Techies worldwide are turning off their computers and phones for Shutdown Day. But can plugged-in Singaporeans survive?

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down? My boss is always SMSing me even on Sundays. If I don’t reply within an hour, I’m sure it would adversely affect my bonus come year-end.”

Employees are given BlackBerrys or other handheld devices with e-mail access, or laptops so they can log into office networks on the go. And Associate Professor Tan Hwee Hoon, who studies organisational behaviour at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University, says it’s not only common, but also mandatory, for most white-collar workers three days a week to be plugged in all the time.

The result is that the line between work and life is blurred, she says. “Bosses want their employees to be constantly connected, even though the job may not require it. More importantly, we have become so used to e-mail that we expect to be replied to promptly, often within 24 hours, and SMTPs be attended to immediately.

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At auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) Singapore, the majority of staff have mobile phones and laptops, says Ms Deborah Eng, its human capital partner. They also have the option of getting BlackBerrys.

She reasons: “Due to globalisation, most companies work across time zones and this has given rise to a culture where people stay connected via mobile devices.”

While PWC staff are generally not expected to stay contactable round the clock, there are instances—especially with urgent or time-sensitive projects—where they have to be, she adds.

But one argument for staying connected is that technology should be as much of an enabler as it is a master. Says Ms Ong: “Whether we like it or not, technology has become very much a part of our lives. In fact, technology enables us to better manage work-life balance. For instance, if staff need to take time off to attend to urgent family commitments, they can come to a standstill because their colleagues can still reach them through their mobile phones or BlackBerrys.

And, yes, there are the sceptics who carp that the fuss surrounding today’s tech black-out is overrated. One executive, Katrine Poon, 28, one of the 600 or so people who pledged to shutdown in Singapore today, says: “I’m doing it because it’s something I feel I can achieve and work towards its objectives. I see people who are so reliant on the computer that they neglect the people around them.”

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IT executive Katrine Poon, who plans to take part in Shutdown Day.

But can plugged-in Singaporeans survive?

I F YOU are reading this story in an actual newspaper, congratulations. But if you are reading it online, get your hand off your mouse and step away – you are addicted to your computer.

That’s what some techies worldwide are planning to do today in an effort to regain control of their lives, and re-connect with the non-virtual world.

Shutdown Day, as the “event” has been dubbed, was started in Canada by computer developers Denis Bystrov and Ashutosh Ra-

jkar. At press time, more than 12,000 people had signed up to unplug themselves from their computers and technology today, according to the duo’s website www.shut-
downday.org

In Singapore, a Facebook page promoting today’s event, titled Shutdown Day Singapore, was started last month by pro-
duction manager Jimmy Liew, 34.

The self-proclaimed tech geek and blogger says he first started circulating the message to his friends on the social networking site as a “public service”. They then passed it along to their friends.

The actual numbers, however, don’t really matter, says Mr Bystrov in an e-mail inter-
view with Life!: “I don’t care if participants click ‘I can’ or ‘I cannot’ (on the website),” he says. “As long as they start thinking about these main questions—What about me? Can I survive? or not? How am I spending my time?—the aim of the project is reached.”

“The aim is also to get people to think about how their lives have changed with the increasing use of the home computer, and whether any good things are being lost because of this.”

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Those behind the cause say the idea is to drive home the need to switch off every once in a while before over-dependency kicks in. Otherwise, the danger, explains senior consultant psychiatrist and psycho-
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