No ‘off’ button

Malaysians love going on holidays but there is no break when it comes to their smartphones and other digital devices.

The term ‘digital detox’ was first used by Levi Felix and Brooke Dean from California in 2012, with the two conducting retreats for those who want to “detox” from the virtual world and reconnect with themselves and the physical world around them.

Firstly, Malaysians are not ready to embark on such a digital fast just yet. In fact, it is quite the reverse for Malaysians who constantly ask for free WiFi connection when they travel, observes Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (Malatour) president Datuk Hamzah Rahmat.

“Malaysian holidaymakers actually start complaining if there is no WiFi access at the airport!” he says, adding that Malaysians are very much into their smartphones and digital devices even while on vacation.

“It is said to point out that some Malaysians are constantly on their phones in places of worship and when taking part in religious ceremonies,” Hamzah remarks.

He remembers that there were hardly any tourists who posed for selfies at religious places in the past but with the advent of technology, it has now happened ‘all over the place’.

Hamzah notes that these days, almost all guests expect a hotel to have good WiFi connection.

“When Malaysians go for a getaway at a five-star hotel, they expect it to have free WiFi and some even won’t check-in upon properties which do not provide such services,” he says.

However, Hamzah stresses that whether the people wanted to go on an offline while on holiday is a personal choice.

The trend is to people being closely connected wherever they go. Technology has driven us to be constantly in touch, whether online or offline.

Perhaps, some people who go on holiday snap pictures and post it online to be the envy of friends while some just want to share their joy with others. But if it makes them happy and helps them destress by taking photographs of new places and what they ate there, so be it,” he says.

Hamzah says that a person takes a vacation to destress and it ultimately depends on the individual how he wants to do it.

“Both in anything, there is always a limit. People can capture a nice moment but not to the extent that you do not realize there is an incoming call or you miss out on an amazing moment,” he says.

He also points out that the digital world has helped the tourism industry, with users sharing reviews online and encouraging others to hunt for must-visit places.

And perhaps one of the reasons why Malaysians can’t seem to go off the-grid during holidays is ironically because of work.

Employees may need to contact their employers for urgent matters, says Malaysia Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Hardan.

“We do not encourage employees to be completely uncontrollable during their days off, as it is unreasonable. Workers should be contactable at all times. Normally, bosses only need their employees to take 30 minutes to an hour of their day to do some urgent work. Bosses usually do not constantly contact them,” he says.

Shamsuddin says the need for workers to be contactable is also compounded by the globalisation of the workforce, with employees working in different places.

“Even in Malaysia, different states observe different days of the week as rest days. Zodiac, Kolam Bryant and Terengganu have Fridays and Saturdays off compared to Saturdays and Sundays in other states,” he points out.

Fortunately, Shamsuddin says most employees do not have a problem being contacted during their days-off.

Bosses are more concerned with employees not being productive at the office because they are surfing other things online that are not related to work.

“Even if employers decide to bar certain sites like Facebook, workers can always access them via their smartphones.

Employees must be honest and do what is expected of them during working hours,” Shamsuddin says.

Urging the public to practice self-discipline, Health Ministry deputy director-general Datuk Dr. Jeyarajnan Sinnadurai says being too absorbed in gadgets can lead to a breakdown in social skills.

“Perhaps a digital detox is too extreme at this juncture, but rather, people need to determine how and when they would like to respond to the various messages that they receive, to strike a balance,” he says.

Dr. Jeyarajnan suggests that people use different notification tones on their devices for work contacts and for social messaging so that they know how to prioritise their responses.

If you can discipline yourself, the need for a digital detox may not be necessary.

“Going unplugged is a common sight to see people so absorbed in their phones,” he says.

Perhaps families should have a policy to leave their phones behind when they are having meals and just concentrate on having conversations with their loved ones, he says.