

COVER STORY

Dangerous connection

Nowadays, it seems our most likely work romance is with our technology, writes **Sue White**.

As a senior manager for digital media at a public relations agency, Mary Tan admits she's a tech fiend.

"I need to stay updated on technology and social media trends, as well as the ever-evolving world of fashion [in which she specialises]," she says.

To do her job well, Tan has built some intimate connections with her technology. The iPad goes to work (even though she has a laptop), the iPhone is used to take notes at all hours and a midnight "ping" from any one of the multitude of synced devices will warrant a quick check.

"If I'm away from wi-fi, there's a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach," she says.

Tan's job might revolve around the digital world but she's far from alone in being ensconced in a love affair with the devices allowing us to work from anywhere, any time. In a world where the line between "work" and "our life" is becoming increasingly blurry, it seems many of us are happily checking work emails from the tennis, the beach or even from bed.

The phenomenon has been labelled by The Australia Institute as "polluted time".

"Our findings suggest in a workforce of 11.4 million people, some 6.8 million workers experience some degree of time

pollution in any given week, while 1.75 million workers regularly have their free time polluted by work demands," says the deputy director of the institute, Josh Fear.

Although bosses are well aware of the issue, most of the finger pointing is aimed towards the technology involved.

It is becoming more widely acknowledged that the smartphones, laptops, tablets and social media platforms we love are propelling us into a world where switching off from work is increasingly difficult.

The author of *Work's Intimacy*, Melissa Gregg, first noticed this push to this new way of working in 2006.

"I saw the language of recruitment begin to change," she says. "Recruiters were starting to use the language of creativity and fulfilment, explaining how everyone's jobs could be exciting."

The problem is that often that's not the case – plenty of us have (and are happy doing) unglamorous jobs.

Gregg applied for an Australian Research Council grant and spent three years studying the myriad quandaries of the new work paradigm. She was particularly interested in our connections with technology and set about researching how workers are dealing with questions such as: "Should I answer that email tonight after that last glass of wine?" or



Switch off ... Academic and author Melissa Gregg says technology addiction is rife. Photo: Steven Siewert

"Do I have to be friends with my colleagues on Facebook?"

Gregg says: "I interviewed people in generic, white-collar jobs, following them for three years. The main finding was that people I studied were finding it very difficult to stop themselves working,

believes our romance with email is a significant workplace issue on its own. How quickly do we need to reply to an email? When is it OK to dash off a quick email favour from someone we've met only once? Do we really need to check our email after hours?

'The relationship we have with the devices themselves contributes to the problem.' Melissa Gregg

because the ways in which technology is designed is pushing work out of the office and into the home space."

Gregg found plenty of evidence that Australian workers are engaged in the incidental workload that comes from checking our email at all hours. "We do things like the dawn raid – getting up to check email before everyone else in the house is up," she says.

While social media has compounded the problem of separating work and play, Gregg

believes our romance with email is a significant workplace issue on its own. How quickly do we need to reply to an email? When is it OK to dash off a quick email favour from someone we've met only once? Do we really need to check our email after hours?

them," she says. "It's the people in the middle who don't have an assistant to filter communications that feel the pressure of how to answer all of this."

To date, our desire for flexibility has overridden the desire to mentally switch off from work. But there might be change in the wind. The President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, recently approved legislation that allows employees answering work emails after hours to request overtime. In 2010, a Chicago policeman filed a class action claiming overtime because he was required to answer his BlackBerry after hours.

At this stage, Gregg suspects the real winner in the flexibility war might be brands.

"The relationship we have with the devices themselves contributes to the problem," she says.

"The way people speak about the technologies and phones ranges from a love-hate relationship to total addiction. I believe it's quite dangerous."