

From the *San Jose Mercury News*, January 30, 2001:

If You Work Away from the Office, Know When to Unplug

By Margaret Steen

Cell phones, pagers and portable computers have freed many workers from the constraints of the office. But people who use this wonderful technology to work when they're away from the office need to be sure they know when to stop.

This warning will not surprise a lot of workers, but its source might: Gil Gordon, a telecommuting and virtual office expert and consultant based in Monmouth Junction, N.J.

"It is kind of ironic," Gordon admits, that he has written a book called "Turn It Off: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career." It will be published in March by Three Rivers Press.

But Gordon says just because telecommuting technology allows you to work anytime, anywhere doesn't mean you should. His book, he says, is a call to both managers and workers to take a close look at how they're using this technology now that it's no longer a novelty.

Gordon is not calling for a wholesale ban on working evenings and weekends. But he says workers need to ask themselves three questions: Do you have enough time for yourself, your family, your friends and other obligations outside of work? Even if you think you're spending enough time away from work, does your family agree? And is your after-hours work truly helping your company?

The answers to these questions should help clarify whether you need to unplug. In some cases, the after-hours work may not be encroaching on other activities -- or it may be allowing you to take time off during normal working hours. And some jobs simply have to be done at inconvenient times.

For many workers, however, the answers to these questions may not be as reassuring.

Gordon has one caution for workers who plan to march into the boss' office and announce their refusal to carry a cell phone after hours, however. Before you initiate this conversation, carefully consider your total work picture. If you're answering e-mail at 10 p.m., are you receiving flexibility during the daytime to compensate? If you realize that working at home in the evenings allows you to take time off during the day to run errands or attend a child's soccer game, you may not want to complain too loudly.

"Many people have come up with that kind of blended work/life scheduling that for them works very well," Gordon said. "The situation that concerns me the most is the one where the employee really feels that over time the employee is doing more giving than getting."

Gordon has a message for managers about this situation: "What looks like an opportunity to get more work out of people is likely to backfire."

Employees whose hours away from work aren't truly away from work, he says, are more likely to burn out, and they will become less productive over time.

If you're a manager, watch your actions as well as your words: If you always check voice mail on your days off, you'll lack credibility when you tell employees not to ruin their vacation by calling the office. And if your organization rewards people who send e-mail in the evenings, work all weekend and check in during vacation -- especially if these heroics result in public praise -- it will be very difficult to convince workers you mean it when you tell them to take a break.

One of Gordon's most interesting ideas is for both managers and workers to consider some middle ground between working and not working.

This could be especially helpful if you're telecommuting. You get used to checking e mail frequently and answering work calls because you have to be available during working hours. It can be difficult to stop being as available when working hours are over but you're in the same place, with the same equipment.

Gordon suggests that you agree with your manager that during certain hours you'll be actually working -- answering the phone and responding quickly to e-mail, just as you would at the office. During some evening hours, although you'll be in the same place, you may decide you'll answer pages and occasionally check e-mail, but you won't stay in constant touch. And you may want to carve out certain times when you won't be available at all.