

# How businesses can best help employees disconnect from work

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After hours of video meetings, employees often need to take a breather mid-day.  
Credit: Unsplash

A number of countries have recently introduced legislation giving employees the legal [right to disconnect](#) electronically from work.

Originating in France, right-to-disconnect initiatives mandate that organizations cannot expect employees to be available outside of their established working hours.

This legislation has now expanded to [Ireland](#), [Canada](#), [Spain](#) and other countries.

However, by maintaining a focus on a set of established working hours during which employees must be available, the right to disconnect simply takes the physical time clock off the wall and figuratively puts it into the cloud. Although an important initiative, a greater focus on employee [autonomy](#) is needed to maximize the benefits intended by these laws.

Although the right to disconnect may foster [high performance](#) by allowing employees to [recharge their batteries](#), the major intent is to promote employees' [work](#)-life balance by allowing them to disengage from work, handle different responsibilities and ensure their well-being. Right-to-disconnect laws signal a greater focus on employee well-being, and a rejection of the idea that workers need to be "always on."

## **Limitations of the right to disconnect**

But right-to-disconnect legislation has limitations. It focuses on specific hours employees are free to disconnect and establishes a window during which they must be accessible.

However, establishing working hours during which employees must be available is a holdover from the [industrial age](#) when the value of employees was based on the inputs they provided—physical labor, for example. It fails to recognize that the value of today's employees is often based on their outputs, including [creative work](#).

However, when organizations implement policies that allow employees the freedom to choose for themselves when and how to disconnect, the [well-being](#) and [performance](#) benefits of disconnecting are maximized.

For example, someone working at home may choose to disconnect in order to go for a run at 2 p.m. and then work at 8 p.m., after their kids are asleep. Also, different people [operate more effectively](#) at different times of the day.

Similarly, an employee completing a series of intense meetings might want to take a break before re-engaging in work. Giving employees the right to disconnect on their own terms may be the best formula for promoting both performance and well-being.

## **Fostering autonomy**

These benefits can be maximized when work is designed to provide employees with an appropriately [high level of autonomy](#), which refers to the discretion employees have over how, when and, increasingly, where they complete their work tasks. Numerous classic and contemporary studies demonstrate the value of employee autonomy.

For example, [research shows](#) that employees who have the freedom to choose how to structure their workday and schedule their tasks (work-scheduling autonomy) have higher levels of work engagement and innovative work behavior.

[Other studies](#) indicate that allowing employees to make decisions (decision-making autonomy) and choose for themselves how to perform tasks (work-method autonomy) reduces mental strain, increases work motivation and improves job performance.

Similarly, [research shows](#) that when employees have the discretion to

choose where to work (location autonomy) they select environments that promote both their productivity and well-being.

As these studies demonstrate, there are a [variety of forms of autonomy](#). Employee well-being and performance will be enhanced if greater autonomy, of various types, is built into right-to-disconnect initiatives.

In structuring work this way, organizations effectively separate work hours from work outputs and focus squarely on results rather than the time clock. Doing so also reduces concerns over how to manage employees remotely.

Overseeing an employee's work behavior may not, in fact, be necessary as long as workers are generating outputs on time, within budget and at an acceptable level of quality. As long as employees are meeting organizational objectives, when, how and where they work may be largely immaterial.

## **Limits to autonomy**

Different jobs have different levels and forms of autonomy they support. For instance, an emergency room nurse cannot choose to work from home or independently decide when to arrive at the hospital for a shift. The relationship between autonomy and work outcomes [may vary depending on the nature of the work and the employer](#).

Issues such as the nature of the work, co-ordination requirements, dealing with deadlines or crises, work standards and employee tenure should all be considered in deciding how much autonomy is warranted. But the general principle should be to provide as much autonomy as a job will allow and support employees in their exercise of it.

Additionally, work groups should have the opportunity to establish the

parameters of autonomy themselves and revisit this issue on a regular basis.

The right to disconnect is an issue that has emerged due to technological developments that have allowed organizations to keep employees tethered to work 24/7. Implementing this right effectively requires overcoming the industrial age mentality that imposes constraints on [employee](#) autonomy that are unnecessary, and possibly counterproductive, in the modern age.

The best way to help employees disconnect from work is to allow them the autonomy to choose for themselves how, when and where to disconnect.

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