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Redefining the concept of social work/life balance.

Rita Marcella

As we might have expected 30 years ago, the Internet, the proliferation of electronic means of communication and the advent of social media have revolutionised how we live life today. I can vividly remember giving a breakfast presentation then to a large audience of businessmen and women in which I'd been asked to talk about what the Internet might mean to them and their businesses in the future. I talked about the kinds of business that might proliferate in a virtual world and how online media could alter and improve business practices, such as marketing and communicating with suppliers. What I hadn't quite appreciated was the extent to which electronic media would blur the lines between work and social life – nor indeed the new forms of commerce that have emerged from online connectivity.

It is a fact that today we take our work everywhere with us and our social life goes to work when we do too. There is no gap, no physical distance across which work cannot follow us. And similarly at work we are no longer penned away from our social life and unable to see what is happening around us. Witness the teachers confiscating mobile devices at the start of class or the managers looking askance at their staff checking Facebook or Snapchat while ostensibly engaged in other duties.

Equally however our work may involve formal use of social media, when we tweet or post images on Instagram to promote our goods and services. We may well have a formal online work presence on social media. And of course who can escape from the tyranny of email following us into our most private moments, due to the omnipresence of mobile device use for everything – reading, talking to friends, checking the news worldwide, buying our groceries or even seeking a life partner.

It has been argued that millennials are particularly prone to this constant online activity or inability to shut off one part of their life from the other. The demarcation lines between the work person and the social person can vanish and our informal selves permeate work while things that we do online may have very significant repercussions for our future careers.

Indeed addiction to social media can be observed at all ages. On one occasion I sat in a taxi surrounded by students in evening attire heading for an awards ceremony and every occupant of the taxi was checking their phone for messages of one sort or another – whether email (me), texts, Snapchat messages or likes on Twitter. And the burden of being on all or most of these media demands a huge amount of time and effort of us. Time that might have previously been spent on other pursuits.

And of course the prevalence of social media has created new business opportunities – apart from the megaliths of app creation legend such as Facebook, there are those who have risen to prominence via living their lives on social media, whose fame rests solely on their ability to shine in a virtual world and who may appear to have made no other contribution beyond having a massive follower base. People like Zoe Sugg (widely known as blogger Zoella) and Tanya Burr of the fashion and lifestyle blogging world, both have millions of followers. Indeed Burr has just released a cookbook while Zoella recently appeared on the Celebrity Great British Bake Off.

It is believed that generations Y and Z prefer to gain their news (and arguably their world views) from following like minded individuals on social media, with whose images they associate or whose status they would aspire to achieve. These individuals need have no traditional authority, gravitas or credibility achieved through some formal status such as education or employment – credibility is achieved rather through numbers of followers, levels of engagement and the quality and consistency of the messages posted.

These stellar social media figures achieve revenue from their activities through a variety of activities such as receiving payment or gifts from sponsors, advertisers may pay to be visible on vlog or blog postings and the price charged to advertisers is directly related to the number of followers. Of course if you are creating content online then that content can have an intrinsic value and may be sold independently. Examples of the last type would include those whose music videos first achieved prominence through YouTube such as most famously perhaps Justin Bieber or author Amanda Hocking who originally self-published her books on Amazon.

To date the high profile social media figures emanate from the arts, entertainment, fashion and lifestyle but influential commentators in a wide variety of fields such as video games and sport can find ways to monetarise their popularity. Were he still alive today one can imagine that Beau Brummell would have assembled a massive online follower fan base. The power of the influential persona has never been greater and it will be interesting to see how the lives of future generations will evolve in this fundamentally altered world.

While it would be easy to dismiss social media as a wasteful and sterile activity that removes us from reality into a constructed world, we should remember TS Eliot's observation of the power of such activity to free the mind and enable creativity – "distracted by distraction from distraction" recognising as some creative businesses do that understanding how the newly formed consciousness of Generations Y and Z are capable of performing effectively in a new way will create value for the future sustainability of their company. Workplaces and business opportunities will continue to evolve and change beyond recognition and business success will come in new and unpredictable forms in the future.