

Australia gives millions of workers 'right to disconnect'

August 26 2024, by David WILLIAMS



A boat in Sydney Harbour on August 20, where many residents welcomed new legislation that allows them to "disconnect" from work when off duty.

Australia gave millions of workers the legal right to "disconnect" on Monday, allowing them to ignore unreasonable out-of-hours calls, emails

and texts from their bosses.

People can now refuse to monitor, read, or respond to their employers' attempts to contact them outside work hours—unless that refusal is deemed "unreasonable".

Unions welcomed the legislation, saying it gave workers a way to reclaim some [work-life balance](#).

"Today is a historic day for working people," said Michele O'Neil, president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

"Australian unions have reclaimed the right to knock off after work," she said.

In the streets of Sydney, people appeared to welcome the change.

"I have a very hard time disconnecting and even though I may not necessarily be logged on, my brain is constantly working overtime," not-for-profit worker Karolina Joseski told AFP.

"So getting that after-hour call from my boss doesn't necessarily help."

'Deeply confusing'

But the reform got a cool welcome from Australia's top industry body.

"The 'right to disconnect' laws are rushed, poorly thought out and deeply confusing," the Australian Industry Group said in a statement.

"At the very least, employers and employees will now be uncertain about whether they can take or make a call out of hours to offer an extra shift," it said.

The law is similar to those of some European and Latin American countries.

Research indicates that the right to disconnect benefits employees, said University of Sydney associate professor Chris Wright.

More than 70 percent of workers in European Union companies with a right to disconnect policy considered its impact to be positive, according to a November 2023 study by the EU work-related agency Eurofound.

Employees are experiencing "availability creep" as smartphones and other [digital devices](#) put them in reach of their employers, Wright told AFP.

"Having a measure that restores to some extent the boundary between people's work and non-work lives is a positive thing, certainly for employees but also for employers," he said, particularly in industries trying to lure new workers.

'Commonsense'

The Australian law, enacted in February, came into force for medium-sized and large companies as of Monday.

Smaller firms with fewer than 15 employees will be covered from August 26, 2025.

The head of Australia's workplace relations regulator, Fair Work Ombudsman Anna Booth, said people should take a "commonsense approach" to applying the new law.

Under the legislation, [workers](#) may be ordered by a tribunal to stop unreasonably refusing out-of-hours contact, and employers likewise may

be ordered to stop unreasonably requiring [employees](#) to respond, the regulator said.

The question of what is reasonable will "depend on the circumstances", the Fair Work Ombudsman said in a statement.

Deciding factors may include the reason for the contact, the nature of the employee's role, and their compensation for working extra hours or being available, it said.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese hailed the reform, which was pushed through by his centre-left Labor government.

"We want to make sure that just as people don't get paid 24 hours a day, they don't have to work for 24 hours a day," he told national broadcaster ABC.

"It's a [mental health issue](#), frankly, as well, for people to be able to disconnect from their work and connect with their family and their life."

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