



# Where's the Off Switch?

Flexible work arrangements underpinned by technology can do much to improve the work/life balance — but it can also destroy it

**S**lack-jawed I watched the mother of the groom, seated on the top table, whip out her mobile phone to call a relative at the back of the function centre and chat during the festivities. Admittedly it was a big wedding with guests numbering in the hundreds, but this was a new paradigm at work.

It should have come as no surprise, then, to learn that Australians are obsessed with mobile phones, spending on average an hour a day on them. But it was. Even more surprising was the Queensland University of Technology report's revelation that almost one in 12 mobile phone owners had a monthly bill over \$500.

The mobile phone is without question one of society's most useful technologies, up there with the wheel and the washing machine. Yet I spend less than an hour a week on it and the monthly bill rarely tops \$30. The trick is the off button.

The same goes for all technology which permits mobility and flexibility. If people become hostage to the technology

car boots? Who's going to ensure that effective occupational health and safety policies are in place and properly policed so that the employer isn't landed with a lawsuit when the employee gets tendonitis from lying on the rug with the laptop? Who's going to decide when to press the off switch?

Flexible work arrangements underpinned by technology can boost the economy and employees' work/life balance. We know this because the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Helen Coonan, told us so, having commissioned the Telework Advisory Committee to explore the opportunities of teleworking for the nation after the last election. Senator Coonan said that: "The Australian government places great importance on strategies that address the ageing of the workforce and skills shortages, as well as the economic revitalization of rural and regional areas. Flexible working arrangements can help the long-term unemployed, parents with young families, people on disability support and workers looking for a better work/life balance."

The problem is that she said it a year ago when the report was first released. So far not one of the six recommendations from the committee has been adopted.

Those recommendations called for training programs to be developed for managers in the public and private sectors to explain how to manage teleworkers; for more to be invested in creation of technological infrastructure to support teleworking; for an online resource centre — a repository of information about teleworking — to be set up; for a program to promote and support teleworking in the public service; for more investment in research and modelling in order to clarify how telework can boost productivity and cut costs; and for an awareness and education campaign about the benefits of telework to be conducted.

A year later, when asked what progress has been made the official response comes back: "The Government is considering how best to respond with an awareness raising exercise." Translation: "All a bit hard, not an election issue, file under 'interesting issue', no action required."

But action *is* required. Employers and employees already have teleworking tools. If they are deployed ad hoc, someone will get hurt. BY

*Beverley Head is a freelance writer who has been writing about the relationships between people, business and technology for over 20 years*

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the once-promised flexibility evaporates.

This is particularly acute for knowledge economy workers where the mobile, the PC, wireless networks and the Internet conspire to allow anytime, anywhere access to work. For employees the benefits of teleworking appear obvious; allowing them to work flexibly and without the usual 9-to-5 constraints. Teleworking is already reforming white collar work practices, and will be spurred by the arrival of increasing numbers of Generation Y employees (Gartner's so called "digital natives") who expect or demand flexibility from employers. However, just as the mobile phone left unchecked can run amok, teleworking needs careful evaluation.

What if managers routinely expect tele-enabled staff to be available 24x7? What if they demand employees take a PDA on vacation and answer urgent e-mails?

Who pays for the computing and communications infrastructure required? Who determines which employees are allowed to telework? Who establishes the information access and security policies? Who is going to pay the insurance premiums associated with having expensive equipment in employees' homes or