

Research shows that 'flexible work boundaries' often turn into 'work without boundaries'

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A new study demonstrates that employees do not need to spend actual time on work in their off-hours to experience the harmful effects. The mere expectations of availability increase strain for employees and their significant others -- even when employees do not engage in actual work during nonwork time. Credit: Virginia Tech

Employer expectations of work email monitoring during nonwork hours are detrimental to the health and well-being of not only employees but their family members as well.

William Becker, a Virginia Tech associate professor of management in the Pamplin College of Business, co-authored a new study, "Killing me softly: electronic communications monitoring and employee and significant-other well-being," showing that such expectations result in anxiety, which adversely affects the health of employees and their families.

"The competing demands of work and nonwork lives present a dilemma for employees," Becker said, "which triggers feelings of anxiety and endangers work and personal lives."

Other studies have shown that the stress of increased job demands leads to strain and conflict in family relationships when the employee is unable to fulfill nonwork roles at home—"such as when someone brings work home to finish up."

Their new study, he said, demonstrates that employees do not need to spend actual time on work in their off-hours to experience the harmful effects. The mere expectations of availability increase strain for employees and their significant others—even when employees do not engage in actual work during nonwork time.

Unlike work-related demands that deplete employee resources, physical and psychological, by requiring time away from home, "the insidious impact of 'always on' organizational culture is often unaccounted for or disguised as a benefit—increased convenience, for example, or higher autonomy and control over work-life boundaries," Becker said.

"Our research exposes the reality: 'flexible work boundaries' often turn

into 'work without boundaries,' compromising an employee's and their family's health and well-being."

As negative health outcomes are costly to them, what can employers do to mitigate the adverse effects identified by the study? Becker said policies that reduce expectations to monitor [electronic communication](#) outside of work would be ideal.

When that is not an option, the solution may be to establish boundaries on when electronic communication is acceptable during off-hours by setting up off-hour email windows or schedules when employees are available to respond.

Additionally, he said, organizational expectations should be communicated clearly. "If the nature of a job requires email availability, such expectations should be stated formally as a part of job responsibilities." Knowing these expectations upfront may reduce anxiety in employees and increase understanding from their [family members](#), he said.

As for employees, they could consider practicing mindfulness, which has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety, Becker said. Mindfulness may help employees "be present" in family interactions, which could help reduce conflict and improve relationship satisfaction. And, he added, mindfulness is within the [employee's](#) control when email expectations are not.

Becker, whose research interests include work emotion, turnover, organizational neuroscience, and leadership, is based at Virginia Tech's National Capital Region campus in metro Washington, D.C.

His study, co-authored with Liuba Y. Belkin, of Lehigh University; Samantha A. Conroy, of Colorado State University; and Sarah Tuskey, a

Virginia Tech Ph.D. student in executive business research, will be presented at the Academy of Management annual meeting in Chicago on August 10-14.

"Employees today must navigate more complex boundaries between work and [family](#) than ever before," said Becker. "Employer expectations during nonwork hours appear to increase this burden, as employees feel an obligation to shift roles throughout their nonwork time.

"Efforts to manage these expectations are more important than ever, given our findings that employees' families are also affected by these expectations."

Provided by Virginia Tech

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