

A Oh, hi Tom how's it going? You do look tired.

B I'm exhausted but I shouldn't be since I'm on a flexible work schedule.

A Well if you think about it technology hasn't brought us flying cars or self-lacing shoes...

B Actually Nike's just made a pair of shoes that self-lace themselves like the ones in the film Back to the Future.

A Ok, so we have the shoes, but technology's also brought us the work world of the future - the world where the internet allows us to work any time, anywhere, resulting in the death of the nine-to-five life. As more and more companies promise flexibility, the reality, it turns out, is pretty far from the culture we dreamed of. For almost all of us, flexible work really means working a few hours extra before and after the normal nine-to-five workday. Working nine-to-five does make sense, because many businesses still run within those core hours when markets are open, banks process deposits and payments, and daylight makes it easier for trades people to do their jobs.

B Well it's true that I'm always answering emails before I go to sleep and I usually answer a few during breakfast.

A Email's a perfect example. Digital technology permits a very small degree of flexibility around the regular working day for some, but there have been unseen and sometimes worrying repercussions for employees and employers. For example, experts say that always emailing your staff and colleagues, even though they sit a metre from you, has had a hidden but very real impact on morale and trust. That, in turn, has made truly flexible work nearly impossible for most of us. As a lecturer in human resource management at a Madrid business school said, "There can be a dark side of innovation, and unintended consequences of some organisational innovations."

B Now you mention it, it's true that I don't distrust my colleagues, but I don't really trust them either.

A Our ability to trust each other hasn't advanced or even kept up with the technology we've created. And that's one of the real reasons why flexible work is little more than a catch phrase. No matter how much a work rock star you might be, your manager doesn't trust you. Your colleagues don't trust your manager. And, truth be told, you probably don't trust most of your colleagues or your boss, either.

B Wow you really take a dark view on this. . .

A Well for an economics lecturer at the University of Oxford Business School, it's simple: "Institutional trust isn't designed for the digital age". That's also the case for the trust, or lack of it, people have in their colleagues within organisations.

B Perhaps not surprisingly, then, we're also less able to understand or make room to consider each person as, well, a person.

A Maybe. The director of the Initiative on Technology and Self at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said, "The digital age... has resulted in an assault on empathy, that makes us less able to appreciate the situation of another person".

B In other words, email, texting and quick-type apps have led to our forgetting some of our people skills. They've also undermined our confidence in knowing our bosses and colleagues well enough to believe they'll do as they say. Yes, I must say that I don't feel my other colleagues are really there to support me.

A That lack of trust brings about fear, which goes a long way to explaining why we put in face time at work even when we probably don't need to in order to do our work well.

B Perhaps it can also explain why we feel we've got to be present and be seen to be present in the office even if our work could truly be done from home or the corner cafe.

A Yes. A professor of sociology at the Free University of Berlin calls this the 'mother, may I' problem. It's when we're fearful of asking our managers if we can work from home or work altered hours if, say, we need to help a sick relative or attend a series of medical appointments or simply want to work during the hours we're feeling more productive or efficient.

Outline

As the Internet allows us to work any time and anywhere, this has resulted in the death of the nine-to-five life. Flexible work really means, for almost everyone, working a few hours extra before and after the normal nine-to-five workday. Email has brought about unseen and sometimes worrying repercussions for employees and employers. Always emailing your staff and colleagues, even though they sit a metre from you, has had an impact on morale and trust. Our ability to trust each other has not advanced or even kept up with technology, and lack of trust brings about fear, which is why we put in face time at work even when that is probably not necessary to do our work well.

Questions

1. How would you deal with the problem of receiving and answering emails outside work hours?
2. From your experience, does flexible work give people more freedom, both at work and in their personal lives?
3. Is there a real risk in the digital age that we will lose our people skills?
4. What would your ideal place of work be like?