simply because they either don’t realize, or don’t believe, it is perfectly acceptable to set hard boundaries. Everyone has the right to unplug for a while each day, and take a break of uninterrupted mindfulness.

Also, it is paramount to resist any notion that texts and emails have to be answered immediately. Old lawyers know from bitter experience that it is best to pause before responding, especially if stressed. It seems that much of the friction in the world today is generated by a fear of missing out (FOMO) that drives instant texts and posts by many in the heat of the moment. They can’t stop using technology in an impulsive and unhealthy way.

Your smartphone can be a friend, however, and run meditation and mindfulness Apps that support well-being. The best medicine, however, is to experience part of your life each day totally off the grid without a smartphone around. This can be as simple as leaving your phone behind and taking a walk around the block in solitude.

If you need help with technology addiction or would like to know more about setting healthy boundaries and practicing mindfulness, TLAP can help. Call (615) 741-3238, email tlap@tncourts.gov, or visit us on the web at www.tlap.org.

See information about process addictions at tlap.org/process-addictions. All communications are confidential as a matter of law.



BUDDY STOCKWELL was appointed by the Tennessee Supreme Court in July 2020 as executive director of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP). He comes from south Louisiana where he has been a volunteer and program monitor for the state's Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the executive director of Louisiana's

comprehensive Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP) peer professionals' program. He is a certified clinical interventionist through "Love First" training at the Betty Ford Center and has personally been in recovery from alcoholism for over 38 years. Stockwell earned his law degree from LSU Law School in 1993. He practiced in both large and small firm settings, including a solo practice in Baton Rouge where he focused heavily on domestic litigation. Read more about him at tba.org/Stockwell.

NOTES

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide>.
2. "Smartphones are Killing Americans, But Nobody's Counting," Bloomberg, October 2017; Stock, Lambert & Ingold.
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/science/technology-addiction-irresistible-by-adam-alter.html>.

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