

Digital Workplace Impact

with Paul Miller



Episode 71

The vitamins for digital wellbeing

Transcript



If you spend 12 hours staring at a computer, you're not going to feel great at the end of it, so actually taking that time to recuperate, reset your mind, is important. Sometimes you can feel quite challenged by emails that come in – you can feel quite emotionally attached to them, perhaps annoyed, or things can affect your mindset quite a lot and it's good to find that space.

Dr Christine Grant, School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University

It happens at the moment that we're mainly working digitally, but everyone's talking about: How do you work? How does that work for you? What's happening? And, you know, being perhaps a little bit more open about what's going on in terms of mental health as well. So, I think this sharpening of focus is not just the fact that we're working digitally, but that awareness.

Elizabeth Marsh, DWG Director of Research

Digital wellbeing has become a hot topic for 2020. With so many of us now working from home, juggling time and technology, and always being “on”, escaping from work can be very difficult.

For our guests in this episode, finding the right balance has been at the centre of much of their work. Elizabeth Marsh, DWG's Research Director, is a strong advocate of digital literacy and digital mindfulness at work, and has recently authored [Digital workplace overload: How to reduce employee technostress](#). Dr Christine Grant is a leading applied researcher in the psychology of remote e-working and agile working, and has co-edited [Agile working and well-being in the digital age](#).

Together with Paul, they discuss the highs and the lows of remote working, share insights from their respective research projects, and offer practical advice on how we can all start to build a more balanced working day.

Note: This transcript has been edited for space and clarity.

Paul

So, today's episode is on the very 2020 topic of digital wellbeing or sort of digital fatigue as well – and I liked the idea that comes up in the episode of “getting vitamins of digital wellbeing”, so treating digital health as something that you need to feed with vitamins to do with setting boundaries and making sure that you control the technology rather than let it control you. There's one example in it of: What do you do if your boss wants to work late at night and expects you to at the same time? I think my answer would be that's it's not acceptable and a lot of this is around making sure that you are working in an environment that suits the way you work.

My two guests today are Elizabeth Marsh and Dr Christine Grant. Elizabeth is Digital Workplace Group (DWG)'s Director of Research and author of our latest report “[Digital workplace overload: How to reduce employee technostress](#)”, available free on the DWG website. She's worked as a practitioner, researcher and consultant in the digital workplace field for over 20 years, and is a strong advocate for digital literacy and digital wellbeing at work. Elizabeth is currently

doing a PhD at the University of Nottingham in the UK, focusing on employee technostress and the potential of mindfulness to help reduce it. She's really good on mindfulness and has a [course on Udemy](#), which I would recommend. She also co-authored with me the book [The Digital Renaissance of Work: Delivering digital workplaces fit for the future](#), which was shortlisted as Management Book of the Year; it didn't win but it was shortlisted!

And my other guest is Dr Christine Grant. She is the deputy head of the School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences at Coventry University in the UK. Christine is a chartered and registered occupational psychologist and applied researcher in the psychology of remotely e-working. Her work explores the impact of technology on remote e-workers, work–life balance, job effectiveness and wellbeing. She has recently coedited a book on agile working and wellbeing and is currently developing a digital competency framework for organizations. The book is called [Agile Working and Well-Being in the Digital Age](#) and the details will be in the show notes for today's episode.

So, digital wellbeing – we're recording this in October 2020, and I'm asking myself: Was digital wellbeing a thing before COVID? And, because it's certainly become a thing in 2020, Christine, is digital wellbeing new or has it been around for a while?

Christine

Well, I'd say it certainly isn't new but it's a phenomenon that's come about and reached more amplification since the pandemic and through COVID. But for me, digital wellbeing has always been very high on the agenda and very important before lockdown. I would say that with the government advising us to work more from home, individuals and organizations are having to move quickly to put in place new ways of working to meet that requirement. But, you know, many people are already working from home, one or two days a week ad hoc, so what's really changed is this has gone from a kind of short-term episode, if you like, into a much longer-term proposition. I think that brings a lot more challenges, should I say, because lots of people would have been managing the one or two days potentially, and lots of people might have thought that was a kind of easy option – but it was never an easy option because managing different roles, juggling time, managing these flexible hours is not an easy thing to do whilst working with technology.

Paul And what effect has the events of this year had on the topic of digital wellbeing? Has it helped our digital wellbeing? Has it harmed it? Or has it just changed it?

Christine I think that the issues around digital wellbeing were starting to emerge quite strongly. Some of my research has looked at the switched-on culture, so people not being able to switch off from work, that's been around for quite some time now. So I wouldn't say that's new. But of course, as I say, now we've been sort of pushed into using technology so much more, obviously it's heightened the issues around that. And yes, I've found through my own research that actually it can affect mental health. It's really very important for us to switch off and recuperate from work. I was just describing earlier, I have a number of pieces of technology here that I'm trying to juggle: two phones, three computers (laughs)! All of them have got alerts on them at different times. So it's very hard to juggle that sort of thing and to really effectively have some downtime away from this.

Paul Hmm, and Elizabeth, maybe we should start with this, how would you describe what is digital wellbeing?

Elizabeth It's interesting, I read a paper recently that was talking about "digital illbeing", so we can almost look at the inverse and understand what goes wrong in order to understand what we need to work better. But I'm looking into the area of technostress and that's been studied for maybe 10, nearly 15 years, and now it's coming into sharper focus: you know, things like a sense of overload, it can be a sense of addiction, the stress that can build up from being always connected. A variety of effects that can go wrong and I think those are coming into sharper focus, as Christine's been saying. We've known those things for a while and they've been researched, but they're really coming into focus now, and I think as we're moving, again as you said Christine, from remote working being something that we might do occasionally into something that's much longer term – and as we go into the winter it's kind of coming into a much stronger focus – that we need to understand the things that can go wrong and how can we address those.

Paul Yes, and it's been an extraordinary kind of process hasn't it? I can't count the number of organizations who've talked to me about fatigue in their workforce –

and it's sort of digital fatigue, but it's also the fatigue of not having the normal routine, the kind of pressures of being in an environment where nobody knows how long things are going to go on for, how it's going to change. I do kind of randomly ask myself whether for people in New Zealand, who've now got life back to, inverted commas, "normal", are they kind of free of all of these stresses and strains because life around them is sort of completely as it was before? Or is the kind of halo effect of a world going through all of the turmoil affecting them? Do you have any views on that?

Elizabeth

Yes, and it's interesting, I was reading a paper earlier about how we've gone from resistance to revolution. It's this idea that we've been making this really quite slow shift to this way of working for decades and there's been so much resistance, but in a matter of months a lot of that has been broken through and we realize lots of benefits of that. So how do you go back and do people *want* to go back? And I think the consensus among a lot of managers and employees is that we now want to find a new way and it's maybe some kind of hybrid between the different ways that we've experienced the physical workplace and the digital workplace. And, again, what are the wellbeing implications if some people are working in the office some of the time, some people are at home all of the time? And so we need to reshape the way that we understand our digital connections and the way that we work together through them.

Paul

Hmm and, Christine, I'm just thinking, is the topic really about digital wellbeing or is it just about wellbeing or balance? Because is it that there's been so much more technology used in work? And the difference I feel has happened this year is that, in the past when people were choosing to work remotely, the point was they *chose* to work remotely. This time, 50% of the workforce – and obviously there are whole bunches of people who aren't working in this way – have been *forced* to work remotely, so there's been no choice in the situation. I'm wondering whether the problem of wellbeing is around the technology, or is it just a broader environmental issue about how we're working?

Christine

Hmm, that's interesting actually, because my own research has looked at the impact of technology on wellbeing, work–life balance and job effectiveness. So it's looked at those three areas in some detail, and I think that switching from working from home all the time in the short term has brought some challenges in terms of role conflict and that sort of thing: home schooling and looking after

vulnerable friends and family, and so on. But I think working in this longer period really can cause some strain that Elizabeth alluded to there around technostress. You know, we do have to consider the ergonomics of how we're sitting, the long hours that we're putting in – and I think technology does drive that, the fact that work is constantly available. It's really up to us to put in these boundaries between our work and non-working time. But it's hard to do when you're not very practised at that and perhaps you're quite driven for productivity and performance, maybe worried about losing your job – and presenteeism does come into this type of working as well. We noticed that people would just carry on working, whether they're sick or not, in this environment. So I think technology facilitates this, but can also be quite detrimental to our wellbeing. So to answer your question, I think it's a bit of both, actually.

Paul Hmm, but people weren't really paying as much attention as they are now to the topic of wellbeing when we had commuting happening relentlessly every single day for whole swathes of the population, and people went “Well, that's just what's required to do your job”. There wasn't a whole lot of focus around that. Why the difference? Why did people ignore that and not ignore this?

Christine It's really interesting, isn't it, that they would ignore the commuting and I think that's the one thing about remote work and agile working. It actually provides that flexibility not to commute at some of those times, even if you are going into the office. So it reduces that strain all round, both on the transport network but also on individuals' wellbeing. Yes, I do find it interesting. I used to commute myself into London for 15 years and being on a packed train certainly does reduce your wellbeing. However, sitting at your computer is also not great and certainly using things like virtual conferencing can give you quite bad headaches and issues with vision and suchlike. So, you know, it's almost trading one for another. But I think the thing with digital wellbeing is that we have a feeling that we could and should be managing it better, but aren't quite.

Paul Right, and Elizabeth, do you think that the reason maybe this sort of artificial distinction I've drawn with commuting, is because commuting had become established? It was a cultural norm, whereas, if you like, this unprecedented level of remote working is new, although, as Christine says, it's been happening for quite a long time. But do you think it's because we're now for the first time getting our heads around what happens when we're working on a two-dimensional screen for such long periods?

Elizabeth

I think it has changed what's acceptable. I think of a friend of mine, who is a piano teacher who has been moved to virtual teaching, as so many people have, and now actually has to have quite a serious operation, which would have knocked out his teaching practice for months, but now he can carry on teaching at home and having an income from that. So, you know, beforehand, if you'd suggested to people, "Perhaps I could teach you online", that wouldn't have been of any interest. People would have said, "Why would I do that?". So, similarly with other things in the workplace, as you say, the norms that we had – people just accepted them. What's interesting about this time I think is, it's this awareness that we're developing of *how* we're working. And I think, it happens at the moment that we're mainly working digitally, but everyone's talking about: How do you work? How does that work for you? What's happening? And, you know, being perhaps a little bit more open about what's going on in terms of mental health as well. So I think this sharpening of focus is not just the fact that we're digitally working, but that awareness. And I think, and you know I come from a sort of mindfulness angle... so I'm interested in how do we bring more present moment awareness to what's happening in our digital work? So, for example, have I just become so absorbed in my digital work life that I haven't paused? I haven't taken a break. I'm not aware that my shoulders are hunched, whatever it is. So the more we can bring awareness to our work practices, physical and digital, the better, I think.

Paul

Hmm, and Christine, can you give me an example of what a positive version of digital wellbeing looks like? Perhaps talk me through a day that would demonstrate what you would think of as good practice.

Christine

Well, I actually think that looks different for everybody, so I think it would be quite hard to do that with assuming that we're all the same. As I mentioned earlier, we have different and multiple roles and commitments that we're all managing. So, for me, it's about working out what's right for you and your family and friends and those around you, because we have individual differences, not only in what we do, but also in our personalities. We have different strains and stresses to work through and our downtime will be different too – you know, how we see that, where we want that to be, what our commitment is to work. Now, I happen to work and quite like working long days (laughs) and working quite hard, but also when I put in my time out can be

quite a lot more flexible when you're working in this kind of agile way. So, I might put it in a very different place to someone else.

So I think my advice would be really to gain a greater awareness of what you're presently doing, maybe keep a techno diary or something, to work out where your times are, where you've got space. Think about balancing the vitamins of wellbeing, so the physical diet, mental health, social – are you getting all those things together in your day, your week? And if anything's missing, then obviously look for some of the gaps – and I'm sure that Elizabeth would support me in this as well (laughs), in that you do need to be kind to yourself because some days are just so incredibly busy and we know that you are more productive when you work from home. We actually work very hard in this environment, so if you have to work hard on that day, maybe you need to ease up on the next day or another time when you can. It is hard to switch off from some types of jobs, but one of the things I found helpful is potentially to schedule time out in my diary, perhaps to ask others to take me for a walk or help me to switch off. So I think there are some things there and I wouldn't want to say what a perfect day would be for someone else. I probably know what it is for me but, yes, I think you have to take some actions to work that out for yourself to some extent.

Paul

But I'm presuming, Elizabeth, if somebody is telling you, “Look, I've got huge problems... I'm now working remotely, I can't switch off. I enjoy what I do but it's one online meeting after another. People don't seem to leave any time...”. What would your advice be? Get a different job (laughs)?

Elizabeth

(Laughs) Yes. I mean, you can't confuse the digital issues with if the workload is unacceptable or undoable. If the management is poor, those things, it's just poor management! Sometimes I think we see the technology being blamed for that. So, you know, it's not all about technology, but I think something that really strikes me is around making a difference as a team. So, we're working, but we're working as part of a team; we have a manager or we may manage a team, and we have people that we're collaborating with – and actually to have conversations about how we're working and talk about: How is that working? Do we email all the time? Are we using certain tools? Which people in the time are happy in the team are happy to be perhaps always on and instant messaging? And other people who might really need more focus time? So, we're just about to publish a report at DWG on digital overload and in that

there's individual and team skills and tactics to help you stay focused, to handle interruptions, to communicate in a more optimal way, and also just deal with the range of information and tools. So I think that, as Christine said, it's not one size fits all. And I love the idea of keeping a techno diary because it really brings it home to us what we're doing when we actually write it down, but doing that as an individual, but as I say, also doing it as teams as well.

Paul And I suspect, Elizabeth, you've got a perfectly even wellbeing day (laughter) – you know, you're an exponent of mindfulness. You've got what looks like a terrific new course on, am I pronouncing it right, Udemy?

Elizabeth Yes.

Paul Udemy, okay, which I highly recommend, all on digital mindfulness in the workplace. So talk me through one of your beautifully balanced days.

Elizabeth (Laughs) If only I had it all sorted out, Paul! I find it's a mixture, so some things are really clear-cut for me and I like to have very clear boundaries. So, and I was listening to you interviewing Lauren Vargas actually, and similar to her, I like to start the day without technology. I like to start with now walking my puppy, but also I like to do a little bit of exercise, I like to meditate. I like to choose when I start with things like email and looking into messaging, because it just gives me the whole feeling for my day that this is not all about technology and responding and reacting, and that gives me a chance to think about what are the things I really need to do today and want to do. And that might change once I check my messages. And equally, having boundaries around certain times in the day where I like to move from working on a project, perhaps doing some research, to something quite different, whether it's going for a walk or doing a little bit of gardening, or whatever it is. So having definite times when I kind of move away from the computer and I find, if I become too focused, if I get too sucked in, I come up against a kind of a digital slump and I find that I've lost energy. So, I think with our digital tools, it's always an ongoing process to notice our behaviours and then suddenly see, "Ooh actually, maybe this doesn't quite work so well and what can I do to fix that?"

Paul I was just wondering, Christine, whether we're sort of missing some of the *upsides* of, I'll call it "the digital ways of working". I mean, obviously, there's potentially the overload and stress that can come with it but, you know, if I think

of my own experience, or just thinking back in time, there was a time when we had to go into a workplace because that was the only place where the tools of work were and it was actually a very regimented, restrictive way of working, and I've certainly found having worked in this way pretty much for the last 35 years, that actually it gives you an awful lot of liberation and freedom, flexibility, and I sort of delight in being able to run a reasonably sized consulting company from wherever I am, using a whole manner of different technologies – I think it is a beautiful experience.

Christine

Yes, I think there are lots of positives and I think one of the things coming through possibly the pandemic side of things is that we're actually feeling more connected to our homes and to our families, but perhaps a little less connected to our work colleagues. So I think it is finding that balance and you're obviously very experienced at doing that. So it's about how we do that and how we look after ourselves, really, whilst we're doing this kind of work. I mean, there are massive positives around managing your own day if you do have that level of autonomy in your role. Of course, not everybody has that to enable them to do that. Some people do find it very difficult to switch off if they've constantly got meetings. I can say that, even speaking for myself, and I'm very experienced too, I've worked from home for many years as well, off and on, in a kind of agile way, but actually through this period of time I can have days where I could literally have virtual meetings from 9am in the morning till 5pm in the evening. So it is about self-managing that time to some extent if you can, if you have that, as I say, autonomy. But certainly in terms of wellbeing, it can be very effective; you can take time out to go for a walk, you can talk to your partner, you can collect your children from school, whatever... you can try to be more flexible around some of that time. But it does take management and awareness, very much self-awareness, to be able to do that effectively.

Paul

Yes, and I think one of the things is that it's this environment in which you work, by which I mean, how does the team, your boss, people who report to you – how are you all working collectively? Because that's going to affect, even dictate, how you work. So I feel that we're often talking about digital wellbeing on an individual level, digital fatigue and so on, but for instance, if I heard that there were people in the company, and there will be, who are struggling because of digital overload or whatever, it's about trying to change the environment and the expectations so that they're able to work in a way that

feels more appropriate. There's quite a lot to do with teams and organizational structure in this?

Christine I just wanted to say that I think preferences play a part in this as well. So, if you have a manager who prefers to work at certain times of day, say from, I don't know, from 8pm in the evening till midnight (laughs), that can be quite difficult to manage as well, and if your team, as you are saying, also prefers to work all sorts of different hours, you can find that *you* might be spread amongst that whole 24 hours in different ways. So it is about, and I think Elizabeth talked about this, it's about how the team comes together and how it makes that agreement about, "Okay, so this is when we're going to have these meetings. This is when we're going to work in this way" – because agile working naturally lends itself to any time working in any place, doesn't it?

Paul Yes, and I've got to ask you, Christine, do you follow your own advice? Talk me through... I mean you've done it a little bit already... but talk me through an ideal day where you feel that you've got the different aspects of this in better balance.

Christine Thank you, yes. Well, for me, it has all been about developing self-awareness. So I know that I like to work long and hard, but I also know that it isn't always good for me to work long periods of time, and I think I agree with Elizabeth also on the digital slump, which can happen about 2pm after the fifth virtual meeting. So it's very important to ring-fence time and, as I said earlier, I've been finding myself more and more putting time in my diary where I don't want to be interrupted and I want that to be productive time. But I also will sort of diarize time to go and walk as well – to get that fitness in and to get some fresh air, because if you spend 12 hours staring at a computer, you're not going to feel great at the end of it, so actually taking that time to recuperate, reset your mind, is important. Sometimes you can feel quite challenged by emails that come in – you know, you can feel quite emotionally attached to them, perhaps annoyed, or things can affect your mindset quite a lot and it's good to find that space.

So I think I ought to answer your question now, I've been avoiding it for a while (laughs)! What would my ideal day look like? I would schedule time in the morning, very early, to get through my emails because, for me, if I don't get through those, then my whole day can be in disarray. My day job is very

operational, so I do need to get those things under control as much as possible. But yes, then I might stop, have a coffee, probably connect with a colleague and perhaps have a more informal chat about the day and about the day before. That really helps me as well to sort of ground myself before getting into more of the meetings that would then naturally occur. So usually, I would follow that with several meetings and then squeeze in a lunch break if possible (laughs). Not so easy, but a perfect day would be to have lunch when away from this room where I spend most of my time with the technology, to actually be away from it and in the summer it was great to sit outside and have 15 minutes to do that. But yes, you know, I like work, so I am quite attached to doing it in this way; I'm quite used to doing this. But I think boundaries are key, I really do. And I think when you switch off, find that time that's right for you and switch off, and then go and do something else that's completely different – and it could be watching mindless TV for a while, a couple of box sets or whatever it is, going outside, whatever that thing is – I think it's really important to do that and that's what I would do in my downtime, as well speak to my daughter and my family and suchlike. So just find something else to do that isn't technology related necessarily.

Paul

Yes, and Elizabeth, so if you find yourself in a team or with a manager who is expecting you to work in a particular way – maybe there are certain new norms that have been set up especially for COVID, and people have slipped into a new routine and it's not working for you – how would you recommend that you somebody deals with that?

Elizabeth

Yes, I think it's a good question for these times. I've certainly heard stories of people newly working from home and they're literally sort of stuck in the back bedroom all day and really struggling with that, and it just it has to be through having those conversations within the team, hopefully feeling safe enough with your manager to just talk about what is and isn't working. And hopefully in the context where we are having more conversations about things like our mental health and how people are doing, we've got more of that personal kind of aspect, perhaps in our work conversations; there's a good setting. And then also bringing examples. I mean, we publish reports and case studies which contain examples of how it can be done really intelligently so that the organization has productive staff but also happy staff and people who are going to be able to be productive in the long term, because, you know, while there might be a short-term productivity raise, if people are getting fatigued and

burnt out, then it's not going to benefit anyone, so I think bringing forth those kinds of examples – and there's lots of research coming out around that as well – is another good kind of tactic.

Paul

Yes, and I think that, as we talked about earlier, being kinder to ourselves. We're working through a period when things are not the way we would want in any way. I mean, there are definitely vast numbers of upsides that have been discovered – the number of stories I've heard of people who've said this has really reconnected them with their own locality, community, family. I don't know anybody I've spoken to who's said to me, "I want to go back to the way things were before, with no changes at all". People are talking about reductions of business travel, etc., etc., so there are lots of upsides, but we need to also be a bit, I think, kind to ourselves and realize we're working through situations that are less than ideal. I think that's important.

I don't know why, for some reason I've written down "Ask them about nightmare stories". This is probably a Halloweenish, sort of ghoulish part of me thinking... have you heard of any stories of where people get digital illbeing or digital non-wellbeing completely wrong? You know, are there any interesting examples?

Christine

I think certainly from my research and the qualitative side, I don't know if it's a Halloween story as such, but certainly lots of people who do work through the night – and that can be a choice thing. But also, how effective are you at working at 2am in the morning? I'm not so sure. I think that you do need to consider that time frame of working, because it does put pressure on others as well. And I do think the load the increased weariness that you can have and the cognitive overload we've already talked about is there and obviously these things build up and can lead to poor mental health, increased anxiety, depression. You can get quite a lot of social isolation as well working in this way. We often think that people have got families and people around them, but I've met lots of people who don't have that and, through COVID being isolated anyway, sometimes this has really increased those feelings, so from a psychology point of view, I'm really quite concerned about individuals who are working alone and working strange hours potentially as well, because you can lose your sense of reality, I would say.

Paul Yes, and I was talking to somebody earlier today and they said that they've got, I think, 200 people in the company and they said the level of emotion is much higher than it's ever been. There are people crying on calls; there's kind of deep levels of stress. I've had calls with people where I can sort of see how upset they are, not necessarily that they're crying, but it's just like there's a lot of people need a lot of hugs at the moment who aren't getting them – and it's quite painful.

Christine It's worth saying isn't it, you know, from a psychology point of view, that if we were in the workplace we probably would simply go over and hug them, or you could get that eye contact. But there is something about this virtual community where you see someone is upset but there's very little you can really do – and it is that kind of humane, human level that you really want to connect with somebody. I think we're all possibly missing that and I've had those conversations too where I can see that staff are really, really upset. But I do think this virtual thing makes it – and I'm not talking from personal experience necessarily – it somehow makes it easier to deliver less pleasant news? I don't know if that's something Elizabeth's come across as well, because you're not having that generally focused eye contact. I don't know. That's something else to explore maybe.

Paul Yes, it's an interesting one and I wonder, Elizabeth, whether there's any practices from your digital mindfulness that can help alleviate some of this. I mean, it's not so much advice on “leave half an hour after every meeting to go for a walk” – I think there is a level of kind of boundary best practice advice, but are there also mindfulness things that can help?

Elizabeth Well, I think the theme that you've both touched on of kindness – kindness and compassion – is really important and, actually, if we're going to be resilient through this time, then that's a really key component. So we all have this inner critic that's very, very busy most of the time and, if we look sometimes at how we speak to ourselves and how we drive ourselves with that inner critic, we'd never talk to one of our loved ones in that same way. So actually, again, just becoming aware of that voice and kind of saying, “Okay, let's back off here and see if I can just offer myself kindness at this moment that is really difficult.” You know, there's an emotion. There's a lot of anxiety, uncertainty. And I'm not alone, other people are feeling this too. Whatever my situation is, maybe it's because I have no space in the house because I've got full-on family, or I'm

isolated because I'm on my own, actually just saying, "Well, you know, other people are suffering too". And perhaps I can just take a moment just to offer myself a sense of kindness and kind words. Maybe it's that break just to look out of the window and kind of take in the good as well.

Paul

I also think that there's almost like the *quality* of the conversation, because, you know, I have had the benefit of working and running a company in this way for a long time. We've worked in a distributed way with no offices now for it must be 8 years or so, and you can either have a transactional conversation or you can actually listen to each other; you can have time for some humour. So, you know, we're all using the same technology, but how we use it is going to vary completely – and I think that's important.

But one thing I was thinking about, which I was interested to get a view from you about, Christine, is that it strikes me that one of the problems is that the technology we've got at the moment to use in digital working is really... yeah, it works, but it's very two-dimensional, it's very functional, it's very clinical. You know, I can go from one online meeting, which could be in Zoom, in WebEx, in Teams – it doesn't matter because essentially it's a bunch of people on video, on a screen. And one of the things – and I don't know whether you have any views on this – it strikes me we need much richer and much more immersive types of technology that actually make sense to us as human beings, because it feels very thin to me, the technology at the moment.

Christine

Hmm. Yes, I think so, and what I was alluding to from the psychological point of view is around the eye contact as well as the delay that you possibly get, so you're not quite being totally in real time. I think something around that would be good and I think the other thing that would help, and it isn't necessarily the technology, but thinking about working with others. I noticed in Nottingham they've turned a hotel into a kind of community hub where you can go and work together. So you might all be working on different things for different organizations, but actually you could be in a similar environment and you could be networking quite effectively that way as well. So, yes, technology, I think could be improved for sure – and we've had to take on this new technology very quickly I would say. It probably isn't that new, actually, but we've had to learn it really quickly. But yes, I think there's probably more can be done around that.

Paul Yes, and Elizabeth, I think we've sort of been beating up on technology a bit this year, but frankly if we hadn't had the technology, our problems would have been substantially larger than they have been. I mean this is the largest shift in where people are working – and it's happened in so many different countries – since the Industrial Revolution. And it happened sort of in a matter of weeks. Obviously, different countries are in different situations now, but this level of disruption is quite unprecedented – and the technology has been a kind of beneficial thing for us, hasn't it?

Elizabeth Yes, I think it has got further to go and also our experiences of work – and you and I have looked into what that might look like in 10 years or so. I think we will have something much more immersive. At the moment, we make the best of the technology. It can do a lot for us and it's been great to see people discover just how much connection they *can* get through things like video calling and bringing together people in perhaps surprising ways and just experimenting. So much is about the practices that we bring to technology: How do we work with our emotions? How do we collaborate? How do we manage people? You know, one of the things about Halloween stories earlier Paul, one of the things I've seen that is more disturbing, is how much monitoring is going on – so, actual monitoring technology that might be clicks or emails, but also people managing through staff feeling, for example, that “I must post ‘Like’ in the instant messaging channel so they know I'm online”. You know, this is not the fault of the technology, but it's bringing poor practices in.

So we need to build trust, connection, just as we would if we were face to face. It's just that the challenge is slightly different, I guess, doing it through our online world.

Paul So, Elizabeth, for anybody struggling with digital wellbeing, we've got a new DWG report coming out, haven't we?

Elizabeth Yes, so this will be available on our website, I think, by the time this podcast is live. It's called [Digital workplace overload: How to reduce employee technostress](#). So that's the report I've written, and it's a particular interest area obviously. So, in there we actually define what is digital workplace overload and look at some of the problems, so I bring together some of the research that shows the issues that it's causing, some of the drivers. We look a little bit at the psychology and then we look at what to do about it, and we look at this at three

different levels: the organizational and leadership level (so things like cultural norms, support policies, training); then we also look at information and technology management (so things like streamlining the content and communication, really taking a user-centred approach, bringing tools and information together) and then, as I've already mentioned, that individual and team level (so how do we keep ourselves focused, deal with interruptions, etc., etc.). So there's lots and lots of advice for organizations in there.

Paul Great, so that'll be in the show notes and you can find it on the DWG site, which is digitalworkplacegroup.com – and Christine, you've got a new book coming out called [Agile working and well-being in the digital age](#). Could you just give listeners a little summary of the book and how do they get hold of it?

Christine Yes, sure. So this book's really aimed at researchers and practitioners too, in fact anyone who's interested in remote e-working, home working or agile working. We look at how it's important for the needs of customer service users in an ever-changing market and how we can achieve that through meeting the goals of effectiveness and wellbeing. We use state-of-the-art theory to understand and how to optimize agile working by looking at key issues, psychological ones around personality, teamworking and management. We also define the concept of agile work in trying to unpack some of those often misunderstood terms around that, such as telework, remote working, etc., and we look to explore the wellbeing consequences of agile work, including sedentary behaviours, digital distraction, something called digital resistance, which is quite interesting, and we try to offer insights for the future and what that might look like – you know, things like working in community hubs and all that sort of area as well.

Paul Great, and when's it out and how do people get hold of it?

Christine So I'm hoping it'll be out in December this year and it's available on Amazon.

Paul Fantastic. So that's really good. So, the question that I like to end the podcast with is what is a perfect working day? Elizabeth, what's a perfect working day for you? And presumably it would involve some time with your new dog?

Elizabeth Yes, definitely puppy entertainment at the moment (laughs)! It's a key part. But actually it's a word that you said earlier Paul – variety – and that's really important to me and keeps me quite engaged. So I might spend a couple of hours working on a DWG research project, then a bit of puppy fun and then I might be looking at some reading I'm doing for my study or perhaps going out. So, like you said, that kind of autonomy of shaping my day, kind of as it goes. But as I mentioned also, making sure that there are some boundaries and spaces around things so that I can look after my wellbeing too.

Paul Sounds perfect. And Christine, what's the perfect working day for you? And I know you're a little bit, not quite a workaholic, that would be going too far... but you're somebody who likes to put in a hard day's work, so what is a perfect working day for you?

Christine I'm worried that I am coming across as a workaholic now, but ...

Paul No, no, not at all!

Christine ... I did want to say that (laughs) I kind of have my day job where I'm a deputy head of school, but actually my research is so important to me that adding value in a social context, I don't mind if that takes me over hours, which it often does. But yes, you know, a good balance of the vitamins of wellbeing so, as I said earlier, the social, the physical, all of that, if you can possibly do it, or at least one of them. But being really productive makes me feel good and being focused on my work, having my priority list and getting through that, and I love talking and sharing the day's ups and downs with colleagues, checking in. And I guess in my downtime I do like to read new research, but (laughs), you know, that's a bit sad really isn't it? But I do like to talk to my daughter who's at uni at the minute and not able to come home really, so that's quite a nice thing to do and reconnect with other friends too.

Paul Yes, I mean, one of the things that I've done... which makes it sound like I've got it all kind of sorted out... but I don't start work until 11.00 every day now. This is one of those irritating things that will just annoy people when they hear of it, so that I can go for a walk with our dog, I can do my yoga, I can meditate, have breakfast and then start at 11 and, you know, I don't do that, I have what I call a dishevelled day – and dishevelled days are bad days, so a perfect working day for me always involves that.

But thank you both so much for sharing your perspectives on digital wellbeing. Any final comments from you, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Just it's great to see more attention getting onto this topic as we're moving through this difficult time and I think that we're going to come out with a much better understanding, not just as organizations but individually too, of what do we need in the ways that we work? And I think that's a good thing.

Paul And final reflections from you, Christine?

Christine Yes, I mean, I'm really excited about the future. I think for me this has been an amazing time for my research (laughs) and to see it out there and being used and really sort of connecting with lots of different researchers. But I think, you know, there can be a lot of frustration attached to this type of working but also those positive benefits, and I can't wait to see what the future holds. I'm just hoping that there are more places where we can go and work together in this way that actually brings our communities together more. I'm really quite looking forward to the differences and the different prospects it can bring to us.

Paul Yes, absolutely. I think, when you're immersed in something, you can focus on the things that are challenges, that are struggles. But one of the things, like you Christine, that I'm really enthusiastic about is what I call "working close to home". So it's not about working *at* home, but it's working either alongside colleagues who might live near you locally or with other people locally in communal workspaces, and I think that could be a really positive thing economically and socially for local communities. I think there's going to be a whole bunch of things coming out of it because... I mean this year's not been boring! It's been challenging, but it's not been boring. Well, actually, no, it has been boring. It's been quite monotonous at times, I don't know why I said that! Anyway, thank you both so much for sharing and lovely to talk to you both.

Christine Thank you.

Elizabeth Thank you.

Paul

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London

30 City Road, London, EC1Y 2AB
Tel: +44 20 7374 8061

New York

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www.digitalworkplacegroup.com
@DWG
info@digitalworkplacegroup.com

