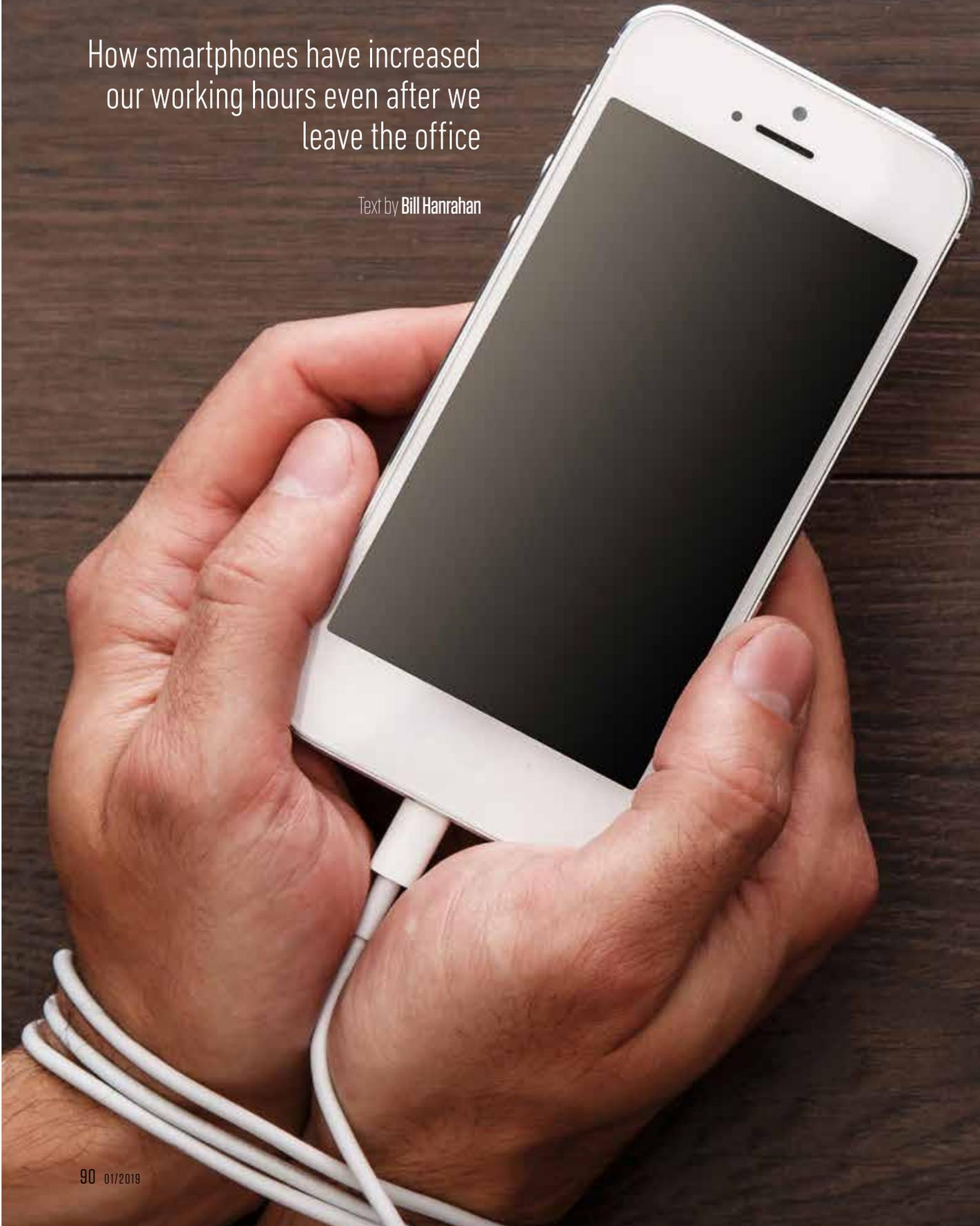


DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS

How smartphones have increased
our working hours even after we
leave the office

Text by **Bill Hanrahan**



THIS THIRD INSTALLMENT OF our smartphone dilemma series will focus on some current trends being discussed and shed new light on what the phones do to us. If you haven't read any of my previous articles, here is a quick summary: phones are changing how we behave, and the evidence is pointing in the negative direction. Phones are more ingrained in our society than ever before and that isn't going to change. The social media aspects attached to the phone have created a psychological need to stay connected. Everything from the interface of the phone to the time you get your notifications are designed to keep you hinged to it. Going a day without your phone has become harder than quitting smoking. And, unlike smoking, none of us really want to quit.

Generation Z, also known as the "Igeneration," have never known life without the smartphone. Do you remember the days when we had to go to the library to get a book? How about writing a paper and doing works cited with the library rolodex? Those days are long gone. Fast and accurate responses are no longer a luxury, they are the rule.

A few years ago, if you had your phone out while talking to someone it was considered rude. Today, it's almost normal to be multi-tasking, especially around the office. *BuzzFeed* created a Netflix special titled *Follow This*, which accurately pointed this out. I catch myself doing this every now and then, but I have to tell the person I'm speaking with, "I'm just gonna jot this down," to make it clear I am only taking notes. So, if Netflix is creating shows about tech addiction and Tim Cook is announcing built in programs to control your screen time, why are we still using these products every day? Why can't we stop? Firstly: They make us feel good. Secondly: They have replaced face-to-face communication. Thirdly: We depend on them more than ever.

The science behind the notifications is indisputable. We feel good when we get a message, someone likes our post, or a post gets lots of comments. Dopamine is released in our minds, which is why we keep going back to our phone. Dopamine is associated with the feeling of pleasure and satisfaction we feel when we receive a reward. We keep refreshing our news feed in hopes of something new and exciting to release more dopamine. The short term effects of this is us continuing to look at our phone habitually. Long term, we don't know yet. But we end up

in this dopamine driven feedback loop consuming our attention.

Phones are ingrained in our workplace and are an essential tool for information. Try applying for a job without an email these days. It's impossible. You are required to have an email in order to communicate with your work team. I can only imagine the look on my boss's face if I were to tell him I deactivated my email because it is bad for me. (He's understanding enough that I may actually be able to get away with it). Our jobs, our lives, our bills, everything requires we stay online. There are very few things you can do these days without an email address.

We are expected to stay connected. We are expected to know what's going on in between emails before and after work. But we don't benefit from this. In 2017 France imposed new laws to prevent people from getting emails after a certain time. It's called the "Right to disconnect" or "*Le droit à la déconnexion*." This new law guarantees employees in France the right to ignore messages that aren't sent or received within their regular working hours. According to *The Washington Post*, the reason for this law was because of an increased number of work related stress in the lives of French people. "The motivation behind the legislation is to stem work-related stress that increasingly leaks into people's personal time — and hopefully prevent employee burnout," French officials said. I think this is something we will start to see more of in the future.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries workers and unions in the US fought for better working conditions and shorter working days. In 1938 the Fair Labor Standards act was passed and stated 40 hours was the full work week. Anything over 40 hours would require the employee to be paid time and a half. Our ancestors would be ashamed of us if they knew we were talking to our bosses and colleagues after we returned from a long day of work and not getting paid time and a half for it! We do it voluntarily and sometimes subconsciously these days not because we want to, but because we carry work in our pockets.

Email speeds up productivity, commerce and transactions. Email also makes it easy to recall what one another said. But it's extremely hard to convey our emotions. Not every message needs to be communicated via email. We have voices and faces, and we shouldn't let

that go unused. Simon Sinek, author of *Leaders Eat Last* and the creator of one of the top TED talks "*How Great Leaders Inspire Action*," said in an interview "human bonds are human, and they require human physical interaction. You have to look someone in the eye before you trust them. The relationships you build physically are not only more efficient, but deeper." We must never replace face-to-face interaction with computers. I am afraid what the next generation will look like if we lose our ability to look one another in the eye.

In 1972 psychologists Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard determined there are six facial expressions that are recognized by cultures around the world: disgust, sadness, happiness, anger, fear, surprise. These emotions are easily displayed by changing our facial features when we meet each other. In a recent HBR podcast titled *Avoiding Miscommunication in a Digital World*, communications expert and speaking coach, Nick Morgan, talked about the importance of face-to-face conversation. Nick said, "face-to-face meeting is very efficient in one important sense: that is, we humans care about each other's intent. Intent is very hard to convey except face-to-face, where it's easy and effortless." Email doesn't allow us to do this. Nick met with lead neuroscientists in their field and asked "So if email is so bad, what should we do about it?" The lead neuroscientist responded, "pick up the phone and read your email to the other person." Doing this allows people in real time to clarify their feelings and emotions. You may ask, "What about Skype and Facetime?" Nick argues it interrupts that natural speed of a conversation, and we often end up looking at our own image on the screen instead of directly into their eyes (or the camera lens).

So go ahead, leave your phone at home. Go to the office without it one day. Email will still be there, but it won't nearly be as easy to check while you use the restroom, eat lunch or wait for the elevator. Still not sure if your phone is addictive? Try giving it up for an hour. Then try two hours or a day? Most of you will realize you, too, are dependent on your phone. Go to a mall or a coffee shop and count how many couples, friends or families you see sitting together using their phones. Hopefully you'll be more cognizant of your usage after seeing this. The observations are clear: people can't put down their phones. ■

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