



Young people are under pressure – technology holds sway in our performance-oriented society

By: Anders Petersen, sociologist and associate professor
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The technology affects all of us and all aspects of life. Not least of all in our working lives. But have we done well enough to adapt to the changes, and did we ever have a chance? The individual today is under pressure from the performance-oriented society, and a study from The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center indicates that technology plays a critical role in our well-being – both when we are at work and when we are off work.

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In a long list of studies, we see that 16- to 35-year-olds suffer negative consequences mentally, which result in increased occurrences of anxiety, depression and, in particular, stress (see Den Nationale Sundhedsprofil 2017)¹.

Is this development because young people today are softer, or could it be because we are overemphasizing these issues? Some would say yes to both these claims. However, I do not think this is the most reasonable explanation. Instead, to arrive at a better explanation, we have to understand what the performance-oriented society does to us: A performance-oriented society which is highly technological and based online.

It seems reasonable to refer to present-day young people as the “performance generation”. Young people need to perform constantly and to succeed in all areas of life. In their studies, on social media, in relation to their bodies, sexuality, gender and of course their work. The young people have grown up and know no alternatives to the performance-oriented society. – A type of society that can also be found in many other western countries and that has some very specific characteristics, which are putting extreme pressure on an increasing number of young people.

Are we aware?

The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center has asked Danish wage earners about their use of technology in their work and private life². The survey clearly shows that it is particularly the younger age groups that seem affected by the dominance of technology and of the smart phone in our daily lives. Fifteen percent of young people ages 18-29 stated that they have often or constantly felt stressed within the last two weeks, and as many as 44 percent stated that their phone contributed to the stress to some degree, a high degree, or a very high degree. A number that drops rapidly the further up we move in the age categories.

At the same time, a whole 63 percent of the those aged 18-29 indicate that they would like to cut down on their use of the phone to some degree, a high degree, or a very high degree. This number also drops the older the age category. So, are the older generations just better at controlling their use of technology and not allowing themselves to be affected? No, I think to a greater degree we are seeing a generation of young people who have started to address the fact that technology has some down sides.



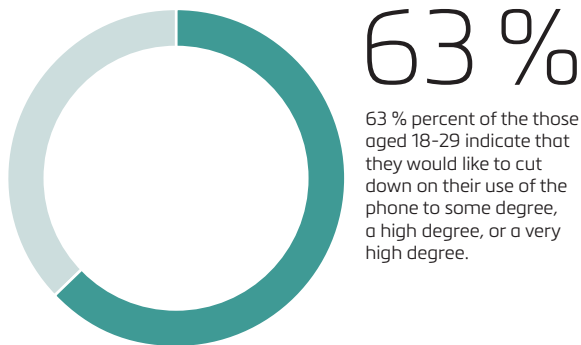
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1) sst.dk/da/udgivelser/2018/danskernes-sundhed-den-nationale-sundhedsprofil-2017

2) *Altid På - en undersøgelse af danskernes digitale vaner (Always On – a study of the digital habits of Danes), The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center, 2021 – for more information, see the fact box on page 6*

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Smart phone use



The performing self

Very basically, a notion is prevalent in the performance-oriented society that the personal self is the key that unlocks individual performance opportunities. The self is the holy grail from where the individual's energy and initiative originates and which drives sustained performance optimization. And the optimization of yourself means that you are always on and you are always performing. A lot of this performance has shifted to social media, and this requires that you are constantly online and have your phone on you. You often hear the smart phone described as an extension of your arm or a limb. It feels best when you are holding it in your hands rather than keeping it elsewhere.

The development of the performance society requires presence – constantly. Otherwise you fall behind and lose ground in the struggle for recognition. Anything other than presence is a step backwards. So there is no room for breaks in performance or gaps in the performance portfolio. Heaven help the CV that is low on performance: That doesn't fly in the performance-oriented society! So what do we do? We stay online!

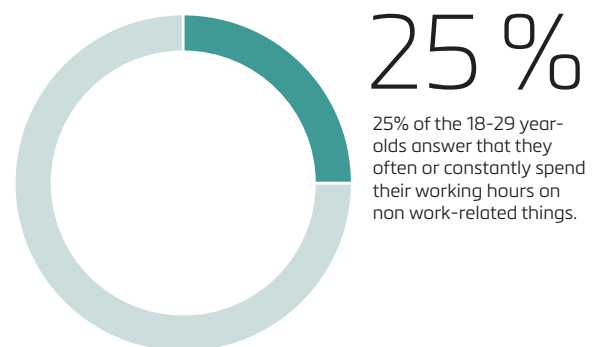
The boundaries have been erased

Previously, the struggle for recognition and the measuring stick for social esteem were determined by our employment situation and career. This is still partially the case, but the boundary between you work and

personal life has been erased in many areas. Particularly after technology has become part of our everyday lives. We can check emails from home when we have time off, and we can check Facebook and Instagram when we are at work.

And we do. The study from The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center shows that 44 percent of Danish wage earners either occasionally, often, or constantly spend time on non work-related things during their working hours. The smart phone is an attention-demanding disturbance when we work, and all else being equal, it challenges our concentration and efficiency. When we look at young people, a whole 25 percent of the 18-29 year-olds respond that they often or constantly spend time during working hours on non work-related things.

How working hours are spent



The performance identity is constantly under development, and you are never done with it. It can always be better. At this stage, it is important to understand that the responsibility for executing this rests solely on the shoulders of the individual. Shaping your performance identity is therefore your own job and your own responsibility. This may well be the reason why we cannot keep our fingers off social media, even when we are at work. We cannot lose our foothold, and we cannot seem that we are unavailable.



“ *We have to perform socially and privately when we go to work, and we must perform professionally at work in our spare time.* ”

The same picture applies when we look at our personal life. Here too, we are unable to focus ourselves on our family and on being together since the boundary to our work is erased; therefore, we continue to act as though we are at work. A whole 38 percent of Danish wage earners are often or constantly available after work hours. And this is despite that only one quarter answered that they actually get paid for it.

We have to perform socially and privately when we go to work, and we have to perform professionally at work in our spare time. So, beyond having to perform constantly, something may also indicate that we need to perform in several different arenas at the same time. And since multitasking is impossible and our split attention means that we are not fully focused on anything, it is not strange to see dissatisfaction.

Being able to perform constantly has simply become a common norm that everyone is subject to.

Performance has become a primary social competence and is therefore a fundamental socialization parameter. Seen in that light, it is not strange that our individual self becomes the primary tool – the driving force – that ensures sustained development through our personal performance.

Be prepared – be agile!

The requirement for continuous activity – and thus the requirement for constantly boosting your performance identity – is handled through the adoption of contemporary catchwords: We must continuously develop our flexibility, mobility, initiative, motivation, adaptability, readiness for change, agility, etc. These concepts are instantly recognizable, and I would assume that almost all adults and young people in today's Danish performance society would recognize them in their lives. But what do these terms express?

“ *... the performance-oriented society ruthlessly exploits people today. And when it comes to young people, that ruthless exploitation sets in so that they ruthlessly exploit themselves.* ”

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They show us that the individual can constantly make themselves more attractive on an ever-changing labor market. However, the norm of sustained activity extends beyond the borders of the labor market. The notion that we have to be active, ready for change, flexible, adaptable, etc. has been elevated to the status of desirable ideal and thus influences (largely) all the social platforms where the individual participates. This is participation that we cannot turn off since the internet never sleeps – not even at night or between 8 and 16 when we should be working.

Our ideals thus constitute new ways to regulate. We have no other choice than to choose them since they have become a common rule. And, moreover: Young people learn – at preschool, school, high school, and later at university – to succeed in the performance-oriented society. The performance-oriented society’s rules and norms become internalized through the institutions indicated above. And then young people sure do act upon them!

A revolution may be on the horizon

However, something worth noticing and which the study from The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center also indicates is that we may now see the first steps in a revolution against technology – or more accurately, towards our use of technology. As professor of philosophy Nolen Gerz points out in his book: *Nihilism and Technology*³, technology is here to stay, now it is just a question of how we best learn to live with it and protect ourselves against it.

And the revolution may have already started among the young people. Perhaps not by renouncing or boycotting technology and digitization, but rather as awareness and attention to how we can claim back the power. In my view, it is entirely obvious that the performance-oriented society ruthlessly exploits people today. And when this involves young people, that ruthless exploitation sets in so that they ruthlessly exploit themselves. They push themselves so hard constantly so as to meet the requirements of the performance-oriented society and construct the best possible performance identity.

The dark side of the perpetual drive to perform is a negative effect on the mental state: Anxiety, depression, and stress. And here we have to be very aware that something is there which spurs this development further. I am particularly thinking of the expectation pressure that is part of being on social media and constantly having to be available with your smart phone in your pocket. Some may think that young people should just “get a grip”. But it is not that simple. Because social media platforms are exhibition windows for the young people, where they present their performance identity and where they receive recognition for it.

Or where they might receive recognition. Because social media is ruthless, and the flow of smileys and likes does not come on its own. It requires investment, and payment comes as either: Recognition or disregard. It is actually brutal, which the young people are well aware of when you talk to them. And they know full well that they pull their smart phone out way too often “just to check”. But it is just so incredibly difficult to do anything about it. Because either you are in or you are out.

The previously mentioned awareness can be seen in the study from The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center, where one in four answered that they felt dependent on their phone to a high or very high degree. 44 percent responded that, to some degree, a high

3) Gerz, N.: *Nihilism and Technology*, 2018



“However, the million-dollar question is: How do you do it? How do you change something that has become such a strong habit, an extension of our limbs, and which is based on a technology that was designed to capture and keep our attention?”

degree, or a very high degree, their phone takes time from things in their life that they actually think are important. And 43 percent responded that they wanted to reduce their use of the phone to some degree, a high degree, or a very high degree.

The experience of telephone dependence is relatively similar in the different age groups. However, the response of young people scores significantly higher for questions concerning how the telephone affects their lives, which shows a great awareness that something should be different or should be done differently. The million-dollar question is: How do you do it? How do you change something that has become such a strong habit, an extension of our limbs, and which is based on a technology that was designed to capture and keep our attention.

Naturally, there are no quick fixes when it comes to changing the phone habits of young people. However, something that could get the young people's attention away from the screen and to something else is the establishment of a performance-free space. By this, I mean a space where the young people can enter into communities with each other where the focus is not on performance as the means for achieving a specific goal, but on performance as the freedom to explore something: A subject, music, games, play, etc. If the space is organized sensibly and is supported institutionally, I imagine that it could get the young people to lift their gaze off their smart phones. If only for a moment!

“Altid På – en undersøgelse af danskernes digitale vaner” (Always On – a study of the digital habits of Danes) is a study prepared by The Job Satisfaction Knowledge Center on the basis of data collected from the analysis institute YouGov. We asked 2031 Danish wage earners, who responded to a total of 50 questions. The respondents were selected to be representative of gender, age, geography, educational level, and job area – all are aged 18+, currently on the labor market, and have at least one manager above them.