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The Frontier: There's connected, and there's too connected

By [Chris Gaetano](#) December 05, 2022, 9:11 a.m. EST 4 Min Read

When the pandemic first began, there was a great deal of concern over how people would talk to each other when offices were closing all over the country. What would they do, it was thought, without in-person meetings? How would people collaborate when they're not in the same office? How do firms maintain their culture when everyone is at home?

Software developers heard this cry loud and clear and, in just a very short time, there was an explosion of new and improved communication and collaboration solutions. People held daily department meetings over platforms like Zoom, tracked their workflow on programs like Monday.com, and managed projects through Slack. While tools like these had been around for many years, it took the pandemic to make many of them household names.

Peter Scavuzzo, chief information and digital officer of Top 20 firm Marcum, said it was amazing to see these developers spring into action to update and adapt their software for this new era.

"I think the online collaboration tools for conferencing and document sharing have come leaps forward. The ability to embrace these technologies has gone at a rapid pace. It's just remarkable how it's been embraced, and how people had a handle on that stuff," he said.

We are now a few years into this new normal, enough time for the problems of our ultra-connected workplaces to come to the fore. We've all heard the jokes, we've all read the memes, we've all watched the parody videos, and they all point to the same thing: Connection is great, yes, but maybe we're starting to get a little *too* connected.

"When everyone suggested Teams or Slack, while I do think there's a lot of validity to them in that it cleans up the junk of the email, eventually it [turns] into just one more distraction. We're working on one thing, then we get a message from other staff members or multiple staff. It's [becoming] the next distraction. In another five years or so, people won't want to deal with a messaging app," said Wes Hartman, director of technology at Kirsch Kohn & Bridge and the founder of RPA solutions provider Automata.

Kim Austin, director of global strategic accounting partnerships with Avalara, said one effect of this has been damage to our work-life balance. Paradoxically, the speed at which we can now reach one another without having to account for things like travel time has meant more to do, not less.

"The whole work-life balance is laughable. I think burnout is massive. Everyone talks about Zoom fatigue. I think people may have undervalued dead time, like I go to the office and leave that meeting and get to my car and drive to the next appointment — or even just walking down the hall or across campus for another meeting. That's where you can do so much brain processing and mulling over what you just experienced and sometimes recharge and take a deep breath and recompose yourself," she said.

Now, said Austin, we are in a situation where the minute one Zoom meeting ends is the minute the next one begins, and no one can say they were late because they caught traffic on the way. People, she said, have these expectations of real-time instant gratification when it comes to communications, which on the one hand has been good for getting certain things done quickly but, on the other, has contributed to a feeling of burnout and stress.

Gayle Heskiel, chief operating officer for Net at Work, feels that people's appetites for even more connection are starting to run out, as a lot of the low-hanging fruit in this area has been picked. At this point in time, she said, it is difficult to envision the need for additional solutions when what's there already covers so much.

"What's being oversold are the remote collaboration tools. Anyone who can work remote has already done it, and while there's always opportunity for improvement, it's overdone. There's no new Zooms that need to be made, we have Meet, we have Teams, they don't need more competition in that space," she said. "You could increase licenses, of course, to increase revenue, but there's too much focus [on that]. Remote is here to stay. There's nothing we need to adjust to anymore. Jobs that can't be remote won't be remote, and no amount of collaboration tools will help that."

Kacee Johnson, vice president of strategy and innovation with CPA.com, noted that just as important as the technology itself is the mindset the business has when adopting it. She has talked to many firms that seem to believe implementing some single solution, such as remote collaboration tools, will solve all their problems, which is unrealistic. While the work-life balance problems that have come with the rise of remote work are real, they could be seen as a product not so much of the technology itself but, rather, the culture of the organizations using it. When remote work is done well, in a way that respects boundaries, Johnson felt the technology would just fade into the background and be hardly talked about at all. She compared it to email.

"No one talks about email, we live and breathe it. I don't think we'll ever leave this remote workforce. People are leaving jobs because companies make them go back. To me, [collaboration tools] are just going to be like email or having a phone line. It is what it is," she said.

This story is part of the second season of the Accounting Today series called "The Frontier," where we explore the cutting edge of accounting technology through conversations with thought leaders across the country, who will share with us their observations, hopes, concerns and even a few predictions here and there.

See the rest of [the series here](#).