Digital Boundaries and Disconnection at Work

A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

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Why is digital balance important?

The rise of mobile communication devices and other new technologies has made it possible to achieve such a high degree of flexibility and autonomy for workers, to the extent to which it allows work to be done at any time, regardless of location, provided there is connectivity.

Increased remote working as a result of the pandemic is positively impacting the lives of many workers, with reductions in commuting time and cost, and the ability to spend more time with family members. However, an 'always on' working culture can be a major trigger and accelerator for ill health – both mentally and physically.

Poor digital boundaries pose risks to employee wellbeing

Findings from the Work Foundation and from Dr Lara Pecis at Lancaster University Management School highlight that IT use can increase work intensity, heighten work-related stress and consequently lead to decreased work productivity. This is because remote work intensifies the need to be responsive and connected beyond standard working hours, during evenings, weekends and holidays.[1] While some appreciate knowing what is going on in the virtual office at all times, others find that the inability to unplug and switch off is putting strain on their mental wellbeing. One interviewee told the Work Foundation that "it's not so much working from home, it's living at work."[2]

The Health and Safety Executive's management standards highlight the importance of working hours, control over tasks, and how organisational change is managed as key factors that can affect stress at work.[3] Therefore, it is critical that organisations take a proactive and consultative approach in mitigating wellbeing pressures.

The Right to Disconnect is emerging as one solution to help create rules or guardrails to help employers and employees manage digital boundaries between work and home. Such approaches have been introduced through legislation or agreements direct between employers and unions/works councils. Other approaches, include making digital boundaries part of your wellbeing agenda or flexible/hybrid working arrangements.

The case for action

Digital disconnection is about creating a positive culture that helps employees to limit engaging in work-related communications and extending working hours into their personal time. Many large, multinational companies already have developed a range of approaches to help balance work and home life. [4] [5]

There is a compelling business case for embedding a strategic approach to disconnection within your organisation to support wellbeing within new working patterns:

- An established evidence base indicates a link between higher levels of employee wellbeing and increased productivity.[6]

- Employers taking an interest in employee health is a potent driver of workforce trust, and improving levels of wellbeing has been shown to be associated with more sustained levels of engagement and performance.[7]

- Evidence suggests that disconnection is particularly important for gender equality at work, with recent research finding that generalised expectations of working long-hours plays a key role in blocking women's progression.[8]

Why is a proactive approach needed?

This is a complex issue that won't resolve itself. Any approach to mitigating the risks posed will require careful thought and consideration, compassionate leadership and engagement with staff.

- maintaining the gains in choice over working hours and flexibility that many employees have benefitted from throughout the pandemic, while still meeting wider organisational objectives will need to be carefully managed.

- Without a proactive approach to digital disconnection, existing inequalities could be exacerbated, and new ones could form as a result of power dynamics within the organisation.

- If leaders don't empower staff to set their own boundaries, conflicts could arise. For example, a line manager who chooses to work weekends due to childcare responsibilities throughout the week could put members of their team under pressure to do the same when it doesn't suit their preferences or circumstances.

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution – different ways of working may work for different people, in different roles, in different businesses, at different times.

Principles for developing an approach to digital disconnection

We have developed the following set of principles to help employers to develop their own approaches to digital disconnection that supports workers to fully disengage from work outside of core hours and while on leave. To inform this work, we held a roundtable discussion with employers from a range of sectors, including energy, manufacturing and professional services.

1. Leaders need to develop a purpose and values-driven strategy informed by staff involvement

By developing an organisation-wide approach, you are signalling to your staff that you recognise that there are risks to an always-on culture, you want to protect their wellbeing and work/life balance, and that tackling this requires collective responsibility.

Start by gathering evidence to build a clear picture of the current situation in your organisation - what kind of out-of-hours communication or work is taking place, when it is happening, which roles or teams are affected? Alongside this, draw on existing evidence about what is working and where the challenges are in your organisation, for example staff survey results, staff turnover or sickness absence data.

A core issue that many employers are likely to come up against is the seemingly inherent incompatibility of flexible schedules and the right to log off in the first place. As we see greater take-up of flexible working patterns, the amount of time where people can meet in person or communicate directly will be more limited. Within this context, there's a clear need to carefully plan for collaborative time to reduce the risk of staff being contacted outside of their working hours. One attendee described these challenges in terms of balancing the needs of I/We/Us – the individual, their direct team and the wider organisation.

The employers we spoke to highlighted the importance of employee consultation when making decisions in their organisations. This is positive; however, it is crucial that discussions about working patterns and locations includes digital disconnection.

Key questions to explore through consultation:

- How will your organisation or team define 'working hours/days/time' and 'time away from work'?

- If those working patterns are likely to be different for different members of the same team/organisation, what challenges and opportunities might that present? How can time together be maximised to limit the risk of colleagues picking up work during non-working hours?

- What aspect(s) of work within your organisation can make taking time away from work difficult? How are they affecting staff at the moment? How can you think differently about how that work is delivered to facilitate better work life balance?

- What problems would you like to tackle through establishing an approach to disconnection?

Your organisation's values and ambitions should form the starting point for an approach to digital disconnection. For example, you might choose to set targets around improving the retention of working parents, women or disabled employees, linked to your disconnection strategy, if high levels of staff turnover among specific worker groups is a concern.

2. Focus on building management capabilities within your organisation

Managers will be critical to the successful implementation of any digital disconnection strategy, as a result it is is important that they are trained in managing conflict and empowered to set expectations within their team. Managers themselves are also likely to be under pressure, and therefore it is important that they are supported, and that their skills (and the supporting infrastructure of the organisation) are capable of trialling, evaluating and amending new approaches.

It is important for managers to know their team members, understand their circumstances, and be able to pick up on signs of stress. Organisations should consider training managers to use tools such as Mind's Wellness Action Plans with their teams, to enable them to structure and start conversations about mental health and know when and what type of support or interventions are needed with individuals.[9]

3. Experiment and engage with staff to find an approach that works

As with any change process, clear communication and inclusive engagement will be critical to its legitimacy, take-up, and success. Consultation should be a continuous exercise aimed at developing a thorough understanding of employees' perspectives, and the kinds of responsibilities and pressures that impact them at work. There will likely be a need to experiment with different approaches to disconnection over time. From our research we have compiled some examples of disconnection that you might want to try.

To enable this iterative approach, employees need to feel psychologically safe, meaning that they feel comfortable taking risks and trying out new things, and need to believe that their opinion is valued. Evidence suggests that high levels of psychological safety are the most significant characteristic of efficient teams and facilitate employee wellbeing.[10]

There should be regular opportunities for staff to provide feedback on approaches to disconnection. Results of this feedback, like with all staff surveys, should be published internally with identifiable actions to take forward. Your digital disconnection strategy should be seen as a living document that can evolve with the organisation and respond to shifts in working practices in the future.

Experiment with these practical changes:

- Make clear in email signatures that they work flexibly, and a response outside of the recipient's own working hours is not expected.

- Schedule meetings and calls with advanced notice, considering the working patterns of all attendees, to ensure that each individual's personal time is respected.

- Lead by example, e.g. by setting expectations and highlighting the importance of the right to disconnect to clients and external partners.

- Agree a window of time for response to external enquiries/stakeholders that allows colleagues to pick up points at times that work for them.

- Designate specific times of day for meetings and for focussed time.

- Agree to use different forms of communication for different purposes. For example, text or WhatsApp messages for social purposes, email for work purposes, and no expectation of a response outside of working hours.

- Lead by example, with senior leadership being clear that we all need to be able to switch-off from work.

- Review and discuss plans with trade unions and/or staff groups.

Short-term practical steps must be reinforced with longer-term cultural change

Fundamentally, organisational approaches to digital boundaries and disconnection should be part of a wider cultural change programme. This takes time and dedication; just implementing quick practical steps will only get you so far.

Digital disconnection is an important step, but it won't resolve all issues relating to work-life balance and burnout. Instead of being a standalone initiative, digital disconnection should be one policy within a much broader package aimed at enhancing employee wellbeing. This could include reviewing workloads and job design, improving holiday and leave policies, offering a range of flexible working options to improve work-life balance, and facilitating the development of mentoring programmes.

Get in touch

This is an area of ongoing importance in our research and influencing programme at the Work Foundation. If your organisation has implemented or is working to implement strategies around digital disconnection, and you would like to be involved in our work, please get in touch.

About Us

About the Work Foundation

The Work Foundation is the leading think tank for improving work in the UK. We have been an authoritative, independent source of ideas and analysis on the labour market and the wider economy for over a hundred years.

As the pace of economic change continues to disrupt the ways we work and do business, our mission is to support everyone in the UK to access rewarding and high-quality work and enable businesses to realise the potential of their teams.

To do this, we engage directly with practitioners, businesses and workers, producing rigorous applied research that allows us to develop practical solutions and policy recommendations to tackle the challenges facing the world of work.

We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

About Prospect

Prospect Union is a leading UK trade union representing over 150,000 members across professional, specialist, engineering and technology roles. The union is a leading voice in establishing flexible and new work patterns both to improve wellbeing for workers and productivity.

References

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Additional Resources

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• The Work Foundation (Aug 2021). Implementing an organisational right to disconnect policy: key considerations for employers. Available at: https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/news/blog/implementing-an-organisational-right-to-disconnect-policy-key-considerations-for-employers

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