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Cameron Walker

In ‘Digital Exhaustion,’ Paul Leonardi shares how to make technology work for you

Have you ever come back from a blissful, disconnected vacation — swearing that you would bring this new, low-tech approach back to your daily life — and a few days later, felt as if the stream of texts, emails and alerts have more of a hold on you than ever?

For [Paul Leonardi](#), UC Santa Barbara Duca Family Professor of Technology Management, there’s a better way. In his new book, “[Digital Exhaustion: Simple Rules for Reclaiming Your Life](#)” (Penguin RandomHouse, 2025), he draws on 20 years of research to examine why our digital life is so overwhelming — and what we can do to make our tools work for us.

Leonardi’s research focuses on how people use new tools to organize more effectively, increase efficiency and improve knowledge sharing within organizations. “But there’s always this dark side,” he noted. “At the same time that these tools do great things for us, if we don’t approach them in the right ways, they can lead to a sense of fatigue and burnout.”

In working with companies to design effective organizational networks to make the best use of new technologies, Leonardi has often surveyed employees about digital burnout. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, he started to hear such stories

unprompted. Work meetings and weekend meals with family and friends turned into an essential, yet endless, series of Zoom meetings, FaceTimes and group chats. “It was an overwhelming time because we were so dependent on our tools,” Leonardi said.

While on tour for an earlier book, “[Digital Mindset: What It Really Takes to Thrive in the Age of Data, Algorithms, and AI](#)” (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022), co-authored with Harvard professor Tsedal Neeley, Leonardi made a crucial observation. He noticed that employers, while excited about boosting digital fluency in the workplace, were also concerned about their employees’ potential digital burnout from new tools like generative AI in addition to the existing slate of technology. Feedback from employees at all levels of the workplace prompted the new book, in which Leonardi explores the causes of digital exhaustion and provides an extensive set of tips for digital newcomers and digital natives alike to reclaim ownership of their tools — and, hopefully, their lives.

The importance of being intentional

Most people sit down at the computer to work with the best of intentions. “Then you open up a window, click on an app, go to a website — and you find yourself spiraling out into all of these different spaces,” said Leonardi, who is also chair of UCSB’s Department of Technology Management, “All the clicking, the exposure to new information, the reading, the processing, the bookmarking, and all the rest can be exhausting. And then you wonder where the last 45 minutes went. It happens at home, too. Picking up the phone to check a message can turn into a deep dive into your distraction of choice.” (For Leonardi, it’s Zillow.)

In his book, Leonardi describes multiple studies that point to the importance of using apps and devices intentionally, as well as successful steps many of his interviewees have taken that work for them — approaches that include having a designated time to respond to texts, making apps less easy to access, and disabling shortcuts on devices. “For me,” Leonardi said, “that has meant that every time I open up an app, every time I click on a new website, every time I pick up my phone, I’m always taking a breath and asking myself, ‘OK, what am I trying to accomplish?’”

Pick some apps — and ditch the rest

Leonardi has worked with clients on reducing the number of platforms they use, since using too many can create subtle energy sinks that add up. “For me, one of the biggest stresses and drains is in video-conferencing apps,” he said. “Switching from a Zoom meeting to Microsoft Teams, then hopping over to Google Meetup means reorienting yourself to the small differences — how to share your screen, even mute yourself — each time. That might not sound like much but each of those shifts, interactions and reorientations is mentally exhausting.”

To streamline planning a meeting, he often assumes the role of scheduler so that he can be the one sending out a Zoom link — his preferred platform — or make a request to use that method when others are doing the organizing.

Wait it out

When it comes to work-related messaging, it may feel that the best response is the fastest one. But Leonardi and others have found that what’s called the “email urgency bias” may be adding to digital exhaustion. “Most of the time, we perceive other people’s queries to be much more urgent than they do,” he noted.

To reduce email exhaustion, Leonardi suggests waiting a bit to send a response and then to write a longer, more complete message. “When we send more comprehensive, longer messages, people tend to respond to us less frequently,” he added. “And if you track the metabolic energy that we’re spending, it costs much less energy to write one nice, long email than it does to respond to six short ones, especially when they’re coming at times that aren’t convenient for us.”

In the end, approaches to reducing digital exhaustion will be different for different people. “Everybody has the power to reduce their digital exhaustion,” said Leonardi, who includes a chart in the book’s appendix to help readers tailor his strategies to their individual needs. “But we all experience digital exhaustion differently, so we each need different solutions.”

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