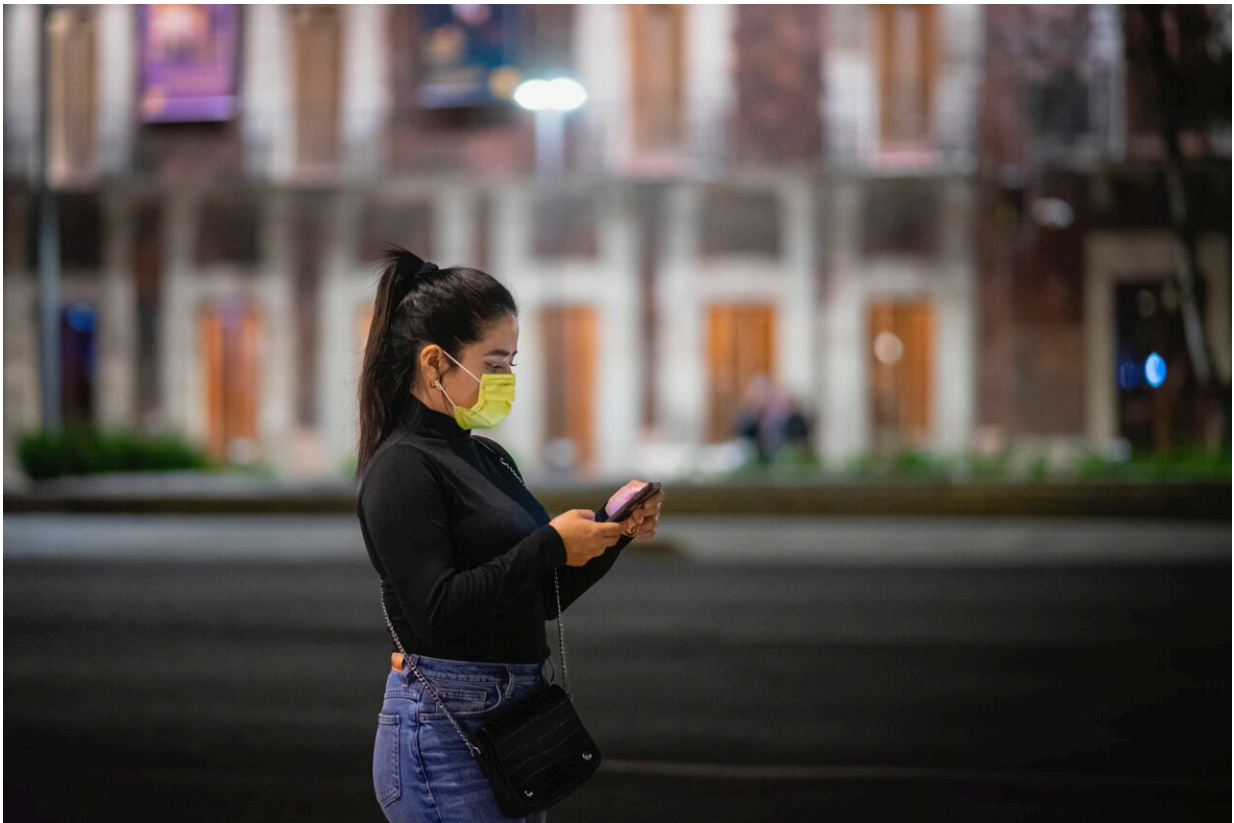


Staying connected to work after hours is good—up to a point

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There's a "sweet spot" for how much employees should be digitally connected to their jobs after hours, a new study suggests.

Some work after hours—like checking email or doing other tasks—makes employees feel more connected with their colleagues and supervisors and makes them more productive, results showed.

But after a certain point, digital connectivity to the office turns into "too much of a good thing," said Jia "Jasmine" Hu, corresponding author of the study and professor of management at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"When workers spend too much time on their phones and laptops outside of working hours, it leads to emotional exhaustion and lower job performance," Hu said.

The study was published online in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

Hu and her colleagues conducted two studies, both in China, with similar results. Both were done before the COVID-19 pandemic.

One study included 467 employees and their supervisors at a large pharmaceutical company. The second study involved 313 employees and their supervisors at a large financial institute.

At the beginning of the studies, participants rated how often they used mobile digital devices to perform work outside of normal hours in a variety of different contexts, including while they were shopping and while eating at a restaurant. They rated connectivity on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always).

A month later they completed a questionnaire that measured what is called social capital development at work. They were asked questions about how much they networked with others at work and how well-connected they felt to their colleagues. They also assessed how emotionally exhausted they felt, rating how burned out they were from

work and answering similar questions.

After another month, supervisors rated the performance of participants in the study.

Results showed that up to a certain point, after-hours connectivity for work-related matters led to more [social capital](#) for employees and better performance ratings from their supervisors.

"At low to moderate levels, staying connected to work was beneficial for both employees and employers," Hu said.

"Connectivity allowed employees to build better and stronger connections with people who could help them with their jobs, enhance their performance, and advance their career."

But when employees reported more than moderate levels of connectivity, they were more likely to say they felt burned out at work and felt fatigued when they got up in the morning and had to face another day at work—signs of emotional exhaustion.

And that tended to have a negative effect on their job performance, according to the ratings of their supervisors.

The "[sweet spot](#)" for how much digital connectivity is ideal is likely to be different depending on the job, the company and the employees themselves, Hu said.

But it is important to find that spot, according to Hu.

"Organizations risk damage if they fail to recognize that too much connectivity may be detrimental to employee performance," she said.

"It is a good idea for organizations to work with [employees](#) to identify when connectivity is too much and to clarify expectations regarding when to respond to after-hours messages from work."

This study was done before the pandemic, when the lines between work and non-work time became even blurrier, Hu said.

"COVID-19 has changed how people work and it is more vital than ever to find that balance in how much we connect to work after [work hours](#) and create appropriate boundaries between our work and private lives," she said.

More information: Shuang Ren et al, Digital connectivity for work after hours: Its curvilinear relationship with employee job performance, *Personnel Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/peps.12497](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12497)

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