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Wellness Trend Report:
Setting Digital Boundaries in the Workplace

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Introduction

In today's world, email and smartphones have become a bare necessity in the workplace. In fact, 89% of office workers state that sorting through emails is a part of their daily work tasks. [1] Since the convenience of ongoing communication has been engrained into our workplace cultures, along with the surge of employees working remotely, it has become easier than ever for employees to communicate outside of work hours. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 27% of US employees work from home at least part of the time. [2] The ability to work from home can promote work life balance and help increase employee retention, however, increased accessibility to employees outside of business hours can affect psychological detachment and create a mentally draining "always on" culture. [3] While the increased opportunity for productivity may be attractive to employers, not setting boundaries for communication outside of working hours may have negative effects on employee wellbeing resulting in decreased work performance.

What is an "Always On" Work Culture?

An "Always On" work culture is defined as, "Where your employer is no longer paying attention to the typical working hours set out in your contract." [4] This means that there has become a growing expectation for employees to be available to their employers on weeknights, weekends, and even on vacation.

In a survey cited by Business News Daily, 76% of white-collar workers regularly check their email after work hours, with 10% percent of those employees stating they check their email constantly while trying to multitask at home. [5] In many cases, this hinders an individual's work-life balance, and ability to connect with family members which can be the catalyst to a variety of issues within the home.

In some cases, the "Always On" culture can even be dangerous. In the 2022 Travelers Risk Index, it was reported that 42% of index respondents report that they take work-related calls or even answer work-related emails or texts while driving. [6] Of those employees, an alarming 39% reported that they answer these messages as they feel they always need to be available. This statistic is verification that the "Always On" mindset has been involuntarily embedded into workplace culture. 19% even reported that their boss will actually be upset with them if they do not answer, regardless if they are behind the wheel. [6]

While it was previously stated that working from home can help promote a healthy work-life balance, not setting digital boundaries can create inverse consequences and make employees feel as if they are constantly on the clock. It is important that leaders give the opportunity for their employees to psychologically detach from their work on a daily basis in order to prevent employee burnout.

What is Psychological Detachment and Burnout?

Psychological detachment is the ability to mentally disconnect from thoughts and concerns about one's work during nonwork hours. [7] In a study conducted by the National Institutes of Health, it was confirmed that there was a direct correlation between an increase in employee availability during nonwork hours and a decrease in psychological detachment from work. The increased availability leaders have to their employees decreases the ability for employees to psychologically detach and begin the stress recovery process that is needed to unwind from work, and to reduce burnout. [7]

There are many ways that employees can experience burnout, as symptoms can appear in both mental and physical forms. Emotionally, individuals can experience feelings of irritability, mental exhaustion, and even negative feelings of self-worth.[8]

When employees are unable to psychologically detach from their work duties, they are congruently experiencing anticipatory stress, a constant state of anxiety and uncertainty. [9] This anticipatory stress comes from employees worrying about the consequences of not addressing emails, as the expectation of a "timely response" has been altered due to increase in availability.

Burnout also comes with a plethora of physical effects that can be harmful to employees. These may include lethargy, headaches, and muscle pain. [10] Even more worrisome, burnout can contribute to the development of chronic diseases due to many physical symptoms of burnout that are experienced over a period of time. Allowing employees to psychologically detach gives employees time to also take care of themselves, and focus on their wellbeing. From a productivity standpoint, burnout can be detrimental to employers . It can cause a reduction in work performance and in more severe cases, their employees fall ill and are unable to work. For larger companies that pay for their employees' medical claims, this can also become a financial burden.

Effects on Work-Life Balance

In a 2022 research report conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, they found that 6 in 10 globally surveyed employees were actively searching for a different job and cited their work-life balance as the reason for their job search. [11] As a result of employees seeking other job opportunities to accommodate this balance, many employers globally are experiencing an employee shortage, which can cause a chain of negative effects including a decrease in productivity and revenue.

Additionally, remaining employees may start experiencing burnout due to these shortages.

Although this statistic shows that a majority of job seekers experience poor work-life balance, companies that take this into consideration may be able to make improvements and alleviate or even prevent these shortages.

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What Employees Can Do

While it may seem that employees have no control over their work-life balance, there are a few ways that they can alleviate the urge to constantly check their emails.

Turn Off Notifications-Turning off any work-related notifications and alerts during nonwork hours can be very helpful when employees need to mentally detach from their work duties. Alerts can disturb and distract employees from free time that they should be using for themselves, and put their mindset back into work. If the employee feels that the alert is important or urgent, they may even abandon their leisure and tend to the message they received.

Set Screen Time Limits-Setting a screen time limit can help with employees who might not be able to fight the urge to check emails outside of work hours by limiting the amount of time that they can spend on these tasks. Often times, employees can tend to lose track of time and spend much longer working on work emails and tasks than they intended. Employees can set screen time limits whether it be an alarm alerting them to stop work at a certain time, or they can set up a time for their laptops to power down.

Be Open with Employers-It is important that employees are open and honest with their employers when they are feeling overwhelmed or burned out. There are many things that a person can have on their plate that do not involve work, and it is not unreasonable to expect that employees take their mind off work when their day ends. While leaders should create an environment of open communication, employees also need to be assertive when they feel that their workload is bleeding into after work hours and negatively affecting their work-life balance and personal wellbeing. Bringing up these issues to employers can even prompt leadership to reflect on current workplace practices and make changes and improvements where necessary.

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What Employers Can Do

Employers and leaders are very influential, and are responsible for setting the tone and creating the environment within their workplace.

Leaders themselves need to psychologically detach. [8] Setting digital boundaries starts with leaders. Often times, it's leaders who are also working outside of their own expected work hours. While they may have workloads that require them to follow a non-traditional work schedule, it may be unreasonable to expect employees to follow the same suit. In some cases, leaders may even be overworking themselves and need to allow themselves time to psychologically detach. Typically, leaders are responsible for the workplace culture that they establish. When you lead by example and encourage healthy work-life balance, you will create a workplace culture that follows. However, when leaders create an environment that prioritizes urgency and rigid timelines, the result is that employees will feel the need to be constantly available. Especially when they know their direct supervisors are already awaiting their responses.

Create a PTO policy-creating a PTO policy is a direct, and structured way to ensure leaders and employees are not performing work duties while on scheduled PTO. A PTO policy should eliminate uncertainty of when employees can and cannot be reached while on paid time off. In some cases, leaders or employees could be held accountable if this policy is broken. Creating a PTO policy will also send a message to employees that they are valued.

Keep open communication with employees-It is important to clarify what your expectations are. Be clear, direct, and reasonable when letting employees know when you expect them to be working on tasks. It is also equally as important to be observant and listen to your employees if they vocalize that they are burnt out. Be watchful of employees that may be showing signs of burnout, and directly ask if they are overwhelmed. Showing empathy, and that you care about their wellbeing can also aid in employee retention. Employees can be more likely to stay with an employer that they feel cares about them. Employers that do not show that they value their employees and their wellbeing can be viewed as a toxic workplace, and can hurt retention.

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Distracted Driving Contract/Policies-Establishing a Distracted Driving contract can help alleviate, or even eliminate, work calls and emails being address while employees are behind the wheel. A driving contract would be transparent in setting the expectation that leaders and employees are not to send or address work related messages while driving. Setting clear disciplinary action if the contract is broken is necessary in order to enforce this policy. It is also very important to communicate these policies to all employees. From Traveler's 2022 Risk Index, 68% of respondents reported that they do have a Distracted Driving policies in place, but only 1 in 4 employees are aware of them. [6]

Adapt-According to LinkedIn COO, Dan Shapero, American businesses are experiencing "The Great Reshuffle." [12] In a post-COVID world, employees are looking for more out of their employers. They are switching up their jobs, and even moving to new career paths, that better suit their needs and lifestyles. Whether it's for better pay, benefits, or more work life balance, employees are being more considerate of how their jobs affect their wellbeing. This forces companies to adjust to employee needs in order to retain their workforce. Shapero states, "In a Darwinian fashion, those who refuse to adapt will fall behind. Their best and brightest talent will quit and move to the companies that offer employees choices, options, respect, and dignity." [12]

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Conclusion

In a post-COVID world, the modern-day workplace has made a dramatic shift from employees working in the office full time to working from home in some capacity. If executed correctly, giving employees the opportunity to work from home can improve work life balance, increase productivity, and increase employee retention. However, both employers and employees should be cautious when the lines between home and office begin to blur. Failing to set digital boundaries can cause an "Always On" work culture where both leaders and employees remain working or available outside of work hours. In order for employees and employers to thrive and avoid burnout, it is crucial that they take the time to psychologically detach after work. Not doing so can result in burnout which effects employee productivity, retention, and overall health and wellbeing. It is important that both employees and leaders take steps to set digital boundaries in order to create a positive, productive, and healthy work environment.

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