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## How Employees Are Impacted

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*The 24/7 world of work is having a significant impact on employees with disastrous consequences for individuals and the organizations that employ them. This chapter explores each of the aspects that are often dehumanizing work and storing up problems that need to be addressed, yet mostly ignored—the curse that is email overload; the rise of stress and depression among employees; the impact of the lack of engagement on employees and the organization; the rise and impact of ‘gig’ workers and the myth that is multi-tasking. Leaders need to recognize the impact that digital overload is having on their employees. The world of work has changed dramatically over the past decade yet leadership models are lagging these changes with significant adverse impact on employees.*

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## Introduction

Practically every article you read on the ‘digital economy’, or ‘the Fourth Industrial Revolution’, as it’s been called, suggests it can solve all your issues. Whether it be increasing your ability to understand and reach your target audience, delight your customers, speed up your supply chain and any and all your projects, the ‘solution’ it would seem is digital. The ‘outcome’ will be increased productivity and profitability.

Congratulations if that accurately describes your organization. For the vast majority though, it clearly isn’t happening. Business investment is falling and productivity has plateaued across the developed world. It is one of the biggest issues we are facing. For years before digital, productivity rose, mainly as a result of investment. That allowed organizations to give their employees pay rises and that helped raise standards of living. Without productivity rises, employees can’t look forward to pay increases and are condemned to lower standards of living than their parents enjoy.

So, the nirvana promised by doing things digital hasn’t happened yet. Its pervasiveness is already very clear and will only increase with the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence still to fully develop. When the label ‘the Fourth Industrial Revolution’ was given to this, most people thought that while jobs would be lost, new better ones would be created, as has happened before.

## What Have We Got Out of This?

What has this Fourth Industrial Revolution brought us so far? Well, the revolution hasn’t started yet. At this time, we are about one year away from a similar period in history; where France was before the French Revolution of the Eighteenth Century. Think about it. The impact so far has been that all the benefits have gone to a few digital billionaires/multi-millionaires who have done little or nothing for society in general, maybe even negative benefits for society if their companies aren’t paying their fair share of taxes. It’s much like the French nobility who garnered all the wealth while doing nothing but look after themselves and watch the peasants starve. While ‘starving’ may not be commonplace today, certainly it’s not so different to the vast majority who find themselves locked into

ever increasing work demands from their masters and an overload of tasks for, at best, the same pay as they received before the ‘revolution’. While the proletariat may not revolt in the same way as did the French, there is clearly a huge swell of disillusionment rising. Wealth inequality continues to worsen. The backlash against egregious CEO salary levels is an example, with more publicity, shareholders and fund managers revolting. ‘Zero hours’ contracts, is another example, where there are no guarantees of how many hours per week employees might get to work. This may suit some people, but for many the inability to know whether they will get 10 or 40 hours work, week to week, puts huge pressure on them.

## **It’s Always Been Like This**

There are those who suggest that ‘it’s always been like this’, it is nothing new. There have always been high demands on employees, a culture of the need to work long hours and authoritarian leaders who were indifferent to the needs of employees. It was situations like this that gave birth to the ‘work-life balance’ movement that arose in the 70s and 80s. Employees, and some forward thinking organizations, felt the conflict between work and family demands to be skewed in favour of the working population and this led to tensions and dissatisfaction.

But now, we’re in a different time. The boundary between work and life is significantly more blurred than ever as we are now more accessible than ever. The smartphone on its own has ensured that and, in general, organizations have encouraged this. You don’t need to be visible to your boss. He/she is quite relaxed if you work from home for a day, or in a coffee shop (well possibly that depends on what kind of boss you have, for many, presenteeism is still all the rage). The invisible cord that links you to your boss at all times is the technology of the smartphone. Previously, when you left the office, you were out of reach. And, while it may suit many to have the ‘freedom’ of working remotely, the lack of social interaction isn’t conducive to collaboration and a shared vision. Today, the expectation is that your smartphone is constantly by your side and that you will check work issues in between checking your Twitter/Snapchat/Facebook feed. That’s another aspect that makes this time very different to before, the sheer amount of potential distractions to vie for your attention.

## We Are Drowning

One other aspect the digital world has brought us is this vast amount of information we are both creating and being exposed to. Even ten years ago, the University of Southern California published a study<sup>9</sup> that showed the amount of information each of us produces each day had risen nearly two hundred fold between 1986 and 2007 as we moved from word processors that only a few employees had access to, faxes and ‘snail mail’ to email and social networks—and 2007 was before we started using Twitter and Facebook. The sheer deluge of information we are now subjected to is a distraction from achieving many of the things that really matter.

Also, while difficult to quantify, can anybody doubt that the speed of change in organizations is exponentially faster than twenty years ago? How many reorganizations are there? How many changes in design, demands to get new products to market more quickly, how many more alliances between companies? Another aspect is the rise of ‘gig workers’. An EY (Ernst & Young) survey<sup>10</sup> in the USA in June 2016, ‘The gig economy is transforming the workforce’, suggests that ‘gig workers’, also known as ‘contingent workers’ will continue to become a larger proportion of the workforce. While some may feel this a positive change, others, who prefer the certainty of employment, will find this way of life more precarious with a consequent impact on their performance.

The issues that are affecting your employees, and having a huge negative impact on their motivation and their effectiveness, are covered below. None of these should be a surprise. But the reality is that leaders aren’t responding to the genuine needs of their employees, nor organizing their employees’ working environments to counter these.

## The ‘Digital’ Curse that Is Email

Email is the symptom of the issues that digital technology has brought us. Surely, when we first started using it, we thought there would be benefits; the ability to communicate more quickly, instantly to a wide audience, freeing up time spent trying to contact others, enabling better and faster decision-making. Or, put another way, increasing productivity. Sadly, it has turned into a tyranny that exacerbates the 24/7 culture

that is permeating organizations, driven by the ability to check and work on emails by smartphone.

So far, those who keep predicting the death of email have been proved wrong. There's plenty of evidence to show that the number of email accounts and the number of emails we send and receive daily are continuing to increase. The Radicati Group, a California based technology market research organization, in their 'Email Statistics Report'<sup>11</sup> estimate that the number of business emails sent and received per user per day was 124 in 2016 and it is continuing to increase. And by 2020, they estimate that nearly half the world's population will be using email. So if you hoped it was dying out, sorry to disillusion you! To give you an idea of the extent to which this is a concern, a McKinsey study<sup>12</sup> in 2012 showed that interaction workers spent an average of 28% of their time answering emails and another 20% looking for internal information. That is one huge diversion of potentially productive time!

## **To Turn Off, or, How to Turn Employees off?**

In an attempt to address the impact of 24/7 email, a number of companies, such as VW, have taken actions like turning off the server after 5.00 pm or stopping staff receiving emails while on holiday. All these and similar actions may appear positive, at least in terms of looking after employees' wellbeing. There's two big 'buts' though.

Surely one of the advantages of connectability is that we can work remotely, from home or from a coffee shop or use the train commute to some benefit. If we need to take a couple of hours for a child or parent care, or take an emergency trip to a dentist, surely we should be happy to take some time in the evening to catch up? It's all part of an adult environment where there is give and take on both sides. It seems retrograde to go back to an era where we 'clock on and clock off'. A wet Sunday afternoon if the spouse has taken the children visiting, may be just the time to settle down. This 'adult' approach was given further credibility by the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Spring 2017 'Employee Outlook' survey.<sup>13</sup> 52% of those surveyed said that remote access to the workplace 'helped them to work flexibly', and

only 10% disagreed, and 42% said it ‘helped them to stay in control of their workload’. However, almost a third of employees (32%) agreed that remote access to the workplace means they can’t switch off in their personal time. Almost a fifth (18%) said it makes them feel as though they are under surveillance, with 17% saying remote access to the workplace makes them anxious and impacts their sleep quality.

The other big ‘but’ is, if we frown or restrict working on emails outside of working hours, then all emails will have to be dealt with during the working day. Think about that in terms of your organization’s productivity. Coming back from a week’s vacation would be a nightmare and the first two days back will be a blur as we try to work through the mountain of mails. There’s also the worrying feeling of satisfaction from getting to the end of a string of unopened emails, even though this achievement has done little to advance the tasks that actually need performing.

Recently, France has passed a law that gives employees the ‘right to disconnect’ from emails once their normal day has ended. This approach also finds favor with UK employees. From the same CIPD survey,<sup>14</sup> 2017 ‘Employee Outlook’, 77% of those questioned said employees ‘should have the right to disconnect from technology’ and only 5% disagreed. However, the leader of the organization always sets the expectation. In one interview conducted for this book, an employee of a global services company said ‘I know, in theory, I don’t have to answer emails, but my boss and many others in this organization are hell-bent on their own, individual success and feel that driving us harder is their right as it may improve the way they are viewed. I have a great marriage and two kids and I fear that putting them first will affect my chances’.

Restricting when I can work is simply exacerbating the problem that needs addressing at source. The loss of productivity and the personal time invasion caused by email overload and the expectation of 24/7 accessibility has to be high on every leader’s agenda when assessing their ideal company culture.

There are alternatives to email that are gaining credibility, like Slack, Hipchat, Jive, Yammer, etc. These are not a panacea. There are plenty who will say they are just another form of digital tyranny. What they can provide is a searchable base of information that email doesn’t. It’s

relatively easy for a new start-up to avoid the pitfalls of email. Not so easy when email has been deep into the fabric of your organization for many years and, as we've seen earlier, the number of business emails sent per day continues to rise inexorably!

Here's the example of the Halton Housing Trust, as reported in the UK's *The Times* in June 2016<sup>15</sup>; 'Now a housing trust in Cheshire has picked up the baton and is preparing to turn off its internal server after a two-year programme to wean staff off emails. The Halton Housing Trust worked out that staff were spending 40% of their time on internal emails.

Nick Atkin, the chief executive, said he feared that his employees were 'addicted' so only drastic action would work. The trust started off naming and shaming its highest email users in a monthly league table, while developing its intranet for more sophisticated internal communications.

An email charter limits the use of functions such as 'reply to all' and 'cc'. It encourages staff to check external emails only once or twice a day, with an auto-response warning clients not to expect prompt replies. The Trust was coming close to its goal of turning off its internal server. Mr Atkin said. 'What is clear is that email has become an overused and abused communication tool. Instead of being one of many ways to hold conversations it has become the default tool,' he said.'

## Don't Underestimate the Impact of Stress and Depression

The macho culture where leaders set the tone of 24/7 accessibility is causing huge damage to both the health of individuals and thus to organizations. The latest statistics are hugely worrying. The World Health Organization<sup>16</sup> (WHO) having called stress 'the health epidemic of the 21st Century' has recently stated that 'depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide' and also, even more worryingly, predicts that by 2030 'there will be more people affected by depression than any other health problem'. Regardless of the costs of this, shown below, surely the biggest concern is the human effect this has on the individual and their families. Almost 40% of employees believe 'it is impossible to maintain a fast-growing career and a sound family life,' thanks to the 'work-martyr' effect in companies.<sup>17</sup> There can be no excuse for a 'blind eye' to this.

The 'WHO' estimate that workplace stress is costing US businesses over \$300 billion a year and an EU funded study<sup>18</sup> in 2013 estimated that the cost to employers in Europe of workplace depression was in excess of €510 billion, comprised of the costs of absenteeism and 'presenteeism' of €272 billion and €242 billion in lost productivity.

This word 'presenteeism' is a word invented to explain the phenomenon of feeling the need to be at work when suffering an illness, or feeling the need to be seen to be working long hours 'because that's what's expected of you as an employee'. To put this new phenomenon into context, Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Professor of Organization Psychology at the UK's Manchester Business School, in his speech to the CIPD Annual Conference in 2015, quoted by People Management,<sup>19</sup> estimates 'the cost of presenteeism to be twice the cost of absenteeism'.

## Have We Learnt Nothing?

Surely by now we've realized that overlong working hours are detrimental to our health and the wellbeing of the businesses we work for. There's probably over a century of research that confirms that it is bad for our health and bad for the organizations who demand it of us. And, to compound our health concerns, if we think that extending the working day by working while at home as opposed to the office might be better for us, a recent scientific study in the UK and reported in the Sunday Times, showed that 'dealing with work issues while at home is pernicious to health and directly linkable to cardiovascular disease'.

For those who think this will all be solved when the rapidly ageing baby Boomers finally quit the workforce and leave it to the Millennials, think again. A report by the American Psychological Association<sup>20</sup> in 2015 found that Millennials had the highest stress levels of all the generations. So, the problems of stress and depression aren't going away anytime soon!

What those at the top of organizations don't seem to get still, after all the above, is that the culture they set pervades the organization



and is having an undesirable effect on their workforce, their levels of productivity and therefore the organization's bottom line, let alone the cost to their reputation, as web-based sites like Glassdoor will expose. We are witnessing a vicious circle of greater pressure on employees through 24/7 accessibility, leading to longer hours, disengagement and presenteeism, which in turn reduces productivity, which leads to zero wage increases, further disengagement and so down and down we go in a self-defeating spiral with depression waiting for us at the bottom.

In 2008, Harvard Business Review (HBR) conducted a survey<sup>21</sup> of people in professional service companies (accountants, lawyers, consultants, investment bankers, IT workers, etc.). The results showed that 94% of 1000 such professionals worked 50 or more hours a week, with nearly half that group turning in more than 65 hours a week. That doesn't include the 20–25 hours a week most of them spend monitoring their BlackBerrys while outside the office. These individuals further say they almost always respond within an hour of receiving a message from a colleague or a client. Not a recipe for continuing high levels of engagement.

Such is the expectation of professional service. Work comes first, above all else. Whatever the deleterious effects on employees, their home life, their health, the expectations are that wherever you are, you are expected to be reachable.

However, HBR then conducted research with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and their consultants around planned, predictable time off. The research, over multiple years in several North American offices of BCG suggests that it is perfectly possible for consultants and other professionals to meet the highest standards of service and still have planned, uninterrupted time off. Indeed, the results demonstrated that when the assumption that everyone needs to be always available was collectively challenged, not only could individuals take time off, but their work actually benefited. The experiments with time off resulted in more open dialogue among team members, which is valuable in itself. But the improved communication also sparked new processes that enhanced the teams' ability to work most efficiently and effectively.

Compared with those not participating in the experiments, people on time-off teams reported higher job satisfaction, greater likelihood that they could imagine a long-term career at the firm, and higher satisfaction with work/life balance.

## **Is It Any Wonder Levels of Engagement Aren't Improving?**

Since the seminal book on engagement, 'The Service Profit Chain'<sup>22</sup> was written in 1997, the link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and loyalty, revenue growth and profitability has been well established. Statistics from Gallup,<sup>23</sup> the leaders in this field, who have been conducting research for over 20 years, in their 2016 'Meta Q12'<sup>TM</sup> analysis of 1.8 million employees across 73 countries, confirms the 'true relationship between engagement and performance at the business unit level, including customer loyalty, productivity, revenue and profitability', as do similar studies by Aon Hewitt, the other major player in this field.

## **Surely, Most Companies Run 'Satisfaction Surveys Now?**

If this is the case, why do so many organizations not embrace employee engagement as a critical factor in improving their business results? A surprising 18% of companies do not use any form of engagement survey.<sup>24</sup> While many organizations will answer, 'we do', why is that the overall survey results from Gallup show 'only 13% of employees worldwide are actively engaged and 24% are actively disengaged'?

Sometimes the answer is that lip service is paid to employee satisfaction. Companies will tell you it is a key focus. Employees will tell you they only focus on the company needs, not what is important to

them as employees and that no real meaningful actions are ever taken as a result of surveys. Equally, the rise of the expectation of 24/7 accessibility and that an employee's time is there to be abused if the company feels the need, are just as likely to be prime issues. Add to this the continuing ratcheting up of demands on employees, causing a rise in workplace and home stress. Have you ever seen an athlete or a sportsman give their best when they were stressed? No, they may be 'in the zone', but that's not being stressed. Research by McKinsey<sup>25</sup> has shown that workplace incivility arising from workplace stress is increasing and had been reported by 62% of those surveyed. The impacts reported as a result of this incivility, most often included a fall-off in performance and collaboration, plus an effect on customer relations and leaving intentions. Employees also see the continuing flattening of their pay levels while the 'top dogs' continue to enjoy huge multiples of average employee earnings and watch them get paid off handsomely when they inevitably fail. Of all the company's various stakeholders (shareholders, society, customers, employees, suppliers and Governments) it will be employees who will be the first to feel any ill winds.

## You Need to Take Responsibility

At this time, all the benefits of technology have gone to help organizations increase their grip on us. So far, all we've got out of it is Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, oh and people working on the potential for fridges that tell us we've run out of milk. The 'March of the Robots', as A.I. begins to replace workers with machines, will be yet another attack on employees. And, don't hold your breath waiting for society/governments to come up with solutions to these issues. By the time that happens all the value will have been taken by the few, yet again.

You can read later in this book what needs to be done to redress the balance to ensure your employees aren't part of the disaffected masses.

What not to do to raise engagement levels.

Here is an example of misusing digital technology, resulting in both a poor outcome to the initiative and managing to kill engagement. Carole Stevenson, Founder of Cybéle, a world-wide Training Consultancy, reports that a major company in the financial services sector took the decision to switch to 95% e-learning and mobile learning, with just 5% face to face learning. The expectation was that the digital learning would be done whilst travelling, which would result in cost and time saving, and deliver the upskilling while requiring less involvement from managers. The reality was different—little acceptance of this ‘one size fits all’ standalone digital learning and the imposition on employees’ time, combined with the lack of support and dialogue and social learning required. Result: no real changes in behavior, mind-set or skill levels and really poor engagement.

## ‘Gig’, or Contingent Workers

One emerging trend is the rise of ‘gig’ or contingent workers. The term includes freelancers, independent professionals and contractors who are not employed directly by the company they are working for. The rise in the numbers of these workers can be attributed to a number of factors: the ability that digital technology has provided for people to work remotely in a number of professions; the need for companies to have people working on specific projects for a defined period of time; and not least, the continuing need for companies to lower their fixed employee costs. Different to the past, gig workers are more often than not highly skilled, specialized knowledge workers. The worldwide web is awash with websites that allow companies to search for the skills they need and for the workers to advertise their capabilities and find the work they are seeking.

## My Choice or Yours?

Clearly for some ‘giggers’, this is a welcome choice, allowing them to be free from the ‘tyranny’ of being employed, giving them freedom to choose where and when they work. For others, it is a forced move, caused by there not being an employed position available. The 2016 EY survey<sup>26</sup> on the ‘gig economy’ in the USA found that only just over 50% would prefer not to be employed full-time, leaving a vast rump

who are there because they can't find a better alternative. These workers have a real chance of becoming the new 'precariat'. The 'precariat' are simply defined as 'existing without predictability or security'. Even though employment is never guaranteed by the employer, it often provides an employee with a much greater feeling of security, particularly if that individual has a family to support and/or a mortgage to pay. This is the group of people that political parties are recognizing need to be protected from the ravages of the new order brought on by the changing nature of the world of work. The issues faced by these workers are very different to those for whom gigging is their preferred choice. However, there is real, and growing concern of the societal impact such a disaffected group could have. If companies cut their numbers of employees to reduce costs and take on gig workers in their place, then more people will be forced into this way of working against their will. Inevitably, this will increase calls for these workers to be granted some form of employment benefits, including holidays, sick pay and pension rights. If Governments feel that they are losing revenue in the form of taxes through the rise of gig workers, expect them to support these calls.

Even with the significant increase that has taken place so far, further expansion is forecast. The EY survey (above) says that 1/3 of the companies with over 100,000 employees expect to have over 30% of contingent workers by 2020 and other forecasts suggest a 50/50 share is the most likely long term future outcome.

## Disengagement for All?

It is unlikely to be plain sailing. In an HBR article,<sup>27</sup> quoting research by Rosalind Bergemann, 74% of contract workers left employment because of 'lack of employer engagement'. So companies need to ensure that the environment they provide does switch them on, or they will be as dissatisfied gigging for the new 'boss' as they were for their previous employer. This is only one of the major emerging issues that business leaders will face. Concerns include ensuring that these workers are properly inducted into the organization's culture, the style of operating and to oversee the full transfer of knowledge to the organization. If project workers are to be based alongside employees, then ensuring the operating style and

culture set by the organization is adhered to by the project worker is vital. Underestimating the need to closely manage the progress of a project team and the subsequent transfer of their knowledge into the organization is a real danger. Too often this isn't the case and the project team are allowed to operate as if on a different planet. A quote from an Agile team leader of over 30 giggers on a major systems project said 'there is little or no ownership by management and we don't see anyone from the beginning of the one week to the end. They won't know what to do with our project when it's delivered as they're not involved enough.' While this individual wishes to remain anonymous, he also stresses that this project is little different to others he's been involved in.

If these workers are spending time at the same workplace as employees, and aren't operating to the same demands, standards, culture then the adverse effect on employees' motivation will be significant. These workers have 'no skin in the game', so the long term success of the organization means little or nothing to them beyond being paid for their time. Employees who see others 'getting away with it', will have little confidence in the leadership's ability to develop a successful organization. While, clearly, individual contractors are more likely to have their reputation at stake, they are, in theory, only as good as their last assignment. As always though, references are only one of the many checks that need to be performed as companies tend to gloss over issues once the assignment is complete.

To make a success of using this new band of skilled workers requires an approach that recognizes the needs of the different individuals and groups. Anything less than the time and effort that would have been applied if they were employees, risks projects running over budget and time. It also risks the real disaffection of those who carry the organization day in, week in and year in and out: the hard-pressed, increasingly hard done by employees.

## Multitasking

If only we were all educated, energetic and eager Millennials, capable of performing three tasks simultaneously while posting on Snapchat... Or, actually, no STOP THERE! Because in reality it's about about the worst

thing we could do. Already there is a wealth of evidence available that tells us just how bad multitasking is both for us as individuals and the organizations for which we work. The overarching tyranny of the digital world has taken us to a place where we allow every ping, ding or buzz to pull us away from what we were doing. We sit with multiple apps/web-sites open, inviting those distractions. A study by Gloria Mark of the University of California, quoted in the New York Times,<sup>28</sup> concluded it took a full 25 min to properly refocus ourselves once our attention had been diverted.

There have been plenty other studies. A Stanford University study<sup>29</sup> demonstrated that typical single-taskers outperformed regular multitaskers in a range of tasks; the University of London, quoted in Forbes,<sup>30</sup> conducted tests that showed multitasking recorded a drop of 15 IQ points, equivalent to the effect of having gone without sleep for a night.

There's also research from the UK's Sussex University, quoted in EurekaAlert<sup>31</sup> in 2014 that suggests there is potential long-term damage to the area of the brain responsible for EQ (emotional intelligence) from multitasking. That could presage that we will be working in really unpleasant workplaces in the future! Unhappy and underperforming, doesn't begin to cover the future's possibilities.

## How Big Did You Say?

But the most significant survey is this one. Realization, a major US Project Management services company, performed an extensive survey of 45 companies across a wide range of industries and examined numerous academic studies in their 2013 report 'The Effect of Multitasking on Organizations'<sup>32</sup>. From this, they estimated that the loss in productivity arising from knowledge workers multitasking is around \$450 billion a year globally! That truly shows the economic value that we are losing by this pernicious influence.

And if you're still inclined to think that this is overstated, just think of texting while driving a car. Or, maybe you prefer the old Roman proverb: 'a man who chases two rabbits catches none' (World of Proverbs).

What's becoming clear is that it is making more practical sense than ever to focus on the task at hand and leave the rest until a natural break

stage arises where you would have stopped anyway. For leaders, there is a huge need to set this example and, by doing this, encourage all others to do the same.

## Key Learnings for Leaders

It is different this time. It's not the same as the 'pressures we've always experienced'. Smartphones and 24/7 accessibility have hugely exacerbated and transformed the demands on employees. You cannot continue to lead as if nothing has changed.

The employee backlash from unreasonable demands is growing, as the requirement to be 'always on' is abused and the benefits of success go only to a few. You need to act on 'macho management'.

Continuing low levels of employee engagement are costing organizations billions of dollars, euros and yen a year. Are you even trying to meet employees' legitimate expectations?

Email has become an invasive infection threatening the health of organizations with no real antidote in sight. This will only change if you, as leaders, take action.

Rise in workplace stress and depression is already at epidemic levels, costing billions and receiving insufficient leadership focus. Your employees' well-being is your responsibility.

Gig workers require the same attention as your employees or you won't get value from them and they could pollute the organization. Make sure you know how to manage them.

The number of potential distractions during the working day deflect hugely from the concentrated effort required to add real value and are having a huge impact on organizations' productivity. If you don't take action on this nobody else will.





<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-63798-3>

Conquering Digital Overload  
Leadership strategies that build engaging work  
cultures

Thomson, P.; Johnson, M.; Devlin, J.M. (Eds.)

2018, XX, 192 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-63798-3