A labor call to action: Take a tech Shabbat

By Tiffany Shlain

I used to feel good about getting work done throughout the weekend. I was a working parent starting an indie film studio, and anything that would help me stay on top of things was a win. Weekends were a chaotic mix of recreation and work, sending e-mails and ticking things off my never-ending-to-do list. Not only could I pat myself on the back for my work ethic, I believed I was making more time for myself in the upcoming week. I’d be ahead of the game.

This illusion of how I could “game” time shattered a decade ago when, within days, my father died and my daughter was born. These two profound events made me reconsider how I thought about time — and how I was spending it.

There are many people who need to work seven days a week. But many others choose to. I certainly had. I was like a marionette doll whose strings were all coming from my smartphone: the notifications, buzzes, tweets, and texts. And I wasn’t the only one.

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we've created a culture in which we're still “working” while we play: needing to photograph every moment, then crafting witty posts of our “fun, relaxing activities” on Instagram, then obsessively checking responses. We can barely catch our breath in the tsunami of personal and work digital input, which results in us not being truly present for any of it.

The concept of a day of rest was first developed by ancient Hebrews several thousand years ago. It changed the world, defining time on and time off and creating a weekly window for the big-picture thinking that drives culture forward. When the Industrial Revolution arrived, the world changed again. Factories could run around the clock, but people, we quickly realized, could not. In the 19th and 20th centuries, labor unions began demanding 8-hour workdays and 40-hour workweeks. The campaign was hard-fought, with national strikes and several bloody battles in cities between police or security officers and workers demanding a shorter workday. With the passage of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, the two-day weekend became the norm across the United States.

Almost a century later, it’s time to reconsider what Labor Day actually means to us — what we define as work and as rest in our 24/7 always-on, always-available culture. We need to take a hard look at the boundaries we have let slide and some boundaries we might need to bring back.

When my father left this world and my daughter entered it, I was in a place of work, hurry, and distraction. I wasn’t focused enough when I was with the people I loved, or when I was working. I needed a way to both slow down time and create parameters separating work and home life.

We started turning off all screens from Friday night to Saturday night for what we call our Technology Shabbats. This did exactly what I hoped, creat-
ing a work/life border and slowing the pace, at least for a day. I think of Einstein’s theory that time is relative to the motion of things. When that smartphone is on, everything is sped up. When you turn it off, time seems to slow down. When you make a ritual of turning it off each week for a full day, you can actually rest, truly, deeply, and in a restorative way we rarely get in our 24/7 culture.

A true day of rest was a radical innovation when it first originated, and the concept of a Sabbath is still radical and relevant today. My family’s version differs from the original. The rules are simple: For 24 hours, we stay off all screens — no work, no outside getting in. We create a boundary around us. We’ve now done this for nearly 10 years. Having a protected full day each week for me, my husband, and two daughters (now 16 and 10) has been profound.

I saw a change immediately. We were happier and calmer.

Soon, my film studio was as well. If I was offline, my staff could be, too. The culture of the office changed completely. And even though we were working fewer hours, our productivity actually increased. Research backs up this phenomenon. A 2014 Stanford study of office workers showed that an employee working 60 hours a week will actually produce less than an employee working 40 hours. In my office we also started keeping our smartphones out of sight during the workday, so their buzzes and pings don’t distract us or others, only checking them on breaks.

IT WAS NOT so long ago that the weekend was, literally, sacred. In many states, blue laws — problematic though they were — created a protected time off. The concept was baked into American ideals: Judith Shulevitz has written that one of the reasons Puritans came to America was to observe a stricter Sabbath. The day of rest is a right and a rite, common to diverse religions and cultures worldwide, from the Jewish Sabbath, to the Christian Sunday, to the Muslim communal day of prayer on Friday. In Buddhist practice, there’s a period of reflection known as Upasatha, and the Cherokee tradition has rest days known as “un-time.” Sadly, these kinds of rest days have all but disappeared for many.

The weekly day without screens can be adapted by anyone, from any background. While my family is Jewish, and has a Shabbat dinner with family and friends on Friday night, we don’t observe Shabbat in a religious way but keep the core elements of presence, gratitude, and reflection.

You could try unplugging on the work-free days you do get, even if it’s doable only every few weeks or every few months. If you are able, once a week is ideal. For me, it’s restorative in a way that nothing else is. You get back much more than what you give up.

Taking a weekly screen break restores balance to our selves, our families, our workplaces, and ultimately, society. This is why we need boundaries around work days and days off (as well as fair wages and benefits so people don’t have work more than five days a week or more than one job). Today, we need to consider what Labor Day represents in our 24/7 world and how time off needs to be rethought and re-fought for our digital age.

I found the solution in an ancient practice, remade for the modern era. I invite you to join me.

Tiffany Shlain is an Emmy-nominated filmmaker and creator of the Webby Awards. Her book, “24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day A Week,” will be published Sept. 24. She invites everyone to introduce Tech Shabbats into their lives through her global initiative Character Day this fall. Learn more at 24SixLife.com.