

What a 'right to disconnect' from work could look like in the UK

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The UK's new government has promised to take action to "promote a positive work-life balance for all workers," and to prevent homes ["turning into 24/7 offices"](#). The risk of "always on" working has grown

since the pandemic, with technology meaning that work is often within easy reach.

[Legislation](#) allowing workers to disconnect from work has been increasingly adopted around Europe, in recognition of the damaging effect that endless work demands can have on well-being and family life.

A [review](#) of data from 183 countries found significantly raised levels of heart disease and stroke for those working long hours. And there is a growing recognition of the [negative effects](#) of extended working on [mental health](#). Sick workforces can also damage productivity.

Only a few years ago, most people's working days consisted of traveling to a worksite where they remained for around eight hours, after which they returned home to relax and recuperate. Holidays, too, were times when people could take a complete break from work.

"Dead zones" and areas where the [internet is weak](#) still exist, but they are declining in number. So there are few places where people can truly escape from work. Sociologists have referred to the expectation that workers are always contactable as the "[presence bleed](#)."

In the UK, the share of the workforce reporting that they work mainly at home rose overnight from [6% to 43%](#) when lockdown restrictions were put in place. This figure has since fallen back to 14%, but around a quarter of workers [report](#) that they are now hybrid working.

These workers typically have [more autonomy](#) over their working time—and homeworkers frequently [report](#) being more productive when working at home rather than the office, because there are fewer distractions. Other [benefits](#) have been observed around greater staff inclusivity, where caring commitments or health restrictions had previously made it difficult to work typical hours in office-based

locations.

However, these benefits can come at a [cost](#). Those working at home are often connected to work for longer, and are more likely to be emailing or taking video calls outside of their core hours.

Inevitably, the pressures of work can spill over into non-work life, with homeworkers reporting difficulties in being able to switch off or unwind. This can be pronounced when people have to work in spaces otherwise used for domestic purposes, like the dining room table or in the corner of a bedroom. This can particularly be the case for [young people](#).

It can also be difficult for younger workers at the start of their careers, and other lower-status staff, to challenge demands to be responsive beyond their contracted hours. As such, they can end up being more easily exploited.

The right to disconnect

A legal right to disconnect might include not being allowed to email or otherwise contact staff after a certain time or during their holidays, except in exceptional circumstances. Or it could mean not scheduling meetings outside of core hours—something that might particularly benefit parents of young children.

[The list of countries](#) taking a proactive approach here is growing at pace. While legislation has sometimes been hastened by the growth of hybrid working, it can apply to people wherever they work. Belgium, Ireland and Italy were acting in this area before the pandemic began, when work was largely site-based. Other countries such as Spain, Portugal and Australia are following.

However, the legislative models being used are not comprehensive—there are [weaknesses and gaps](#). In Belgium, the law only requires that employers adhere to a general framework for the right to disconnect (known as a "soft approach"). This allows companies leeway in how the right is implemented. In the UK, [employers](#) have already voiced their desire for some employees—such as senior staff—to have the right to opt out of any new law.

In fact, [58% of business leaders](#) surveyed by the Institute of Directors objected to a right to disconnect. Its report included a claim that legislation could create a culture of "ambulance chasers" taking [legal action](#) against their employers. However, this has not yet been reported in [countries](#) operating some form of the right to disconnect.

Countries with these laws generally specify exceptions in certain sectors, such as aviation and medicine. It has also been common for smaller employers to be excluded: the French legislation applies to companies with more than 50 employees. Yet small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up more than [61% of UK employment](#), so a large part of the workforce could be excluded unless protection is designed more inclusively.

Another concern is that if the sanctions for non-compliance are weak, legislation or (as may be more likely) a code of practice could be a toothless tiger. While employers who have invested in the [business case](#) for flexible working have often developed innovative good practices, for more reluctant converts, legislation provides important employee protection in spurring organizations into action.

It's also important to consider why extended working hours are couched in terms of *digital* connectivity: "disconnecting" or "switching off." There is scope for policy language to be framed more inclusively to cover the pressures on a broader range of workers faced with longer

hours—perhaps including those working in the gig economy.

Recent evidence suggests that unpaid overtime is widespread and is not restricted to those working at home: [3.8 million people](#) did unpaid overtime in 2023.

To make a right to disconnect effective and meaningful, these issues need to be picked over carefully as the government translates its pre-election promises into action. As always, the devil will be in the detail.

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