

### Executives say 'digital detox' retreats are key to their success

A few years back, Tanya Goodin had a come-to-Jesus moment. Goodin had taken her iPhone to get repaired at an Apple Store and was told she had to leave it there overnight.

"I had a mini-meltdown. Total panic at the thought of being without my phone, which felt like a lifeline. Heart racing, coming out in a cold sweat, the lot," said Goodin, who at the time was running a digital marketing agency in Great Britain.

Disturbed by the experience, along with the fact that she hadn't read an actual book in two years because her "concentration span was shot to pieces," she decided to start a new company, It's Time to Log Off, which now runs digital detox retreats in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Executives, primarily in media, financial services and law, frequent her retreats. They agree to give up their smartphones during their stay, and spend a lot of time in nature learning to be present and talking about the pressures they feel to be accessible 24/7.



They also learn how their never-off habits set the tone for the rest of their organizations and reinforce the myth that if you're not connected by an electronic leash all the time you're not doing a good job.

In fact, it's especially critical for leaders at a company to unplug periodically to do their jobs well. Research shows that never-ending digital distractions hurt your capacity to focus, think creatively and make decisions. Yet it's easy to become Pavlovian in response to constant emails, texts, calendar reminders and news alerts. Even in the absence of notifications, you probably still reach for your phone several times an hour.

"We're bombarded with information all the time. Our brain filtering system — like the speed of a computer — has to get faster and faster," said neuroscientist and leadership coach Tara Swart, author of "Neuroscience for Leadership: Harnessing the Brain Gain Advantage."

Constant digital distractions also undercut your ability to do other key parts of your job well: strategizing the best course for your company, enabling innovation, solving problems, and making the people you speak with feel valued and heard.

### **Cutting off for the sake of your company and yourself**

Untethering from your smart phone is difficult for most people, at first. But eventually, it can bring clarity and strengthen performance.

Goodin said some retreat participants decided to restructure their businesses during their time away from their phones. Others came away with a lot of creative ideas.

Roger Crandall, CEO of Mass Mutual, has experienced the benefits of a digital detox a few times.

"It is really helpful to be able to disengage. ... I say to people all the time, 'Put the phone down.' There are very few of us who really need to be in touch all the time. I do think we're losing the ability to think deeply," Crandall said.

He's going on a weeklong retreat and will leave his family and chief of staff an emergency number in case they must reach him. Otherwise, he'll be focused on reading "real books," hiking and meditating.



Unplugging at The Ranch Malibu is made easier by beautiful surroundings and accommodations.

Like Goodin, Milena Regos, also decided to start a digital detox company called Unhustle. It's holding its first retreat this spring in Baja California Sur.

Regos has come a long way from her days running a marketing agency, when she'd sit in front of a computer screen 16 hours a day and sleep with her iPhone in case something came up.

Being so digitally dependent ruined her ability to focus, she says.

As part of her own digital detox, Regos took up kite surfing — which required her complete attention to avoid injury. The experience made her realize "Wow, there is life outside my phone," she said.

Paul Candrick, who runs a construction company in Australia, took part in a trial run for Regos' upcoming retreat.

As a result, Candrick said, "I've been able to turn off notifications and put the phone on silent from 6 p.m. each night. I can check it, but rarely reply. After two weeks, I've found most people don't expect an answer 'til the next day anyway."

### **Retreats that make a digital detox possible**

While some retreats like Goodin's are designed explicitly for digital detoxes, many simply encourage unplugging and by virtue of their remote locations make being connected pretty difficult.

For instance, at The Ranch Malibu, "it's built into our programming and culture and philosophy," said cofounder Alex Glasscock.

There is no cell service on the property and only limited Wi-Fi. Rooms have landline phones but no TVs. Plus, guests are engaged from 5:30 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. in activities from hiking and fitness classes to cooking lessons and massage sessions.



For those who want to explore mindfulness more intensely, they might opt for a four-day silent retreat in luxurious accommodations at The DEN Meditation in Ojai, California.

The property has only limited Wi-Fi and cellphone service is spotty. In any case, phones are prohibited during meditation, which can occupy most of your time from 7:30 am to 9:30 pm.

"You completely detox from all electronics — no TV, no music, no phones — so that you can kind of deal with what shows up," said manager and teacher Thalia Ayres Randolph.

DEN Meditation also offers non-silent mediation retreats, in destination spots like Greece and Bali. Those retreats are longer and guests typically spend five hours a day in meditation and the rest on excursions.