

THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT: HOW ORGANISATIONS CAN TACKLE 'ALWAYS ON' CULTURE

A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL
FORUM FOR HEALTH AND
WELLBEING AT WORK

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The University of Manchester
Alliance Manchester Business School

The National
Forum for
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Wellbeing
at Work



What is the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work?

In 2016 a group of Chief Medical Officers and HR directors of leading global companies and major public sector institutions created the Forum with a central mission to improve workplace health and wellbeing. Today, dozens of major global organisations are members of the Forum representing a vast range of business sectors including retail, banking, oil and gas, healthcare, IT, construction and media.

The Forum's vision is to reinforce the evidence and belief that good health is good for business, and good business is good for health. It aims to inspire people and organisations to challenge their thinking about the opportunities that healthy high-performing people bring to work, while also creating shared values that both business and employees can realise.

The Forum aims to bring the most innovative evidence-based thinking to organisations, and integrate the 'psychosocial determinants' of health that create a healthy work culture. These include productivity, leadership, decision-making, behavioural safety, performance indicators, diversity and inclusion, financial wellbeing and the impact of digitisation.

In recent years the Forum has produced a number of position papers, run high profile networking events, and contributed to government policy papers and consultation exercises.

Find out more at
www.alliancembs.manchester.ac.uk/research/health-wellbeing-forum/

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FOREWORD

At the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work we bring together leaders from the health and people functions across multiple sectors to address pressing workforce challenges.

The world of work has been transformed this century by the technological advances sometimes described as "the Fourth Industrial Revolution". How we work, where we work and when we work have all been altered radically, particularly by information communication technology (ICT). The benefits have been legion, not least in improved productivity and greater flexibility for workers, but there is a downside too in blurring the boundaries between work and home life, leading in some cases to stress and burnout.

In response to the adverse effects of an 'always on' culture there has been growing pressure for workers to be afforded a Right to Disconnect allowing them to disengage from work and, in particular, workplace ICT. In some countries that has resulted in government regulation, either in the form of legislation or the adoption of Codes of Practice. Here in the UK the Labour party included a commitment to introduce a statutory Right to Disconnect in its 2024 election manifesto, but it has not been included in the Employment Rights Bill currently going through Parliament.

There, nevertheless, remains a commitment by the UK Government to consult on the issue with a view to introducing some form of regulation. Some companies in the UK have introduced their own Right to Disconnect policies, either to address requirements for dealing with staff and customers in countries where there is legislation, or to pre-empt possible changes in this country.

In this report we aim to set out a balanced selection of the evidence relating to the impact of ICT at work on people's psychological wellbeing. We also reference the approaches taken in different jurisdictions to crafting regulation in this area and highlight some of the challenges that exist in establishing rules that are practicable in a modern global working environment. We make recommendations for how any Right to Disconnect policy might be developed and implemented, based on the science and the practical experience of seeking to improve the health and wellbeing of people at work.

We hope that this report will contribute usefully to the Right to Disconnect debate and be of assistance both to those considering regulation and those looking to develop company policies in this area.

DR PAUL LITCHFIELD

CBE OStJ FRCP FFOM

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We would like to thank the following members of the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work that helped put together this report:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the implications of the digital and data-led age on the modern workplace, particularly focusing on the concept of the Right to Disconnect.

The integration of information communication technology (ICT) tools such as personal computers, the Internet, mobile devices, and email has revolutionised work environments, promoting flexibility, productivity, and connectivity. However, these advancements come with considerable challenges, including heightened expectations and the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life.

ICT can enhance work-life balance and job satisfaction by facilitating flexibility in both working time and work location. Conversely, it can impose significant demands, leading to pressures to remain constantly connected, thereby increasing workloads, stress, and work-home conflicts. This paradox underscores the drive to introduce policies to safeguard employees' mental health by allowing them to disengage from work-related communications outside contractual hours.

France was the first country to legislate for a Right to Disconnect in 2017 and a number of other jurisdictions have followed suit, either as a legal provision or as a Code of Practice, and some businesses have introduced policies at a company level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further propelled remote and hybrid working, emphasising the importance of establishing clear boundaries between work and personal time, so that employees can have protected time to recharge and help maintain their mental health in an increasingly connected world.

This report reviews the evidence linking workplace communication and psychosocial risk as well as some varying international approaches to mitigate the risk of an 'always on' culture. It describes some of the challenges involved in creating an effective Right to Disconnect approach and the importance of aligning specific guidance with the culture of an organisation and the societies in which it operates.

Guidance and recommendations are also given for how organisations can implement such an approach using the IGLOO (Individual, Group, Leader, Organisation, and Overarching context) Model as an evidence-based framework.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT?

The *Right to Disconnect* refers to a worker's right to be able to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or other messages, during non-work hours without fear of negative repercussions (Eurofund, 2021). It seeks to establish clear boundaries between professional and personal time, ensuring employees can recharge and maintain their mental health.



Technological advancements have transformed the modern workplace, with information communication technology (ICT) redefining how, when and where work is performed. ICT encompasses tools such as personal computers, the Internet, mobile devices, and email, enabling seamless communication and collaboration across the globe (references 1,2).

However, while ICT is celebrated for fostering flexibility, productivity, and connectivity (3,4), it also presents significant challenges and expectations, often described as a 'double-edged sword' (5,6).

On the one hand, ICT can act as a powerful resource. It facilitates instant messaging, remote work, virtual meetings, and flexible arrangements that enhance employees' control over their work environment, contributing to improved work-life balance and job satisfaction (7, 2, 8). Moreover, the ease of accessing and sharing information has revolutionized efficiency, enabling employees to work more effectively (9, 2).

On the other hand, ICT can function as a demand, creating pressures to be constantly connected and 'always-on'. The ability to access work anytime, anywhere, can blur the boundaries between work and personal life, and potentially contribute to increased workloads, stress, and work-home conflict (10, 11). This 'autonomy paradox' describes how mobile ICT tools, while empowering, can become 'electronic leashes,' leading to chronic exhaustion and burnout (12, 13).

In response to mounting evidence of the negative health effects of constant connectivity, France introduced the Right to Disconnect in 2017. This legal framework provides employees with the right to disengage from

work-related electronic communications outside their contractual hours without fear of repercussions, helping to safeguard mental health and protect work-home boundaries.

France's approach was a statutory provision with implementation via employee and employer negotiations in the first instance. Since then, other countries and organisations have explored similar approaches – some through legal frameworks and some non-binding – recognising the need for home/work boundaries in an increasingly connected world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the shift to remote and hybrid working, using increasingly sophisticated digital communication tools, so that more work is now performed outside traditional office settings than in the pre-pandemic era (14, 15).

While these changes offer flexibility and opportunities for innovation, they also help explain the drive to introduce policies such as the Right to Disconnect which aim to mitigate the perceived adverse effects of constant connectivity on employees' wellbeing and work-life boundaries.

For full list of all references see page 39

MYTH-BUSTING THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT

There are several misconceptions about Right to Disconnect legislation and policies that have so far been enacted:

IT'S NOT A BAN ON ICT:

The policy doesn't prohibit the use of digital tools but is about setting expectations that ensures their use respects employees' rights to rest and personal time.



IT IS NOT INTENDED TO HARM PRODUCTIVITY:

The aim is to protect against unlimited connectivity, resulting in stress and burnout which can harm worker wellbeing and cognitive functioning.



IT'S NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL:

The Right to Disconnect can be tailored to specific industries and organisational needs, allowing flexibility while safeguarding employee wellbeing.



IT IS NOT INTENDED TO HARM FLEXIBILITY OR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REMOTE WORK:

The aim is to complement flexible and remote working arrangements by providing clear expectations and boundaries. Employees and employers can benefit from flexibility without open-ended obligations on either side.



IT IS NOT BANNING 'BEING ON-CALL':

Organisational arrangements for being on-call will still be required and remain in place for those jobs that require it. The aim of the Right to Disconnect relates to those who use digital technology for their work, and ensuring they get the right to disengage from work.



LEGISLATIVE AND RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the dynamic landscape of the modern workplace, psychosocial risks have emerged as critical factors influencing employee health, safety, wellbeing and organisational efficiency. The term 'psychosocial risks' refers to those aspects of work design, organisation, and management that have the potential to cause psychological or social harm. Identifying, assessing and mitigating these risks is vital, given their profound impact on mental health, job satisfaction, and overall productivity.

Defining psychosocial risks

Stress, anxiety and depression are now the leading cause of work-related ill health in the UK (16). Britain's national health and safety regulator, the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE), defines stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. When work demands exceed people's ability to cope, psychological and physical strain reactions occur that are linked to lower levels of wellbeing, long-term health conditions and absenteeism (17, 18, 19, 20).

Given the profound adverse health impact of poorly managed work environments, British employers have a legal duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations to assess and manage all work-related risks (21). That includes those risks that could impact mental health (i.e. work-related stress risk-factors) as well as those affecting physical health.

Relevant psychosocial factors should be identified as part of the normal risk assessment process and controls put in place to mitigate the risk of harm to the employee. The HSE has produced management standards (22) to support employers with this process. Other standards, such as the international ISO 45003:2021 (23), are also available to help manage psychosocial risks at work. Psychosocial risks arise from poor work design, organisation and management, as well as from a negative social work context (24).

According to the HSE management standards, these risks include 'demands' (i.e. excessive workload), 'control' (i.e. lack of control), 'support' (i.e. insufficient support from management and colleagues), 'relationships' (i.e. negative work relationship and conflict), 'role' (i.e. ambiguity and role conflict), and 'change' (i.e. poorly managed and communicated organisational change). The International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO) have also identified the work-related disease burden of long working hours (25).

Additional risks, particularly relevant to an increasingly digital and remotely based workforce, include poor balance in the work-home interface and excessive monitoring (26). These risks should be identified and managed as part of the organisation's Occupational Health and Safety Management System.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) underscores the importance of recognising these risks as part of a broader strategy to foster a supportive and healthy work environment. Employees can thrive in terms of their personal development, performance, and wellbeing, even when work tasks are challenging, if their work environment is characterised by high levels of support and autonomy with effective training and motivation (27).





Email and psychosocial risk factors

Email, as a primary mode of communication in many organisations, often plays a crucial role in the psychosocial make-up of work. It is important to note that email of itself is neither good nor bad, but rather its impact depends on how it is used (2, 28, 29).

Email can represent a tool to improve efficiency but it can also be a source of significant stress. Mobile access allows greater flexibility in terms of when and where work is completed and that can have positive implications for employee wellbeing because it enhances autonomy (30).

Scientific research supports this, demonstrating that after-hours emailing (or work-related smartphone use) can allow employees to effectively address their work demands at a time and place which suits them, thereby enhancing family (31), psychological and behavioural outcomes (32, 29).

Conversely, there is research that highlights the detrimental effects of unlimited email connectivity on employee wellbeing (33, 34). The main psychosocial risk factors in play are high workload and low control. Employees can feel overwhelmed by the volume and immediacy of email, creating a sense of overload, stress and anxiety (35, 36). Further, an expectation to respond promptly and to always be available can lead to feelings of low control over one's time and tasks (35, 37, 38).

Organisational norms around email usage can either exacerbate or mitigate these risks. A culture in which managers and co-workers regularly send emails at unsocial hours can raise implicit expectations for constant availability and create connectivity pressure that could undermine the potential positive autonomy effects of flexibility (30).

Scientific research shows that perceived response and availability expectations can lead to work-home conflict, difficulties disconnecting from work, burnout, and increased sickness absence (10, 39, 40). The extension of the workday interferes with important recovery mechanisms, such as psychological detachment and sleep, that are needed to maintain a good state of health (40, 41, 42). These adverse effects can be avoided by consideration of the potential impact of behaviours on others, and the tone is generally set by those at the top of an organisation (43).

Consideration for others might be considered to be a given in an organisation but that is not always the case. Particularly when under pressure themselves, people may make unreasonable demands on those around them and it may be necessary to formalise good etiquette relating to issues such as the transmission of work messages.

The evidence shows that the absence of explicit guidelines for email communication can lead to variable practices and leave workers feeling uncertain around response expectations. This in turn is likely to give rise to additional psychosocial risks of role ambiguity and job tension (44, 45, 46).

Role of line manager support

Line manager support is a critical factor in mitigating psychosocial risks (47). Research shows that family-supportive supervisor behaviours are important drivers for both organisational and employee health outcomes (48, 49, 50, 51). Receiving work-related email from supervisors at antisocial hours can undermine work-home boundary control (52) and create perceptions of inadequate support. The timing and nature of email communications from line managers is therefore a particularly important factor to consider in mitigating the adverse impact of greater connectivity.



Legal context and working time regulations

The legal framework regulating working time plays a pivotal role in addressing the challenges posed by the 'always-on' culture. In many jurisdictions, there are specific laws designed to protect workers from excessive working hours and ensure adequate rest periods. For example, the European Union's Working Time Directive mandates a maximum average working week of 48 hours, including overtime, along with minimum rest breaks and paid annual leave.

In Great Britain the Working Time Directive was implemented through the Working Time Regulations 1998 (53), which remain extant even though the UK has now left the European Union. These regulations aim to safeguard employees' health, safety and wellbeing by preventing overwork and ensuring a sustainable balance between professional and personal life.

However, the widespread use of ICT within organisations now complicates the interpretation and enforcement of such regulations. The way we can now work (i.e. work design) and the ability for employees to remain constantly connected with their work blurs the lines between working hours and personal time, potentially undermining statutory protection.

Research (54, 55) highlights how the intrusion of work into personal life, facilitated by modern communication technologies, conflicts with the intent of working time regulations to control psychosocial risks, including stress, burnout, and diminished mental health. This would suggest the requirement in a digital age for a more nuanced legal approach than legislation drafted for an analogue world.

A number of countries have implemented Right to Disconnect legislation intended to address the challenges posed by the 'always-on' culture facilitated by ICT tools, as well as to protect work-life balance, reduce burnout and enhance wellbeing.

France has a long history of a 'presence culture' in which there is a strict adherence to designated hours, and in 2017 led the way in legislating for a Right to Disconnect. Companies with more than 50 employees are required to establish policies to ensure employees' Right to Disconnect from work outside of standard hours. The application of this legislation is via an obligation to discuss the use of IT devices during employee and employer negotiations.

Belgium and Spain have introduced similar measures intended to promote healthier work environments. In Italy legislation requires employers to negotiate on digital disconnection terms during collective bargaining processes. In 2024 the European Commission also launched a first stage consultation on telework and the Right to Disconnect.

Countries with a legal system more aligned to that of the UK have also introduced measures but generally in a less prescriptive way. In Canada, the province of Ontario introduced the Working for Workers Act in 2021, obliging employers with 25 or more staff to have a written policy on disconnecting from work policies.

In the same year Ireland introduced a voluntary Code of Practice establishing the right to refuse work outside of contracted hours, and in 2024 Australia enacted a law allowing employees to disengage after hours unless their refusal is unreasonable. In both cases contact may be made by the employer, but the employee has the right to ignore it. This is fundamentally different to the European continental model where contact is prohibited.

In some of the countries the Right to Disconnect applies to certain groups of workers undertaking a specific role, or to organisations employing more than a certain number of people. This demonstrates that its application is different, and relevant to the legal framework and requirements of that country. There is also evidence that, even where there is no specific legislation, companies have chosen to implement Right to Disconnect policies, such as Volkswagen in Germany.

In the UK, a Right to Disconnect has not been included in the Employment Rights Bill currently progressing through Parliament although it was a feature of the Labour 2024 election manifesto. The Government has, nevertheless, stated as part of its proposals for labour market reform that it is planning a consultation that will help determine whether any future regulation follows the model enacted in many continental European countries, or the more business friendly approach more common in the English-speaking world.

Whatever form it takes, the intention of Right to Disconnect legislation is to foster a healthier, more productive workforce by establishing boundaries between work and personal life, and empirical evidence from countries where such arrangements have been put in place suggests a reduction in burnout and improved mental health. The challenge for businesses is to balance operational demands with compliance.



MANAGING CHALLENGES



Flexible working

The concept and practice of flexible working is now widely accepted and, in many sectors, has replaced the rigid approach to working time, location and employment terms which characterised much of the 20th century. Changes have affected both the supply and the demand side of the economy. People expect not only that they should have flexibility in the way that they work but also that many services, delivered by other workers, should be available where and when they want them.

In parallel, globalisation has transformed the way many businesses operate. Suppliers, customers and colleagues are often no longer local and may be located in different continents and time zones. Modern information communications technology allows real time communication across vast distances, but the parties to any dialogue or meeting may be participating at very different times of the day to each other.

A globalised and 24/7 society can therefore only function if there is true flexibility in the system. Resourcing labour to balance supply and demand, and scheduling collaborative tasks involving workers remote to each other, have both become more complex. The notion of 'normal working hours', which would have been widely understood within living memory, now seems anachronistic in many forms of employment and legislating on that basis would be problematical.

Sector differences

Some sectors, such as healthcare, have always worked on a 24/7 basis. Historically, that would have involved individuals being available round-the-clock, but as workloads and complexity have increased so shift systems have been introduced for most staff to ensure their safety and welfare and those they serve.

There remain some roles where an 'on call' liability is the only practicable means of meeting fluctuating, and generally infrequent, demands. ICT has been of enormous benefit in such situations, freeing staff up from being tied to the workplace or fixed forms of communication. The key difference between this sort of remote work requirement and the situation that Right to Disconnect policies aim to counter is that the commitment is agreed, planned and (generally) remunerated. That is very different to an open-ended obligation with unlimited connectivity which is more likely to lead to stress and burnout.

One of the challenges of servicing a 24/7 society is that it becomes increasingly less practicable to operate shift systems as staff become more senior. Typically, front line employees and their line managers will be rostered but more senior managers will be engaged to work standard daytime hours.

That can put enormous pressure on these key staff and careful planning is required to define in what circumstances and how they will be contacted. A cascade system is reasonable to respond to an emergency which is likely to occur only rarely, but should not become a regular feature of management practice.

Two-way flexibility

Flexible working is defined by the UK Government (56) as "a way of working that suits an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home". Other jurisdictions such as Australia and Canada apply a less one-sided interpretation which recognises that changes to working patterns should be agreed to suit both employee and employer.

It could be argued that one-sided flexibility is not flexibility at all but rigidity – an employer who requires a worker to be available any time / anywhere is not demonstrating flexibility any more than the employee who sets arbitrary conditions on when and where they will work. To be workable, any Right to Disconnect must be based on mutually agreed parameters in the context of reasonableness.

Some employers express concerns that a Right to Disconnect for workers, especially if enshrined in legislation, will tilt the balance away from mutual benefit and damage their ability to run a sustainable business. Such concerns could be justified if policies are simply imposed without consultation and agreement (including, where relevant, collective bargaining) and, inevitably, there will be some employees who seek to abuse any provision. Understanding the evidence relating to flexible working and its impact on health, safety, wellbeing and productivity is a key element in developing policies which work for all parties, as is reasonableness in balancing the needs of workers, employers, colleagues and customers.

Flexibility paradox

The benefits of flexible working to an employee's wellbeing accrue largely through better work life balance and a greater sense of control and that, in turn, can lead to business benefits for the employer. Unfettered flexibility might therefore seem to be the optimal solution, but evidence

suggests this may not be the case and a 'flexibility paradox' has been described.

Some workers given total flexibility will work more hours than they are contracted for, and others will spend more time on housework and childcare thereby negating wellbeing benefits (the latter phenomenon especially disadvantages women employees). Various authors have therefore suggested that scheduled flexibility should be limited in order to avoid a blurring of boundaries between work and non-work time. This is most often achieved by having 'core hours' which must be worked and allowing the worker flexibility to determine when remaining contracted hours can be worked.

Impact assessment

A recent Eurofound study (57) examined the implementation and impact of Right to Disconnect at company level in nine European countries where relevant legislation has been introduced. The study found various approaches with a mix of 'soft' measures (awareness raising, training and agreed procedures for out of hours contact) and 'hard' measures (severance of message delivery system connections and automatic email deletion).

Where policies are in place, the likelihood of workers being contacted out of hours does not seem to be reduced, but workers are more likely to be compensated and to report higher levels of autonomy and satisfaction with work life balance.

Implementing any Right to Disconnect arrangements requires the same rigour as any major change programme. Communication is key in determining how arrangements should work in practice to balance the needs of individual workers, customers, colleagues and the business overall.

Case Study

Tim Hipgrave, Global Employee Health and Wellbeing Manager at Bupa Group, discusses the impact of Right to Disconnect on the company's Asia Pacific business.

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In recent years, Australia has witnessed a significant increase in attention to mental health, fuelled by greater awareness of workplace stress, burnout, and the adverse effects of psychosocial hazards. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges by blurring the boundaries between work and personal life, heightening employee vulnerability. In response, legislators have prioritised psychological health and safety and stronger guardrails around

working hours, leading to reforms in workplace laws and the introduction of Right to Disconnect legislation by the Australian federal government in 2024. This legal right reflects a broader societal commitment to mental wellbeing, empowering employees to set boundaries and refuse after-hours contact in certain circumstances. Such developments continue to shape workplace culture and regulatory obligations in Australia.

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What this has meant for Bupa APAC

Prior to the introduction of this legislation, Bupa APAC (Asia Pacific) had already implemented measures to assess and mitigate risks to the psychological health and safety of employees in response to state-level regulations. This included a strategic framework educating employees and leaders at all levels and providing targeted assessment and support down to site level. It also included psychological health and safety assessments which assess a range of psychosocial risks, which then inform support and action planning to provide effective risk mitigation. This is underpinned by Bupa's global Enterprise Standard for Wellbeing, Health and Safety which provides the formal framework for Bupa businesses globally to ensure we keep our people physically and psychologically safe.

Guidance

Following introduction of Right to Disconnect legislation in Australia, the business implemented guidance and awareness-raising activity through internal communications to ensure all employees were aware of their rights on what the new legislation meant for them.

This included the right to refuse to monitor, read or respond to work-related contact from their employer or third parties (e.g. customers, suppliers) outside of working hours unless refusal was unreasonable. Guidance was also given on what would constitute an unreasonable refusal, with any specific issues being dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Training was delivered for all leaders on the legislative reforms and guidance included key points for managers and colleagues to implement in order to ensure adherence to requirements.

What has the business learnt?

To date there has been no significant case law in Australia related to Right to Disconnect legislation nor have there been any material issues raised internally. This could appear to indicate that the laws, and Bupa's internal processes, are operating effectively. Bupa's Wellbeing and Safety teams continue to deliver on the psychological health and safety framework, positively impacting employee experience and psychological risks for employees across front line and office-based teams. This has provided excellent insight for Bupa teams globally.



CULTURAL IMPACT



There are several definitions of organisational culture but, to use the Chartered Management Institute's definition, "culture is the way things are done [in an organisation], the unwritten rules that influence individual and group behaviour and attitudes" (58).

Leadership and line management behaviours are critical in 'setting the tone' because individuals are likely to follow behavioural norms displayed by co-workers and those in charge even if these are contradictory of policy. Indeed, it is commonly said in business that 'culture eats policy'.

To this end, the degree to which Right to Disconnect is received and adopted culturally is shaped by the environment specific to that organisation. For example, global working environments are dependent on flexible working hours where people in different countries may work together, but in different time zones. Such considerations must feature in the policies of any organisation operating in this milieu, and the success or otherwise of any Right to Disconnect arrangements will be dependent upon how it is communicated to an organisation with explicit guidance on how this applies 'here'. Acknowledgement, not just of the laws that apply, but also of the values or 'unwritten rules' that exist, will be a determining factor in the adoption of the policy.

Organisational justice

Adoption of a Right to Disconnect policy is likely to send a signal to the workforce that the organisation values their personal lives and therefore them as people, rather than perhaps viewing them as an impersonal 'human resource' to be exploited. However, the way that the policy is implemented is key to developing that caring ethos. The principles of organisational justice should be followed giving due attention to distributive, procedural and interactional fairness in agreeing parameters.

- > Distributive justice refers to outcomes being proportional to the inputs people make. It is also known as the Equity Principle (59).
- > Procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of the decision process leading to a particular outcome.
- > Interactional justice refers to people being given the opportunity to present information and voice concerns before decisions are made.

Managers or employees attempting to 'game' the system must be called out and dealt with if credibility is to be maintained. Furthermore, the signal the policy gives needs to be consistent with the wider way of working in the organisation or it is likely to be viewed as inauthentic and may diminish rather than enhance employment relations. Any policy should therefore not be seen in isolation but rather as a part of the overall employee proposition.

Challenges for multinationals

International organisations face particular challenges in implementing any Right to Disconnect policy. This not only results from operating across different time zones but also because culture and attitudes towards work can vary considerably.

Even within the European Union (60) the rates of teleworking vary considerably ranging from 1% in Bulgaria to 21.7% in Finland and there is, as yet, no common approach to a Right to Disconnect. Global companies need to consider not just differing legislative requirements but also how workers, managers and customers perceive rights and responsibilities relating to work. Consultation before the implementation of any policy therefore needs to be comprehensive and pay particular attention to the needs and attitudes of team members interacting with each other across the globe.

Case Study

A UK-based senior manager in a multinational organisation with team members located across different time zones discusses how technology enables the ability to collaborate but also facilitates disconnection and better work-life balance.

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Working across multiple timezones brings unique challenges, particularly when striving to cultivate a culture that discourages constant connectivity. For me personally, leading a global team that spans regions from Asia to the Americas, this can be demanding. For instance, when some team members are logging off at the end of their workday, others are only just beginning theirs. Here in the UK we are of course uniquely positioned, as our office hours overlap with multiple regions, allowing us to often 'meet in the middle'.



Effectively managing this complexity requires a combination of clear expectation-setting and, most importantly, leaders leading by example. Leadership behaviours play a pivotal role in shaping workplace norms. For instance, leaders should avoid scheduling regular calls or meetings that require team members to participate during their night-time or early morning hours, especially when employees may have family or personal commitments before starting their workday.

Technology as an enabler

While debates around the Right to Disconnect continue, it's important to acknowledge how technology has revolutionised the way we work for the better. Many of the meetings that are now conducted online would have required in-person attendance just a few years ago. For multinational companies, this has significantly reduced the need for global travel, enabling teams to hold productive discussions across time zones without leaving their home offices.

Technology also provides valuable tools to support leaders in fostering effective communication and collaboration within global teams. This is particularly important for addressing cultural differences, as some cultures place a high value on responsiveness and availability. For example, technology features with the ability to delay email or instant message delivery until the recipient's working hours resume are simple yet impactful features. Such tools not only enhance convenience but also reinforce respect for others' boundaries, shifting the conversation from regulatory enforcement to a culture which is supportive of employee wellbeing.

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Working from home

An emerging complicating factor is the politicisation of working from home and the linked issue of any Right to Disconnect. The extension of employment rights is generally championed by those on the left of the political spectrum and in a number of countries, including the UK and the US, is often viewed as part of a wider diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) agenda.

A number of senior business leaders have stated publicly that they view working from home as damaging to workplace culture and DEI initiatives generally are under attack by the new US administration. Few organisations relish being seen as outliers and tend to adopt employment practices which are viewed as mainstream. They may become more reticent in the current climate to introduce policies which are potentially controversial or to pre-empt any legislative changes.



CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING A POLICY

Clearly, any Right to Disconnect policy must be compliant with the laws of the jurisdiction(s) in which the organisation is operating. Even where no specific Right to Disconnect legislation exists, there is likely to be some relevant regulation governing working hours and health and safety at work.

In Great Britain the Health and Safety at Work Act, the Management of Health and Safety at Work regulations and the Working Time Regulations set the context for managing risks associated with unfettered connectivity.

Businesses operating internationally will need to be conversant with the differing legal requirements affecting the Right to Disconnect in a number of countries. Company-wide policies can either set out general principles which are then tailored on a national basis, or adopt the most stringent requirements of the territories in which they operate on the basis that this will ensure compliance everywhere.

Rationale

Defining the rationale for the policy is a critical first step. If people understand what the organisation is seeking to achieve then they are more likely to comply with the policy. Framing a policy in the context of promoting the wellbeing of the workforce, rather than complying (perhaps grudgingly) with legislation, is likely to gain best traction. Benefits to the business as well as to individual employees should be articulated to help overcome the likely resistance from those who view a policy as a barrier to operating effectively.

Consulting widely on the content and application of the policy will help to ensure not only that it is fit for purpose but also that there is greater ownership and no surprises when it is adopted (interactional justice). Particular care should be taken to identify any groups that may feel disadvantaged by the policy and to address their concerns (distributive justice). Circumstances in which it may be necessary to engage with staff outside of their contracted hours should be identified and clear parameters established for when and how such contact may be made (procedural justice).

ICT training

Modern ICT is sophisticated technology with many standard features that can help manage who, when and how people are connected. Ensuring that all employees potentially impacted by a Right to Disconnect policy are suitably trained in the features of the technology being used is likely to render implementation easier and may improve overall effectiveness and efficiency.

Some companies have implemented technology barriers to automatically prevent the transmission or receipt of communications (e.g. email) at certain times. The potential consequences of any such action should be carefully considered not just in terms of the business impact but also for how people may react to it. Automation can cause frustration and engender feelings of powerlessness which may prompt wider disengagement or the application of human ingenuity to bypass the machine.

The IGLOO framework

The stated aim of almost all Right to Disconnect initiatives is to establish clear boundaries between professional and personal time, ensuring employees can recharge and maintain their mental health. As such, it is a workplace intervention designed to improve a health outcome and considerable research has been undertaken to understand this type of psychosocial risk management in complex organisations.

An effective approach developed by researchers is the IGLOO model which was developed to consider the moderators and mediators relevant to the effectiveness of return-to-work programmes, but it is also applicable to other types of intervention.

The key recommendations of this report have been formulated into an IGLOO structure to aid implementation of any Right to Disconnect policy.

Evidence-based tool

The IGLOO framework has been developed by psychologists as an evidence-based tool for promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace. It helps identify 'who should do what' and is well suited to implementing a Right to Disconnect policy successfully.

The IGLOO model for organisations is designed to foster effective communication, collaboration, leadership, and strategic alignment within the broader context of organisational goals and culture.

It emphasises five inter-connected elements, giving a structure to support organisations to comprehensively enhance workplace environments: Individual, Group, Leader, Organisation, and the Overarching context (61).

Given the importance of Right to Disconnect policies in shaping the practices and norms at all levels of the organisation, it is important to note that such policies need to be developed with consultation and agreement.



Moreover, the way that the policy is implemented is key to developing a caring ethos. The principles of organisational justice should be followed giving due attention to distributive, procedural and interactional fairness in agreeing parameters.

Applying the IGLOO model to the implementation of any Right to Disconnect policy increases the chances of it being successful and the following actions are offered as recommendations at each level:

Individual

- > Ensure familiarity and adherence to organisational guidelines and policies regarding email communication.

Group

- > Understand the current organisational norms around email usage and whether these are likely to be exacerbating or mitigating stress risk, in line with an organisational stress risk assessment approach.
- > Agree on the potential impact of email timing and response expectation on others.
- > Line managers should consider the timing and nature of email communications with team members.
- > Recognise that unfettered flexibility can lead to a 'flexibility paradox' in which people end up working more hours. Therefore consider limiting schedule flexibility in order to avoid a blurring of boundaries between work and non-work time. This is most often achieved by having 'core hours' which must be worked and allowing the worker flexibility to determine when remaining contracted hours can be worked.

Leader

- > More senior managers/ leaders should not only articulate the expected norms of communication and flexibility around work for others. They should also articulate clearly and define in what circumstances and how they will be contacted, especially when they have responsibility for a 24/7 operation. This should stem directly from relevant

organisational policies in order to mitigate risk resulting from potentially enormous pressure on these key staff.

Organisation

- > Act on the legal duty as a UK workplace to carry out stress risk assessments to manage the psychosocial risk factors associated with stress and adverse health outcomes. Unlimited connectivity, poor balance between the work-home interface and excessive monitoring are recognised sources of stress which should feature in risk assessments.
- > Right to Disconnect policies need to be developed with consultation and agreement. Understanding the evidence relating to flexible working, wellbeing and productivity is a key element in developing policies which work for all parties, as is reasonableness in balancing the needs of workers, employers, colleagues and customers.
- > Organisations have their own cultures which include values or 'unwritten rules' that will be a determining factor in the reception and adoption of any Right to Disconnect policy. Due account should be taken of this factor in determining how it will be communicated with explicit guidance on how this applies 'around here'.
- > Implementing any Right to Disconnect arrangements requires the same rigour as any major change programme. Communication is key in determining how arrangements should work in practice to balance the needs of individual workers, customers, colleagues and the business overall.
- > Adoption of a Right to Disconnect policy is likely to send a signal to the workforce that the organisation values their personal lives and therefore them as people. To maintain authenticity, any policy should not be seen in isolation but rather as a part of the overall employee proposition.





Overarching context

- > Legislation on the Right to Disconnect takes different forms internationally. Any UK legislation should consider whether to allow contact by the employer but the employee has the right to ignore it, or to adopt a model where contact by the employer out of designated hours is prohibited.
- > A globalised and 24/7 society renders the notion of 'normal working hours' anachronistic in many forms of employment and the widespread use of ICT complicates the interpretation and enforcement of current working time regulations. A more nuanced legal approach is required in drafting any Right to Disconnect legislation than was needed in the analogue world.
- > On call duties remain essential in some circumstances. Stress and burnout can be avoided if the commitment is agreed, planned and (generally) remunerated rather than being an open-ended obligation with unlimited connectivity.
- > Imposing 'flexibility' in a one-sided way, by either employer or employee, is not flexibility at all but rigidity and any Right to Disconnect must be based on mutually agreed parameters within the context of what is reasonable.
- > Global companies need to consider not just differing legislative requirements but also how workers, managers and customers perceive rights and responsibilities relating to work.





Case Study

Dr Lina Siegl, Lecture in Organisational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, has been working with organisations across the public and private sector designing, implementing and evaluating interventions to reduce technostress. Here she discusses her findings.



As discussed elsewhere in this report, poorly managed email culture can be associated with high workload and low control. The more emails we get, the greater our task load and the risk of 'falling behind'. Crucially, how many - and when we get - emails is not in our control. There is also an expectation to be available and respond quickly to emails. The result, as we have documented, is overload, stress, poor wellbeing, hyperconnectivity, burnout, and health-related absenteeism.

Against this backdrop far more research is needed to show whether and how email policies can be implemented to reduce email demands and improve employee wellbeing and performance outcomes. What interventions could realistically be introduced to reduce email-related work demands and improve employee wellbeing? And can these interventions work across different contexts, organisations, and structures?



Study

To begin to answer these questions I conducted a study with two organisations, one a large UK public sector organisation operating in the legal and administration sector, the other a global multinational in the manufacturing sector. In both cases we worked with a number of different teams comprising of more than 100 employees in each organisation.

We began by running focus groups with three to seven participants. Ketso, a creative mind mapping tool, was used to discuss how emails were used, what was and wasn't working well, and how an email policy could improve this.

From this data, combined with academic literature and senior leadership discussions, I developed 12 email guidelines (see right). To implement the guidelines, line managers were consulted to gain their support and their commitment to championing the new email rules which I then outlined to staff during online team training sessions.



The 12 guidelines were as follows:

- 1 *Limit email traffic to (contracted) working hours and days unless urgent*
- 2 *Use a flexible working signature*
- 3 *Signal when you are not working*
- 4 *Do not monitor your emails while on annual leave*
- 5 *Think before you send*
- 6 *Use a standardised format for subject lines*
- 7 *Keep emails brief and use bullet points where possible*
- 8 *Always be professional and courteous*
- 9 *Don't overuse exclamation marks or caps lock*
- 10 *Try to reduce the amount of attachments on emails*
- 11 *Turn off your email notifications*
- 12 *Use the self-help tool for inbox management*

What did we learn?

Both organisations sought to implement the guidelines in their selected teams with mixed results.

In our public sector organisation we found that the intervention reduced technostress (i.e. feelings of email overload and invasion) and the amount of time spent on emails reduced. In our private sector case study, although levels of technological invasion were reduced - defined as 'feelings that work technology intrudes into personal lives and blurs work-home boundaries, creating pressure to always be connected and available' - email overload was not.

In terms of wellbeing outcomes, in the public sector we saw improvements in work-home conflict, psychological detachment from work and levels of burnout, as well as improvements in performance. In the private sector we 'only' saw improvements in levels of burnout.

What also came out of the study was that in the private sector - and especially in the international teams - it is very difficult to take away 24/7 traffic. We found that our interventions were more effective for organisations with local, team-centred communication patterns and perhaps less pre-existing email management skills. International organisations with strong 'always on' cultures may need additional measures to further reduce the burden of emails, such as email overload. This offers a great example of the importance of organisational context when implementing change, highlighting that one size does not fit all.

However, the fact that our training helped address constant connectivity stressors and that we saw significant improvements in burnout across both organisations is a really positive message.

The study also highlighted how important organisational culture is in terms of managing email habits and stress. Employee involvement in policy is crucial and time is needed to integrate any new email policy meaningfully. Addressing constant connectivity is not about removing flexibility. It is about creating work environments where digital disconnecting is supported and enacted, and where leaders set the right tone.

Read the full study here:

['The Right to Disconnect': An Intervention Study to Examine the Effect of Constant Connectivity Through Work-Emails on Work-Home Conflict, Recovery, Burnout, and Performance - Research Explorer The University of Manchester](#)





KEY POINTS FOR ORGANISATIONS AND POLICYMAKERS TO CONSIDER

- > Unlimited connectivity, poor balance between the work-home interface and excessive monitoring are recognised sources of stress which should feature in risk assessments.
- > Consider the potential adverse impact of email timing and response expectations on others.
- > Ensure there are organisational guidelines for email communication and response expectations to dispel uncertainty and mitigate the risk of unintended harm.
- > In drafting any Right to Disconnect legislation, ensure that the realities of a 24/7 society and modern ICT practices are considered.



- > With any UK regulation, determine whether it is preferable to adopt a model which allows contact by the employer, but the employee has the right to ignore it, or one in which contact by the employer out of designated hours is simply prohibited.
- > Where on call duties are essential, ensure that the commitment is agreed, planned and (generally) remunerated rather than being an open-ended obligation with unlimited connectivity. Particular consideration should be given to senior managers for whom a rota arrangement may be impracticable.
- > Develop any Right to Disconnect policy with consultation and agreement based on mutually agreed parameters within the context of what is reasonable, applying the principles of organisational justice.



- > Aim to avoid a 'flexibility paradox' in which people can end up working excessive hours because the boundaries between work and non-work time become blurred by scheduling flexibility, perhaps by stipulating 'core hours' around which the worker can exercise flexibility.
- > Implement any Right to Disconnect arrangements with the same rigour as any major change programme.
- > Focus on communication in determining how arrangements should work in practice paying due account to the values and 'unwritten rules' of the organisation.
- > Ensure that any policy is communicated as part of, and integrated with, the overall employee proposition.
- > Where a company operates internationally, consider not just differing legislative requirements but also how workers, managers and customers perceive rights and responsibilities relating to work.





CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

UK workplaces have a legal duty to carry out stress risk assessments to manage the psychosocial risk factor associated with stress and adverse health outcomes. Unlimited connectivity, poor balance between the work-home interface and excessive monitoring are recognised sources of stress which should feature in risk assessments.

The absence of explicit guidelines for email communication can lead to unclear communication practices and leave workers feeling uncertain around response expectations.

The widespread use of ICT complicates the interpretation and enforcement of current working time regulations, and a more nuanced legal approach is required than legislation drafted for an analogue world.

A globalised and 24/7 society renders the notion of 'normal working hours' anachronistic in many forms of employment and legislating on that basis would be problematical.

More senior managers tend to be engaged to work standard daytime hours but will need to respond to incidents for a 24/7 operation. That can put enormous pressure on these key staff and careful planning is required to define in what circumstances and how they will be contacted.

Organisational norms around email usage can either exacerbate or mitigate these risks. Adverse effects can be avoided by simple consideration of the potential impact of email timing and response expectations on others.

The timing and nature of email communications from line managers is therefore a particularly important factor to consider in mitigating the adverse impact of greater connectivity.

Legislation on the Right to Disconnect takes different forms internationally. Any UK legislation should consider whether to allow contact by the employer but the employee has the right to ignore it, or a model where contact by the employer out of designated hours is prohibited.

On call duties remain essential in some circumstances. Stress and burnout can be avoided if the commitment is agreed, planned and (generally) remunerated rather than being an open-ended obligation with unlimited connectivity.

Imposing 'flexibility' in a one-sided way, by either employer or employee, is not flexibility at all but rigidity and any Right to Disconnect must be based on mutually agreed parameters within the context of what is reasonable.

Unfettered flexibility can lead to a 'flexibility paradox' in which people end up working more hours. Scheduled flexibility should therefore be limited in order to avoid a blurring of boundaries between work and non-work time. This is most often achieved by having 'core hours' which must be worked and allowing the worker flexibility to determine when remaining contracted hours can be worked.

Implementing any Right to Disconnect arrangements requires the same rigour as any major change programme. Communication is key in determining how arrangements should work in practice to balance the needs of individual workers, customers, colleagues and the business overall.

Adoption of a Right to Disconnect policy is likely to send a signal to the workforce that the organisation values their personal lives and therefore them as people. To maintain authenticity, any policy should not be seen in isolation but rather as a part of the overall employee proposition.

Global companies need to consider not just differing legislative requirements but also how workers, managers and customers perceive rights and responsibilities relating to work.

Right to Disconnect policies need to be developed with consultation and agreement. Understanding the evidence relating to flexible working, wellbeing and productivity is a key element in developing policies which work for all parties, as is reasonableness in balancing the needs of workers, employers, colleagues and customers.

Right to Disconnect policies may not reduce the likelihood of workers being contacted out of hours but they are more likely to be compensated and to report higher levels of autonomy and satisfaction with work life balance.

Critical to the reception and adoption of Right to Disconnect is how this will be communicated to an organisation and explicit guidance on how this applies 'here'. Acknowledgement of the values or 'unwritten rules' that exist will be a determining factor in the adoption of this policy.

The way that the policy is implemented is key to developing that caring ethos. The principles of organisational justice should be followed giving due attention to distributive, procedural and interactional fairness in agreeing parameters.





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The logo for the University of Manchester, featuring the word "MANCHESTER" in a serif font above the year "1824" in a smaller serif font, all contained within a white rectangular box.

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