A GUIDE TO DIGITAL WELLBEING

For organisations using technology for social good.

As our personal, networked devices have become ubiquitous in all parts of our lives, our anxiety about what they might do to our individual as well as collective wellbeing has grown. But there is no way to – and also no sense in – turning back.

Instead we must strike a balance between remaining critical and responsible when considering technology and at the same time being open to new possibilities for growth and power which technology has to offer. Here are some steps to consider.

Know yourself:

Wellbeing can be defined as a measure of freedom to spend one's time in a way that aligns with values. So, an introspection about your wishes, needs and values is ultimately the only way to understand, and then shape, your relationship with your digital devices for your own wellbeing. So, what's important to you? It might be focus, in the sense of having time and space to deeply concentrate on a task or topic. Or, perhaps what you cherish most is reliability, meaning that you prioritise responding to people within a certain time. Or, if curiosity is a core value, frequent change and exploring new software might really resonate.

Know your tech use:

There are tools that give us transparency about how much time we're spending on our devices or on various websites. Some of the first such initiatives were developed by the open-source community, such as browser plug-ins Mind The Time and RescueTime, or by campaigners for digital wellbeing, such as Common Sense's tool Moment. Interestingly, in recent months Apple and Google have both launched their own suite of tools to offer this kind of transparency. At this point, it's not necessarily simply about reducing overall intake, it means becoming more conscious of your tech use, as a first step toward bringing it in line with your priorities.

Gain focus:

Digital devices make it so easy to jump between different tasks and platforms, that our attention becomes more and more fragmented. This keeps us not only from real productivity, but can also leave us feeling confused, exhausted, and overwhelmed. Some applications offer help by mediating the information users receive in order to sustain focus. Isolator is a programme that blocks out all the windows except the one the user is currently working on, preventing them from seeing other activity such as email notifications. Other applications (like the browser plug-in LeechBlock) disable functionality within devices, based on the logic of "saving" users from themselves by curtailing options. Taking a more blanket approach, Freedom blocks internet access completely for a specified period of focus.

Clarify shared expectations in your organisation:

We experience a shift towards instantaneous communication. Starting with email and compounded further by the adoption of instant messaging tools within organisations, the fact that messages are delivered instantly has created the additional pressure to read and reply immediately. But is this always necessary? It can be valuable to have a conversation among your colleagues about when everybody is expected to be on call – and when not. If you work decentrally and communicate digitally with each other for the most part, you might want to create regular occasions to meet in person – for your own wellbeing as well as a sense of belonging in the team.

Let's change the system:

It's extremely common for websites and apps to make money not by charging people to use them, but instead letting them use it for free and selling advertising and/or monetising user data. This naturally creates a strong incentive to keep users fixed to their screens for as long as possible, whether this is actually good for them or not. More and more organisations are working to move beyond this paradigm, explicitly rejecting the conventional financing model, instead typically depending on crowdfunding, volunteered time or other sustainability models. You can not only use the hardware and software developed by them, but also help drawing people's attention to matters of digital wellbeing, and demonstrating the plausibility of other routes we might collectively take. Hence the impact of DSI in this sphere can extend way beyond the users of a specific product – it can also help to shift an entire system.

All in all, there are no quick fixes. Yes, there are some strategies and even digital tools (see below) that can help us on our way, but rather than diving straight into those, there are a couple of important steps first. It's not about accepting a set of prescribed ideas, the important part lies in the process of reflection. We have to be conscious about our digital diet. When are we online, why and which effect has it to be always connected, to feel always "switched on"?

Resources for further information:

- Our trend analysis "Wellbeing for Social Innovators" focuses on the question what new technologies have done to our wellbeing, and what we can do about it in the near future.

- The website humanetech.com contains not only their own information and analysis, but also practical tips and links to apps that can help people manage their relationship with tech.

- Learn more about how digital technologies can enable us to tackle social challenges in areas ranging from healthcare and education to democracy and the environment at   .