

CONFERENCES FOR WOMEN

March 2014

"The Zen of Being Digital"

Moderator: Whitey Gray Wilkerson

Guest: Aliza Sherman

WHITNEY GRAY WILKERSON: Good afternoon, everyone. This is Whitney with the Conferences for Women, and thanks so much for joining us for The Zen of Being Digital with Aliza Sherman. If you are on Twitter, I encourage you to follow along @masswomen, @pennwomen or @texaswomen, and Aliza is @alizasherman which is A-L-I-Z-A, S-H-E-R-M-A-N.

So Aliza is a web pioneer, an award-winning author of ten books, an international speaker and teacher of technology for our work and our lives. She's championed women in business and tech since the early '90s and travels around the world speaking about women's issues and the intersections of technology, work and life.

In 1995 she started the first woman-owned Internet company, Cybergirl, Inc., and the first global Internet networking organization for women, Webgrrls International. "Newsweek" named her one of the top people who matter most on the Internet. "Fast Company" called her one of the most powerful women in technology. Her books include Power Tools For Women In Business; Mom, Incorporated; and Social Media Engagement For Dummies.

So welcome.

ALIZA SHERMAN: Hello. Hi, Whitney and hi, everybody. I love this topic, The Zen of Being Digital, and I want to start off telling a couple of stories.

So picture this: I'm at the grocery store, and I'm dropping things. I'm dropping cans of food, I'm dropping my wallet when I go to pay, I'm dropping my credit card as I'm handing it to the cashier. And I'm starting to panic a little.

I mean, what does it mean when you start dropping

things, you just can't hold onto things? Is it a stroke? Is it a brain tumor? I mean, literally I'm panicking and I'm apologizing as I drop something else. I look down at my hands, why can I not grip these things, and I see I'm clutching my iPhone.

I didn't even realize my iPhone was in my hand. I was so used to having the iPhone in my hand as I walked down the aisles of the grocery store that it had become a part of me and was preventing me to hold onto things. I don't know, does that sound familiar to anybody?

Another story.

I'm in Sweden. The year is 1999. I'm walking through a cafeteria and I notice a strange thing. There are people with cellular phones on their tables. Now, if you remember 1999 and the cell phone, it was the size of an ice cream sandwich. And I looked at that and I just shook my head and I said, there is no way that we in the United States would ever have a cell phone at our table.

And my last little story. See if this one sounds familiar.

I'm visiting one of my best friends. I love her. We both love technology, but I haven't seen her for a really long time. And we're sitting in her living room and I'm telling her about my life, catching up, and I look over and she's staring into her iPad, and she doesn't stop. And it breaks my heart.

We, somehow, have to surrendered to our technology. So it's pretty bad.

WGW: Can you give us some insights into how bad it's really become?

AS: Sure. I'm not big on statistics, but I do have a few statistics that can shed some light on where we are as a society in relationship to our mobile devices.

So in 2010 -- mind you, this is already four years ago. In 2010, Nokia came out with a report that said that mobile phone users cannot leave their phone alone for more than six minutes at a time and check their phones up to 150 times a day. Now, those statistics have been questioned by a lot of people who then go and analyze, what are we doing on our phones?

And I'll go into some of that in a moment, but "Real

Simple" magazine surveyed women recently about their smart phones. Sixty-nine percent of them said they sleep with them in their bedroom. I would say a show of hands, but right now I can already imagine the virtual hands being raised when I ask: How many of you have your phone in your bedroom? And by the way, my hand is raised. I don't feel good about that. Fifty-eight percent of women keep their phone close to them during dinner. Seventy-six percent of them look at their phone at least once an hour. Ask yourself: Is that you?

Now, believe it or not, there's a term that has just come up in the last several years called NoMoPhobia. NoMoPhobia, and that stands for no mobile phone phobia. They have literally come up with a way of describing that panic that we feel when we forget our smart phone, NoMoPhobia.

I don't know about you, but that's a little scary to me. I really think that we're succumbing to this thing that I call techno peer pressure. So even when we say oh, oh, I'm not going to be on my phone. I'm going to leave my phone turned off. And then our friends are on their phones and we feel like it's this permission that we have to actually get back on our phone because, you know, it's okay because everyone else is. So it's this techno peer pressure as well that influences us.

WGW: So my question for you is it's a lot of time, a lot of checking our devices, so what actually are we checking and what do we really need to be doing?

AS: Well, part of this list of items came from the people talking about the Nokia study, and how is it possible that you are checking it 150 times in a day?

Now, think about it. Our smart phone is far more than a telephone. So it's not as if we're grabbing our phone for a phone call. In fact, we probably are rarely grabbing our phone for a phone call these days.

But we check our phone to check time, to look at our calendar or to schedule something. We're checking text messages far more than we're actually checking voicemail messages, but we also check our voicemail. We're looking at our email. We're surfing the web so we're looking at websites. We're probably Googling a lot more in a day than we probably ever did five or ten years ago.

Music. We're listening to music or we're listening to podcasts. We're watching video. We're downloading files or uploading files. We're taking pictures. We're checking or making reminders or checking those notifications that keep on flashing and, oh, by the way, yeah, we do have phone calls. That's a lot of checking.

WGW: So everyone who has called in today is obviously intrigued by the topic of simplifying and streamlining their tech life, so what are some things that we can do to change what we're doing?

AS: Well, I have to give you some context in terms of my background. I've been online since 1987. I've been consulting companies about the Internet since 1990. And I've been not an early adopter of all these new-fangled technologies, but sort of a late early adopter.

I remember in the '90s when the headlines used to read Internet addiction. We're all addicted to the Internet. And I would just pooh-pooh them and say we're not addicted. We have control. We can make choices.

Well, fast forward a decade-plus later and I'm actually finding myself using the word addicted now. Things are very different. When it was a desktop computer and you couldn't lug it around with you, or even when it was a laptop computer, only so big, I just never felt that compulsion, that addiction to jump on to it. And yet, with the smart phone or the tablet computer that is so lightweight, that's with me at all times, that sometimes I clutch and don't even know I'm holding it, the word addiction keeps on creeping up, and that's a little bit scary.

So if you think in those terms, though, what we can do is assess how we are acting with and interacting with our gadgets, with our technology, and admit if we have a problem. If you don't want to use the word addiction, certainly consider the word compulsion. Are you compulsively glancing down at your smart phone even at the dinner table or at a restaurant or in the presence of friends or family members? Is it within arm's reach? Is it somewhere where you keep wanting to go to it? Is it always on?

So admitting that you might have a compulsion issue when it comes to your smart phone is a good step. It's that awareness. So be aware. Be aware of how you are attached to your device, if you are. And really, the first step -- and this is something that I was struggling with and I have to admit, I go back and forth and still struggle -- is turn the darn thing off.

I mean, I tend to keep it on 24/7. I've even moved my charging station out of my bedroom into a separate room. I come into the house and I start to charge it, and I try not to look at it again, because there's really no reason after work hours to be compulsively checking.

So the thing I like to say is leave it, hide it and forget it. And that seems to work for me, although I do slip. I have to admit, I do slip.

WGW: So give us some more tips, because I know everyone is real eager to walk away from today's call with some actionable items that they can really put into movement around this topic.

AS: Well, you've got to think about it like a diet.

Now, there are some downsides to a diet. I mean, how many of us have tried a diet in terms of eating habits and have failed because we've tried a fad? We've tried to do something that's not sustainable.

But when you start to change your habits such as portion control -- I mean, that tends to be one of those key things that you do when you are trying to watch what you eat is think of portion control. So in a way, it's technology portion control.

Establish for yourself what you feel are the acceptable amounts of usage and then set achievable goals. Like if I were to say to myself I'm going to cut out my iPhone cold turkey, well, some people do this. They call it a technology sabbatical.

There are actually camps and retreats now that are specifically devoted to getting people to turn off their digital devices and to go a couple of days without them at all. Digital Detox, they've got something called Camp Grounded. It's all about being disconnected from technology. We would not have

thought of this 10 years ago. But you need to set these achievable goals and maybe even have a tech buddy who can help you stay off of your devices.

And look for the fact that when you do these things, you will have some positive outcomes, and some of those positive outcomes are healthier relationships with your technology but also with others, with people around you. They might not even be telling you they are offended by your use, constantly looking down at your smart phone.

I didn't tell my best friend. I use her as an example, she doesn't know I'm doing this and, in fact, probably all my girlfriends right now, if they are listening, are like, oh, my God, is that me? It might be you. But you will also have a better relationship with yourself when you are not compulsively reaching for those devices.

So you know, I can talk about a couple of pieces of software and applications that are out there which you could download today. And it's sort of ironic. I'm telling you to unplug, but hey, download this application because there's an app for that.

There's actually an app for the Android called Mental, M-E-N-T-H-A-L, it's for Android. It helps you see what's consuming your attention on your phone and it tracks how much time you are spending on your phone. I think sometimes when we can tangibly see the numbers, it's eye opening.

The iPhone version, something similar but also a little bit different is called Pause, P-A-U-S-E, Pause for the iPhone. It tracks your time offline, when you are not using your phone. It also makes a game of it so you can compete with others to see who can stay offline the longest.

And then for the computer, I've been using for many years something called Rescue Time, and it monitors your computer usage and your productivity. So every week I get a report saying here's how long you spent on communications, here's how long you spent on creativity, and it breaks it down based on the software I'm using. So it tracks how often I'm in email or using Photoshop or using Power Point, and then it parses that out as productivity or very unproductive.

So this is three pieces of software, that third one was called Rescue Time, software that actually helps you try to address this. Again, it's a little ironic that I'm saying use this software and get offline, but these are a few tools.

WGW: So Aliza, what are -- we want to have a healthy relationship with technology so we're in charge, we feel in control. How can we do that?

AS: Well, I think it comes down to setting limits and designating boundaries. I think I mentioned earlier I took the charging station out of my bedroom and put it into a different room. I've been hearing more and more from people who say my charging station for my devices is right at the door so when I come into my house, I plug them in and I don't touch them again until I leave my house the next morning on my way to work and I unplug them and then go.

So what are the boundaries in your home, in your space? What are the boundaries in your work space or zones, if you will? I've heard families passing around a basket to their family members to put their devices in them and then setting the basket aside so they could sit down at dinner and actually speak to one another. So it's creating that space.

Because when is it happening? And this has happened to me when I'm really diligent about this practice. When you talk about Zen and you talk about any kind of ritual, it needs to be a practice, something that you do all the time. And this practice creates space. When you are not touching those devices at all times and filling your time with oh, my gosh, I've got to check Facebook. Oh, has anyone tweeted me? Oh, has anyone emailed me? You end up creating a lot more space for all of these things you say you don't have time to do.

WGW: So what are some small things that we can do that will help us to make these changes in our lives as it relates to our technology use?

AS: Well, think about alternative behaviors. I think sometimes we can trick our minds into doing something else and not wanting to or needing to check our devices.

Write a letter. When was the last time that any of us have written, handwritten, longhand, a letter and then folded it up, put it in an envelope, put on a stamp, addressed it and taken it to the mailbox or post office? I mean, that process now seems so antiquated. We used to call it snail mail. Now we call it huh? Who does that anymore?

But write a letter to someone. I actually spoke about this topic recently in Florida at Enterprising Women and I just got a handwritten letter from one of the women in the audience. And I've got to tell you, it was an amazing thing just to have a tangible letter written in pen. It sounds old-fashioned, but write a letter.

Or wear a watch. How many of you are wearing watches? I haven't worn my watch since my phone tells me the time. But wear a watch to get back out of that habit. Although some people would argue don't wear a watch and simply don't check the time, we're too obsessed with time.

Make art. I don't know about you, but a box of crayons and some glitter glue and I can go crazy with that. And that puts me back in touch with a frame of mind, a state of mind, like a child-like state of mind which is way, way far removed from this desire to be connected to my tech.

Or play. I have a seven-year-old daughter and I watch her sense of play and I am grateful that she still runs outside and kicks a ball around or jumps rope, and I cringe when I see her sitting down at the sofa with an electronic device. I see myself; she's like a mini me, a mini me reflection.

So I try to get out with her and jump rope with her and kick the ball around. But you don't need to have a child around to go outside and play. Or just take a walk, and take a walk without your phone in hand. You don't need that phone.

And if you need a camera, we need to go back to grabbing those disposable cameras or some alternative non-digital camera and use those for a change. We have become ultra-reliant on our iPhones just to take a photo.

WGW: So I know we're winding down and before we do, you are a strong believer in meditation as it relates to shifting our compulsiveness around technology use, so can you share a little bit with us about that?

AS: I have to confess, Whitney, I'm very, very new to meditation. I've been told for the last 15 years that I could benefit from meditation and I ignored it. I mean, it went in one ear and out the other. And every once in a while I'd go, meditation. Oh, yeah, maybe. It just seemed so foreign to me.

But I just started a meditation practice and it's a little rough around the edges, but what really helped me understand the benefits of meditation, it came from a book called Use Your Mind To Change Your Brain. The author is Rebecca Gladding, MD. And I'm not very scientific, but I'll try to paraphrase what I believe I understand her to be saying about meditating.

So right now in our current state when we are not meditating and when we have this onslaught of information and the technology, the compulsiveness, our brains are focused on the "me" center of the brain where you take things personally and it's all about you, and you are accessing incorrectly and far too readily the fear portion of your brain, that fight or flight area, and also the body sense of your brain where that fear becomes a physical anxiety.

So if you are feeling like you are in a state of panic, anxiety, sort of this non-specific, I don't know why I'm so stressed, that's because you're very focussed in the "me" center.

Now, when you meditate, you're more able to access what's called the assessment center. If you are focused on "me," you cannot properly assess the situations that are happening around you. So after meditating, you can access the assessment center right away. You are removed from that "me" center. The "me" center relaxes and so you are no longer in fear and no longer in that body sense where you are physically feeling your fear so you are better able to look at what's happening around you, process what's happening around you, not take it so personally.

All of those things contribute to a better sense of well being. When you have a better sense of overall

well being, you no longer have that need or compulsion to fill the panic, to fill the empty spaces, to quell loneliness. If you have a better overall sense of well being, when you reach for your technology it's for practical, sensible uses, not to try to solve something that's not actually a problem or to be a balm over sort of a wound that you are feeling that shouldn't actually be there.

So having thought of that and processed that in my own brain, I came to the conclusion that oh, my gosh, meditation sounds like a great thing to insert into my life so that I can better process everything that happens to me as a mom, as a businesswomen, as a person, as a human being.

WGW: So I love that you just mentioned being a mom, because we received a question via Twitter. If anyone else who is listening is interested in submitting a question you can use @masswomen, @pennwomen or @texaswomen and pending time, we'd love to answer your questions during this call as well.

So the question we got was what if your phone is how your kids, parents and spouse communicate with you? My phone is not relegated to work needs.

AS: Oh, my gosh, my phone is the all-purpose Swiss Army knife of life, so I get that. I think having it in proximity but not in your hands and not outside of your bag, you can have the ringer set to specific rings that tell you it's my child, it's my husband or partner, and keep it in your bag or in a bag.

If you don't have a bag for it and if you are not one carrying a purse around or a bag, get your technology bag and stick it in there so it's not physically out in the open and just waiting for you to glance at it, so in a bit of a hide-it piece, but still have it in close proximity.

I know for myself, I purchased an iPhone for my husband because I wanted to be in better touch with him, especially because I travel a lot. And I can't tell you how furious I get when he doesn't check the darn thing or have it anywhere within earshot. If you are using it as a connecting device for family or even for emergency situations, just keep it in a case of some kind and don't hold it in your hand at all moments.

WGW: So create a little distance from it.

AS: And a little bit of visual distance is not audio distance. That visual removal helps stop you from glancing at it. Literally, if it's open, face up on your desk or table or wherever you are, your eye will start shooting over to it to see is there something important? Is somebody messaging me? Do I need to know? If you just put it aside in that special bag made for that occasion, I think that will be helpful. I really do.

WGW: So we're running out of time so we'd love for you to remind listeners where they can find you online.

AS: Well, they can certainly find me on Twitter where I do spend an inordinate amount of time, [Twitter.com slash my full name, Aliza Sherman, A-L-I-Z, as in zebra, A, S-H-E-R-M-A-N](#). And you can find me at [alizasherman.com](#) as well.

I do blog occasionally or you can subscribe to my email newsletter where I give tips on using apps for very specific, practical uses. It's so interesting that I love technology, I'm a tech passionista and a digital diva, but I always look for practical uses. If you use it as a tool to improve something that you are doing, that's great. Just don't overuse it, don't abuse it, and don't let it take you over.

WGW: Love it. Thank you so much for joining us today.

And to everyone who is listening, we'll be posting a recap online in the next week, so subscribe to our newsletter or keep checking the website or checking us out on social media if you want to listen to this again or share it with someone else in your network.

So thank you so much for joining us.