How digital technologies and remote work affect well-being

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Feeling like you have to be constantly available for work results in a permanent state of stress. But in fact, many managers wouldn’t take it amiss if you sometimes didn’t answer the phone. Credit: Roberto Schirdewahn

Many people are kept from falling asleep by thoughts that revolve around work even after the workday is over. In collaboration with Professor Sandra Ohly from the University of Kassel, Professor Marcel Kern, Head of the Work and Health research group at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, investigates how digital technologies and remote work affect well-being.

Digital technology alone will not cause stress

"There’s a lot of research on digital technology and fatigue," says Marcel Kern. It’s often assumed that people can't switch off from work due to digital accessibility. But is this really due to digital media as such? Marcel Kern, Clara Heißler and Sandra Ohly set out to get to the bottom of this question. On five consecutive days, they had employees from different business enterprises fill out a questionnaire three times a day. How many hours did they use their mobile phones for work? Were there still many unfinished tasks left at the end of the day? How well could they switch off in the evening? These and many other questions were answered by 340 participants.

The result: the stress wasn't caused simply because they were using digital technology, but mainly when unfinished tasks were piling up that required them to use the technology. In order to recommend effective measures, the researchers must be able to distinguish between people who can't switch off because they use their mobile phones and people who use their mobile phones because they can't switch off. The latter seems more likely to apply.

Manager training improves satisfaction

As Marcel Kern found out in follow-up surveys, it's the attitude and behavior of managers that usually makes people feel they have to be available at all times. The employees base their behavior on that of their managers. And if those managers keep sending emails late at night, this makes the rest of the team think that they have to respond straightaway. In a study—once again in cooperation with Sandra Ohly’s team in Kassel—Marcel Kern explored methods to combat this problem.

Twenty-three managers of a commercial enterprise took part in a training course. During this training, the researchers made them aware of how their own attitude and behavior can affect their employees. The researchers recommended, for example, to make explicit agreements with the team on after-hours availability. Or to explain why a manager might still send emails late at night—for example, because it's easier for them to reconcile this with their childcare responsibilities.

The researchers interviewed the managers' employees before the training took place and about six weeks afterwards: when did they think they had to be available for their organization? Were they able to switch off in the evenings? How stressed
were they by their job? "The results were conclusive," as Marcel Kern says. "The employees felt much better after the intervention. This came as a surprise to the managers. They hadn't been aware of the impact of their own behavior."

The research is published in the *Journal of Business and Psychology*.


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