

The 40 Hour Work Week — Have Mobile Phones Made It a Thing of the Past?

The ability to stay connected remotely helps many workers to achieve a satisfying work-life balance, but company-provided mobile phones and tablets can also make it difficult for some people to disconnect from the office when they leave work for the day.

Catherine White, an Information Technology instructor at South University, Online Programs says dealing with messages on mobile phones and tablets isn't an issue for her team, as the company does not provide these devices for them.

However, they are held to certain expectations when it comes to email.

"We are expected to return emails to colleagues and students within a 24-hour timespan during the week and 48-hour timespan during the weekends," White says. "During vacation, this is not expected."

For employees that do have mobile phones and other company-provided devices, Marcia Rhodes, a spokesperson at WorldatWork, a nonprofit human resources association focused on compensation, benefits and, work-life balance, says expectations all depend on the corporate culture.

"Based on 'Implications of Employer-Supplied Connectivity Devices,' a study by Gayle Porter, PhD of Rutgers University and WorldatWork, although many companies have policies about appropriate use of company-provided devices, a large number of employees reported they had developed their understanding of expectations based on their knowledge of the company's culture," Rhodes said.

Because of the convenience of being a remote employee, you can sometimes feel obligated, even though you don't have to, to answer because you have the means to answer (and) the more you answer now, the less number of emails you will have to reply to later.

"Unfortunately, the availability of something that could serve as a support for work-life effectiveness does not automatically lead to work-life balance," Rhodes says. "Having a device that increases connection to the job from any place and at any time, especially when that device is supplied by the employer, could also contribute to work interference with family, particularly if the individual perceives an expectation for 24/7 connection with no limitations."

White agrees that it can sometimes be difficult to separate working hours with personal time when you have a company-sponsored device.

"I think this is where the lines do become blurred," White says. "Because of the convenience of being a remote employee, you can sometimes feel obligated, even though you don't have to, to answer because you have the means to answer (and) the more you answer now, the less number of emails you will have to reply to later."

Finding Work-Life Balance with Mobile Devices

The majority of respondents surveyed in the "Implications of Employer-Supplied Connectivity Devices," study reported that using their company-provided device enhanced their job performance, and they most often attributed that to having remote access to tools for doing the job, maintaining contact with office colleagues or clients, or shortening response time, Rhodes says.

"Many reported that device use also enhanced their ability to balance work with home and other commitments," Rhodes says. "This group explained that they could leave the office for personal and children's needs while still covering job responsibilities, they gained family time by being more efficient on the job, and they used the device for improved family contact and scheduling."

"For me, organization is key. Because of my home life and obligations there, I need to make sure that I stay on top of things," White says. "Prioritizing what is immediately due each day helps me focus on that day's tasks and understanding what needs to be done."

"I also take advantage of a quiet home by getting up a couple of hours earlier than my family — having that two hours of quiet time with a cup of coffee and being able to focus with no interruption really kicks off my day properly," White says. "I have been finding that if I don't have that, I can sometimes find it hard to get on track for the day."

According to the results of the "Implications of Employer-Supplied Connectivity Devices" study, Rhodes says the trend in working hours per week indicated that, in general, employees with company-provided mobile phones and other devices worked more hours than before they obtained it.

"If an employee prefers work segmentation, (having) clear boundaries between work and non-work, rather than integration, (with) permeable boundaries so that work and non-work commingle, they should proactively communicate that to their manager/supervisor," Rhodes says. "By the same token, employers and decision-makers might structure their policies to allow for individual work-life preferences."