CHAPTER 6

Technology—Scourge or Savior of Work?

We are becoming the servants in thought, as in action, of the machine we have created to serve us.

John Kenneth Galbraith (1908–2006)

Joe Macri sits in Microsoft’s Dublin-based headquarters for Western Europe, talking with the members of his team. There’s Erik in Munich, Lukas in Vienna, Marco in Zurich, Ian at home in Reading and Pedro in his Algarve Villa.

“No we don’t have an office in the Algarve. I’m not sure why Pedro’s here if he’s on holiday. I’ll need to speak to him,” jokes Macri, Microsoft’s general manager for business marketing in Western Europe. A few months ago such meetings would have been held in Amsterdam at least once every three months.

Today the team meets face-to-face no more than once or twice a year. The rest of the time they meet using Microsoft’s “unified communications” technology—a system that allows team conferencing using multi-angled cameras enabling everyone in the meeting to see everyone else at the same time.

The technology allows instant messaging too, so while one member of the team is speaking, two or three others could be exchanging messages about the content of the meeting.

“Now, if anyone falls asleep—and it has been known in past phone conferences,” says Macri, “we can all see who it is.” He admits that conferencing technology cannot replicate the eye contact and subtleties of human interactions that feed and nourish relationships. That’s why some meetings are still held face-to-face. “But once you know people it makes it easier to meet this way and there is no doubt it is saving us money,” he says.

Macri believes he will be at least halving his team travel budget currently running at more than a million euros a year. “It saves money, increases productivity and reduces our carbon
footprint as a company,” he says. “Also, from a personal point of view I no longer have to get up at some God awful hour to catch my flight to the Netherlands.”

Microsoft, of course, has a vested interest in developing communications software for the workplace. But this also means it has needed to acquire a deep understanding of working patterns, not least to ensure that its own workforce is maintaining healthy working and living habits.

It hasn’t always been the case. In the early days of the company, when developers were working on the first Windows program, some resorted to sleeping under their desks, such was the obsession to get the new operating system completed.

Those days are in the past although the company still runs offices that are open all the time for staff to work whenever they want. Home working is not discouraged either but Theo Rinsema, general manager of Microsoft Netherlands, says the company has become much more aware about the risks associated with overwork.

“We know that people don’t stop working when we don’t see them and we know from the feedback in employee satisfaction questionnaires that this can be a problem. So now we try to help people make the right decisions about work,” he says. “When work shifts from a place where you do things to an activity that you control, you need to develop the competence of when to stop working.”

It’s worth dwelling on this point. Who would have thought that “downing tools” as it was called in the heyday of the trade unions would one day be described as a “competence”? Yet there are thousands of us working today who find it difficult to stop working. Like drinkers at the all-night bar we don’t know how to say “enough.” New technologies are emerging constantly but most take time to embed themselves in our lives and some have unforeseen social consequences, sometimes beneficial, sometimes detrimental, occasionally both.

Technologies have always excited people, often in ways that magnify and overstate the social benefit of innovation. Walking up 22,841 ft (6962 m) Acongagua in January 2003, I had regular updates on our altitude from climbing partner Charles Godden reading from his Garmin GPS (Global Positioning System) device. Godden likes gadgets and has a gadget fund to satiate his appetite.