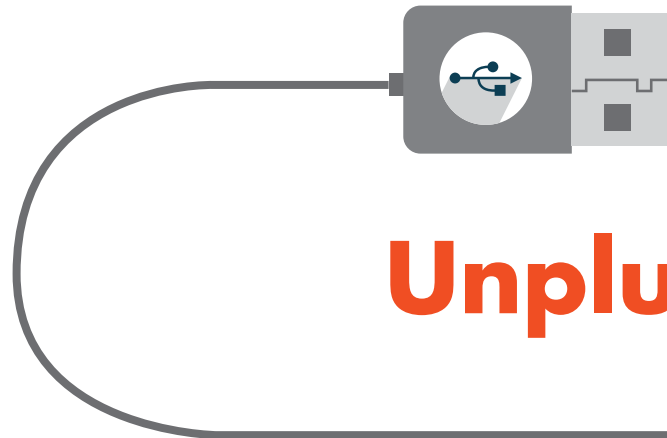


What Happens



When Law Students



Unplug?

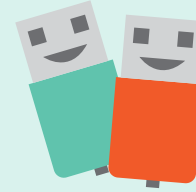
Rachel Van Cleave

My colleague at Golden Gate University School of Law (GGU Law), Professor Michele Benedetto Neitz, asked our law students to do something radical: limit Internet use, including social media and personal email, to only three times per day. Students signing up for the “Disconnect 2015” challenge were advised to check the Internet once in the morning, once around lunchtime, and once later in the afternoon. For most of our students, this represents a dramatic departure from their usual habits of checking the Internet hourly.

I recently read *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg. It occurred to me that most of the time when I check my

personal Internet accounts, I am doing so out of habit. Neitz and I encouraged students to consider what triggered their urge to check personal social media and to decide on an alternative. Might they be looking for a personal connection? Perhaps they are not feeling engaged in what is going on around them, whether that is in class or in a meeting. Rather than a virtual connection, Neitz and I asked them to look for an in-person connection. We recommended that participants try to focus on what a professor or another student is saying and resist clicking over to Facebook or grabbing their smartphone.

I spoke with Neitz about how this challenge went for her, and for our students.



Rachel Van Cleave (RVC): *What prompted you to issue this challenge?*

Michele Benedetto Neitz (MBN): Recent neuroscience studies prove that our minds are less able to focus clearly when we are multitasking. Law students are living in the age of data and information overload, and I realized that Millennial students in particular had likely never experienced being “disconnected” from Internet use. I hoped to demonstrate to students that they would be able to concentrate on their studies more effectively without constant Internet distraction.

RVC: *How did the challenge work? Did you try to participate in the challenge?*

MBN: Each participant committed to trying to check personal Internet sites only three times daily. I organized the challenge through TWEN, Westlaw’s online platform for law school classes. Each morning, I emailed the participants with a forum topic and an article about the benefits of unplugging. Forum topics included questions such as “What is the hardest part of this challenge?” and “What did you focus on today?” I also created daily check-in polls, in which participants could honestly report whether they had succeeded in checking the Internet only three times that day. At the end of the week, we entered all poll participants into a drawing, and two were selected to have lunch with the dean and three participating professors.

Personally, I found the challenge to be much more difficult than I imagined. Like all participants, I could not believe how often I used my smartphone “just to check” what was happening online. I don’t believe any of us succeeded in the challenge every day, but most of us improved as the week progressed.

RVC: *Isn’t it quite ironic that you used Internet tools to structure a “disconnect challenge”?*

MBN: Yes, we noted the irony in our first email to participants. It was the most convenient way to reach a

How to Unplug from the Internet (and Keep Your Job)

Michele Benedetto Neitz

1 Manage the expectations of clients and colleagues. Is there a specific client or supervising attorney who expects you to be available at all times? If so, provide your cell phone number to that individual with instructions to call or text you (instead of emailing) when it is urgent.

2 Set aside specific times to check the Internet. For example, if you designated thirty to forty-five minutes three times per day to check your email (for example, at 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 and 4:00 p.m.), you may be able to clear your in-box every day. Set up an automatic reply explaining that you will respond to all emails at those times, and provide your office phone number for urgent matters. Studies report that workers with scheduled email times are more productive, since they are able to focus without constant distraction.

3 Identify when you are feeling most stressed: On the way into work, on the way out of work, during midday? Adjust your Internet behavior accordingly. For instance, if you are checking your email during your commute, and you arrive at your office already frazzled, your long-term work performance may suffer. If you know you will check email and handle any issues as soon as you sit down at your desk, your commute will be calmer and you will start the day feeling more refreshed.

4 Don’t use Internet browsing to relax. If you have a few minutes to unwind between projects, get up from your desk for a walk or chat with a colleague.

I came to appreciate just how ubiquitous technology is. I scheduled time for meditation, but relied on my smartphone to remind me and to provide me with a meditation bell through an app. I put my phone away when I got home in the evenings, but I needed it to set my alarm for the following morning. The real goal, I believe, is to get control of technology and devices so that they do not control us. Or, as our student commented, "Use the force."

— Rachel Van Cleave



diverse group of participants, and we hoped they would spend their online time responding to our forum topics and reading articles about disconnecting, rather than heading straight to social media sites or personal email. It was fun to see participants personally throughout the week and learn more about how the challenge worked for each of them.

RVC: *You included a short article with each daily email. What were some of the main points of the articles?*

MBN: Each article approached "disconnecting" from a different viewpoint. I included a *Forbes* magazine article about the benefits of unplugging for corporate executives, as well as an article by a tech company CEO who disconnected from the Internet for fourteen days. Some were more science heavy, such as an article about a neuroscience study on the brain effects of constant contact with technology. Others were lighter and more humorous.

RVC: *How did the participants respond to the challenge?*

MBN: I was pleasantly surprised by the commitment of our students to this challenge. They were honest about the difficulties they faced in disconnecting. But as the week went on, and they began to see the effects of unplugging, some of our participants became true believers in the value of letting go of the Internet. One faculty member realized that she checked email first thing in the morning and last thing at night because her smartphone served as her alarm

clock. In the middle of the week, she bought a traditional alarm clock and now is refraining from checking personal email except at designated times.

On the last day of the challenge, I asked students to share one lesson from the week with their fellow classmates. Students felt strongly that their law school colleagues should be more aware of their Internet use. Julie Cummings, a second-year student at GGU Law summed it up nicely:

You are in charge. Use that power. If you deliberately set aside time at intervals to check in and interact with your social media, you can eliminate any fear that you are missing something important. But really, if it's that important, would you want someone to contact you in that manner? If the answer is yes, then make that particular social media platform your go-to method for all contacts. If the answer is no, then don't fool yourself into thinking you must be available 24/7 to all people. Use the force.

RVC: *Overall, did you think this was a successful and worthwhile endeavor? Will you do it again?*

MBN: Yes, I think we successfully awakened students to the idea that unplugging from the Internet can improve their focus and concentration. I plan to implement a second "Disconnect" challenge next fall, and we welcome any practicing lawyers who would like to participate.

Rachel Van Cleave is the dean at Golden Gate University School of Law. Michele Benedetto Neitz is a professor of law at Golden Gate University School of Law.