

Tech-Free Vacation: Why Unplugging Isn't Practical

By Roni H. Amiel

Most of us probably spend more quality time connected to various devices than we do with the people we hold dear. Sure, technology is remarkable -- but nowadays we crave a break from the work emails and phone calls that consume us. But is a true break from technology really practical?

Probably not. According to a 2012 Time magazine poll, 84% of people said that they could not go a single day without their cellphones, while 68% admitted they even sleep with their phone next to them like a teddy bear.

As freeing as an unplugged holiday may seem, it's just not practical for me in my role as a CIO/CISO. Take the consequences of working in a global market. This has forced me to increase my visibility and availability, and to maintain a high level of reliability when it comes to technology assets -- all of which I lose if I vow not to check email or take work calls.

There's also the role I play in security and risk management. Given the rising number of security breaches -- and knowing that hackers don't always attack during business hours -- I need to be available around the clock. Finally, transformative and disruptive technologies come into play. Though they're often helpful, they also mean that CIOs are further expected to be available should problems arise. In a hospital environment, for example, these technologies might include a decision support system or a clinical intelligence solution that clinicians rely on to make patient care decisions

But on a more personal level, disconnecting during the holidays would also impact my interactions with friends and family -- we Skype with relatives, Facebook with friends, and engage on Twitter, for example. Disavowing technology for my immediate family means less quality time with my extended family, too.

Though some people might view technology as a burden during time off, I'm actually

thankful for it. Being connected means I can take a week-long vacation and not worry that my absence might cause a catastrophe in my organization -- because people know they can reach me if they must. (Still, not once in my career have I received "the call" while away -- that notification that a critical information asset failed and was likely to impact core services. Knock on wood.)

I learned very early in my career that taking time off and staying connected is a delicate balance. If a crisis arises where I absolutely have to work, I carve out a set period of time during the day to do so. I'm also able to recognize when my presence is not absolutely necessary, and I know when to just say no.

Here's what I recommend for balancing work while on vacation: First, be proactive about scheduling and build downtime into your schedule. In that time, focus on those activities that add value, and consider outsourcing or delegating the stuff that doesn't. Finally, realize that a little relaxation goes a long way in helping you recharge.