

After-hours email expectations negatively impact employee well-being

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Earlier this year, France passed a labor reform law that banned checking emails on weekends. New research—[to be presented next week at the annual meeting](#) of the Academy of Management—suggests other countries might do well to follow suit, for the sake of employee health and productivity.

A new study—authored by Liuba Belkin of Lehigh University, William Becker of Virginia Tech and Samantha A. Conroy of Colorado State University—finds a link between organizational after-hours email expectations and emotional exhaustion, which hinders work-family balance. The results suggest that modern workplace technologies may be hurting the very employees that those technologies were designed to help.

Using data collected from 365 working adults, Belkin and her colleagues look at the role of organizational expectation regarding "off" hour emailing and find it negatively impacts employee emotional states, leading to "burnout" and diminished work-family balance, which is essential for individual health and well-being. The study—described in an article entitled "Exhausted, but unable to disconnect: the impact of email-related organizational expectations on work-family balance"—is the first to identify email-related expectations as a job stressor along with already established factors such as high workload, interpersonal conflicts, physical environment or time pressure.

Previous research has shown that in order to restore resources used

during the day at work, employees must be able to detach both mentally and physically from work.

"Email is notoriously known to be the impediment of the recovery process. Its accessibility contributes to experience of work overload since it allows employees to engage in work as if they never left the workspace, and at the same time, inhibits their ability to psychologically detach from work-related issues via continuous connectivity," write the authors.

Interestingly, they found that it is not the amount of time spent on work emails, but the expectation which drives the resulting sense of exhaustion. Due to anticipatory stress—defined as a constant state of anxiety and uncertainty as a result of perceived or anticipated threats, according to research cited in the article—employees are unable to detach and feel exhausted regardless of the time spent on after-hours emails.

"This suggests that organizational expectations can steal employee resources even when actual time is not required because employees cannot fully separate from work," state the authors.

According to the study, the expectation does not have to be explicit or conveyed through a formal organizational policy. It can be set by normative standards for behavior in the organization. The [organizational culture](#) is created through what its leaders and members define as acceptable or unacceptable behavior.

"Thus, if an organization perpetuates the 'always on' culture it may prevent employees from fully disengaging from work eventually leading to chronic stress," says Belkin, associate professor of management at Lehigh's College of Business and Economics and coauthor of the study.

Organizational expectations

The authors looked at data collected from surveys of 385 participants from a wide variety of industries and organizations. The surveys were designed to measure organizational expectations, time spent on email outside of work, psychological detachment from work during off-work hours, level of emotional exhaustion and perceptions of work-family balance, among other factors. The largest industry groups represented were finance & banking (15%), technology (11%), and healthcare (8%).

In addition to the correlation between organizational expectations to monitor work email after-hours and emotional exhaustion as a result of the inability to "turn off," the researchers also found that people who prefer a strict separation of their work and family time have an even more difficult time detaching from work than those who are OK with blending work and home time.

"The anticipatory stress caused by organizational email-related norms is more dangerous for people who prefer highly segmented schedules," says Belkin.

The authors believe that this may be because people with less rigid separation between work and family time have "...an easier time disconnecting since their personal preferences do not conflict with organizational expectations." Belkin and her coauthors believe that a high-pressure environment may eventually lead to emotional exhaustion for "low segmenters" as well.

Balance matters

The authors cite previous research correlating the absence of work-family balance to a number of detrimental outcomes - for both the

individual and his or her employer:

From the study: "Satisfaction with the balance between work and family domains is important for individual health and well-being, while individual inability to successfully balance roles in those domains can lead to anxiety and depression, lowered satisfaction with both work and family roles, absenteeism, decreased job productivity and organizational commitment and greater turnover."

"As prior research has shown, if people cannot disconnect from work and recuperate, it leads to burnout, higher turnover, more deviant behavior, lower productivity, and other undesirable outcomes," said Belkin.

What managers can do

The results of the study provide insights into what managers can do to mitigate employee chronic stress and [emotional exhaustion](#) caused by organizational expectations related to email.

"We believe our findings have implications for organizations, as even though in the short run being "always on" may seem like a good idea because it increases productivity, it can be dangerous in the long-run," said Belkin.

The authors suggest that if completely banning email after work is not an option, managers could implement weekly "email free days." Another idea is to offer rotating after-hours email schedules to help employees manage their work and family time more efficiently.

The authors write: "By making descriptive and injunctive norms that emphasize balance between work and non-work domains salient, organizations should potentially decrease the email-related stress."

The benefits may go beyond employee well-being.

From the study: "Such policies may not only reduce employee pressure to reply to emails after-hours and relieve the exhaustion from stress, but will also serve as a signal of organizational caring and support, potentially increasing trust in management, [work](#) identification, job commitment and extra-role behaviors."

The authors suggest that future research on the impact of communication media on employee behavior and well-being include how organizational expectations may be contributing to the outcomes.

Provided by Lehigh University

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