

# Stop working on your commute – it doesn't benefit anyone

August 31 2018, by David Spencer

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Our journey to and from the office has been taken over by work. Rather than reading a book, catching up with the news, or just relaxing, our commute time is now increasingly spent reading and replying to work-related emails. The transport we use to get to and from our jobs has become another venue for work.

The sad thing is that we consent to this extra work, despite it not being remunerated. Hours spent commuting are unpaid – they add nothing to our bank balances, though they save our employers the expense of higher wages.

The extension of work into commute time reflects the presence of an intrusive and pernicious ["always-on" culture](#). It reflects an environment where we are enslaved to work, even when not physically in the office. Our busyness, however, can only come at the expense of the quality of our lives and our health. We must fight to resist it.

## **Work-life imbalance**

[Research](#) shows how workers fit work into commute time, in part, to ease the burden of work. Answering emails on route to work can help to save time once you're at work. Equally email can be answered on the way home from work to ease the pressure of work during the next working day. Work can also be done on the move that could not be finished at work.

But here "savings" of time and effort are [likely to be illusory](#). Employers are not going to cut email traffic just because workers are replying to emails on the way to and from work. To the contrary the incentive is for employers to encourage email traffic outside of regular hours in order to exploit the free work of workers.

Work "saved" during commute time, in this case, may translate into more work during paid [work time](#). Workers again may be in the position of doing more work, for no extra pay. Out-of-hours working implies that work cannot be fitted into paid hours. It suggests that workers are overworked (and underpaid) for the work they do.

## Always-on culture

New technology enables us to connect with our work, beyond normal hours. Laptops and iPhones mean we have instant access to our work and workplaces. Wifi on trains and buses has helped to turn commuting into work time. But technology itself does not explain why work is performed outside of regular hours. For that we need to look at organisational culture.

Organisations increasingly demand that their employees give their bodies and lives to work. Staying late at work is a badge of honour.

Presenteeism – the act of being present at work for longer than is required – is rife in workplaces and reflects on the culture of overwork that is [endemic in modern society](#).

Working during commute time is simply an extension of the same culture. It demonstrates the way work has taken over our lives. We find time to work even when not at work because we are exposed to a culture that venerates hard work.

## Few benefits

Yet, all this extra work seems to bring few economic benefits. Productivity remains low in the UK despite workers working all hours. Commuters are no more productive for answering emails on the go. Indeed productivity is likely to be lower due to the stressed out and exhausting nature of long [commute](#) and work schedules.

[Research](#) continues to show the [negative health effects](#) of long hours of work. By working more we suffer ill-health, physical as well as mental. We also neglect our families, friends and communities. And we lose the ability to think and act beyond the roles we fill as workers.

Work may now be a normal part of commuting time but its performance imposes high costs on us and society more generally. In a rational world, we would move to [ban out-of-hours email](#), not just to protect free time, but also to safeguard health. Beyond this we would look to challenge the hegemony of work and promote ways of living that are less work-centred. Cutting work hours would be the only sane way of restoring any semblance of balance between jobs and life.

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