

S. Korea mulls law to keep office out of the home

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Hyper-wired South Korea is considering legislation that would ban bosses from bothering their staff at home, after growing complaints about the country's already onerous work-life imbalance.

A bill prohibiting managers from badgering staff at home was submitted to parliament on Wednesday, sponsored by 12 lawmakers from the main opposition Minjoo party.

"As more firms use [social media](#) or mobile messengers to send work orders, regardless of time, the stress inflicted on workers has reached a serious level," they said in a statement.

The bill seeks to ban firms from sending employees work-related messages by telephone, text, social media or via mobile messaging apps after official working hours.

The document specially references KakaoTalk, a chat app used by around 80 percent of the South Korean population.

The MPs' statement noted that too many workers were expected to be constantly on call, even when on holiday or late at night.

"More people are demanding rights to disconnect after work hours," it said, adding that the bill would allow workers a [personal life](#) free of workplace intrusion.

Similar legislation prohibiting e-mails after regular work hours has been proposed in countries such as France and Germany.

More than 80 percent of South Koreans have smartphones—one of the highest penetration rates in the world.

Couple that with the country's notorious workaholic corporate culture, and you have a system ripe for abuse, the MPs say.

Right to 'disconnect'

In 2014, the average South Korean worker clocked up 2,124 working hours—the second-highest total among OECD member nations after Mexico and far higher than the average of 1,770 hours.

In a recent report titled "Workers Who Are Scared of KakaoTalk," the Korea Labour and Society Institute said employees are forced to work about 11 extra hours a week on average using electronic gadgets.

"We have reached a point where working on weekends or after-hours—without pay—is increasingly becoming a norm," the report said.

"The use of smart devices for work blurs the boundaries between work and family life, which leads to a negative impact on work-family and work-life balance," it added.

South Korea prides itself on keeping pace with cutting edge technology, from ultra-fast broadband speeds to Samsung's high-end smartphones.

But its embrace of all things digital has come at a cost, as phones and tablets have morphed into mobile offices for employees that never close.

Some firms have taken unilateral steps to keep off-hours sacrosanct.

LG Uplus—the country's third-largest wireless operator—has threatened managers who send KakaoTalk messages to subordinates after 8:00 pm with demotion, or even dismissal.

"We wanted to help our staff enjoy their personal life in the evening, which will eventually foster their creativity," company spokesman Baek Yong-Dae said.

A gradual push-back against the gruelling work ethic that was deemed essential to South Korea's economic rise from the devastation of the Korean War has gathered pace in recent years.

Efforts to promote a life free from stress and information overload have included a series of "space-out competitions" where participants are required to "do nothing" for hours by not talking or using any electronic devices.

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