

4 Aug 2021 - Jake Young

Prioritising wellbeing in an 'always on' digital age

Out-of-hours ICT use can lead to 'always on' working and be a serious barrier to wellbeing. What can employers do to help?

A summary of Schlachter et al. (2018) Voluntary Work-related Technology Use during Non-work Time: A Narrative Synthesis of Empirical Research and Research Agenda

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that more jobs can be done remotely than previously recognised. Any sense that working from home is a privilege for the few no longer stands. This potentially gives workers a greater ability to balance their work and life in a way that suits them, but it often doesn't work out that way. The ease of using information and communication technology (ICT) in non-work time, combined with pressure to be 'always on', can harm our work-life balance and wellbeing. Recently, even the CEO of Zoom has admitted to struggling with 'Zoom fatigue', lamenting up to 19 videoconferences in a day. And while some countries have introduced a legal 'right to disconnect' from work, there is a clear need to understand what progressive people management looks like.

A systematic review by Svenja Schlachter from Surrey University, with colleagues from Birkbeck and Exeter universities, gives us a clear view of the best available research on 'always on' working and the use of ICT out of hours. Here we look at the findings and lessons for HR and people managers.

Key points

- When working digitally, employees sometimes feel pressure to be 'always on' and constantly available. This can be a serious barrier to a healthy work-life balance.
- Digital work has mixed effects on processes at work; some research suggests using ICTs can improve job control, but other studies find no link. Moreover, while working digitally outside usual hours can improve performance, it also results in greater demands as work becomes more intense.
- Voluntarily working online outside usual hours is often perceived as a personal

choice and similar to going the extra mile. Taken too far, however, and it is likened to workaholism.

- Using technology to work can result in a better balance between work and familial commitments for some, but causes conflict between the two for others, who struggle to disconnect mentally.
- There is evidence for an ‘empowerment/enslavement paradox’, whereby technology can liberate some and suppress others. This is usually determined by an individual’s ability to balance their use of technology and resist overuse.
- Managers must ensure employees feel they have autonomy in choosing how to use their time effectively. Creating a climate in which flexible working, rather than pressure to be ‘always on’, is encouraged, is key
- Leaders should encourage employees to be responsible for managing their time and their workload, rather than expecting the same of each member of staff.

Norms and pressure to be available create an ‘always on’ climate

Qualitative research suggests many employees feel pressure from their organisational context to be constantly available and to engage in ICT use. This pressure is heightened when expectation comes from different sources, i.e., their colleagues as well as their manager, and when these sources are vague about what exactly is expected. Quantitative research supports this, showing that organisational norms do indeed link to how people use ICT. This creates something of a cycle, whereby a climate of expected availability is created. Employees sense a desire from their employer to maintain a level of being ‘always on’ through cues like a high distribution of ICTs and long hours, immediacy and dedication being valued.

Working digitally has mixed effects on work processes

We get a mixed picture on how ICTs affect people’s work patterns – some research says ICT increases flexibility and control, while other studies say it decreases them. One positive finding from both qualitative and quantitative research is the greater level of performance as a result of voluntary ICT use during non-work time. However, this has also seen greater job demands, particularly the intensification and extension of work.

Voluntary work is usually perceived by staff as personal preference

Those who voluntarily use ICTs in non-work time are keen to highlight this as a conscious personal choice. Those with a preference for integrating their work and private life tend to conduct voluntary ICT use more than those who wish to segment the two. Voluntary ICT

use is generally perceived as similar to going the extra mile and showing great dedication and career focus. However, it is also associated with excessive dedication, namely workaholism. There is also a suggestion that such voluntary work is used as a tool for impression management – that is, to appear dedicated, reliable and indispensable to managers, customers and colleagues.

Technology can encourage a better work-life balance for some, but difficulty switching off for others

There is a clear understanding that being able to work anywhere and at any time increasingly blurs the boundary between work and home life, which may cause an intrusion into physical home space and psychological head space. In contrast, some studies suggest that ICTs can in fact facilitate a balance, allowing employees to fulfil familial responsibilities and thus improving both their work and home lives. Mostly, however, this blurring is associated with work-life conflict, and the link between ICT use and interference to life outside of work has been prevalent. Indeed, working outside of non-work time often means employees are unable to detach and recover from work-related demands. This difficulty to disconnect mentally is associated with later conflict, trouble sleeping and reduced wellbeing.

High initial use of technology can result in addiction

A lot of what we have discussed so far can be summed up by what Schlachter et al. call 'the empowerment/enslavement paradox'. This suggests that workers are either empowered by gaining work-life balance through increased flexibility and control, leading to greater satisfaction, wellbeing and reduced work-life conflict, or they are made 'slaves' by being digitally 'tethered' to work, decreasing their flexibility and control. There appears to be evidence for this. Research finds that initial over-adaptation to ICT, or high usage, can be problematic. Usually, it levels off as employees become accustomed to the technology and find a balance of everyday use. However, an inability to do this can cause something of an addiction to ICT. This often depends on norms within one's group; support from managers and teammates can encourage employees to use ICT flexibly and individually, so attitudes towards it are improved and a healthy level of use should be achieved.

Autonomy and segmentation buffer the effects, but organisational pressure and job demands exacerbate the negative consequences of digital working

Several factors may buffer potential negative impacts of voluntary ICT use, or even

facilitate benefits. These include work autonomy – in particular having control over one’s work schedule. This weakens the link between ICT use and work-life conflict, as well as the association between ICT use and lack of engagement in recovery processes, such as sleep. A desire to segment work and life also reduces the negative impact by allowing employees discretion over their ICT use. Unfortunately, some factors heighten the negative consequences; organisational pressure to be ‘always on’ appears to undermine this discretion. A demanding job also strengthens the association between ICT use and work-life conflict.

What practical lessons can HR professionals and managers take from this research?

Employees often rationalise their use of ICT out of hours - they acknowledge negative consequences, but downplay them, seeing them as a fair trade off for the increased flexibility and autonomy afforded to staff. Moreover, employees often argue that their excessive ICT use is in accordance with their personal preference and is necessary for both their professional image and career advancement.

Clearly, the benefits of ICT use exist, but they require smart management in order to avoid some of the negative outcomes mentioned earlier. Employers should ensure that staff do not feel overly pressured to using ICTs outside of work time. Formal guidelines and processes need to be supported by a more implicit organisational climate in which leaders up and down the organisation practice using ICTs not necessarily for longer, but smarter. Providing boundaries for employees on the limits of time and workload management should be imperative, and organisations would do well not to simply leave employees to their own devices in this respect.

This review highlights the importance of an employer clearly signalling support for employees taking the time to switch off and detach from work. However, evidence also highlights the self-imposed components of ICT use; this behaviour is evidently very individual and context dependent, and the freedom afforded by such organisational changes is clearly welcomed by many employees. Therefore, allowing individual employees a level of self-management, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach, seems a sensible way forward.

To read more about how to protect mental wellbeing in an age of digital work, see our [evidence review](#).
