

Work Connectivity: Staying Plugged in After Hours

As mobile technology continues to evolve, the boundaries between personal and professional time have become blurry. People can now stay connected to work whether they are sitting on the bus or in their living rooms at home.

But some employees view new technology as a mixed blessing — it both helps them with their workload and increases demands for more work. Ultimately, some feel they need to stay plugged in to work even after they leave the office.

“We live in a globalized environment and the advent of such technologies has allowed businesses to expect more from their employees, for better or worse,” says Jason C. Crittenden, program director of Information Technology at South University, Richmond.

The workplace has also become more competitive because of the effects of the recent recession and the scarcity of jobs. Employees are using technology to stay connected to work in order to maintain job security in a shaky economy.

According to a survey released by InterCall, a conferencing and collaboration services provider, nearly one in two Americans (48%) who use technology in their everyday jobs say they are required to do more work with fewer resources because of the current economic climate. Nearly 30% feel they need to stay connected to work 24/7, even during weekends, breaks, or holidays.

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Cathy Sexton, a workplace productivity trainer, says work can become much more competitive when employees are willing to work overtime.

“When you have a reduction in force, those who are willing to work harder or longer may appear to have an advantage,” she says. “But I don’t see it as an advantage because in the long run, these workers will burn out a lot sooner.”

Crittenden agrees that connectivity can breed competition among employees.

“Response times can assuredly be tied to high performance levels,” he says.

But, he also wonders if it is not so much the employee’s drive to compete as it is the employer’s expectations of lightning-fast responses and constant productivity that is fueling the need for round-the-clock connectivity.

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“I suspect most people would love to disconnect from work when they walk in their front door, but because our society has accepted these technologies as ‘necessary,’ employers have adopted them as a means of ensuring employees are always connected,” Crittenden says.

For some professions, including in health and information technology fields, it is important for employees to stay connected at all times.

“Some managers and companies require, expect, and/or imply that the employees need to be available at all times no matter how minor the question or need,” Sexton says.

Because of this, there is a growing mobile workforce and reliance on email connectivity. Employees may find it necessary to be connected to their work email even during off hours.

The shift to 24/7 work started with the rise of smartphones, social media, and tablet computers. And technology companies are in tune with what individuals and companies need to operate in a global environment.

"I think technology companies are at the forefront of the paradigm shift we have seen in how companies access, deliver, or create information," Crittenden says. "They have a knack for giving us services we didn't think we would ever need but for some reason we can no longer live without."

But as the technology improves and connectivity grows it will be important for employers to realize where to draw the line. In order to keep a happy and healthy workforce, employers will need to make sure their employees maintain the right work-life balance.

"First and foremost, an individual's health and family should always be priority number one," Crittenden says. "Allowing either one of those to suffer because of work is unacceptable. If you run into this situation, it's time to reevaluate what is important in life."

Sexton says the work-life balance philosophy must be a part of the company culture and needs to be encouraged from the top down.

"Performance and productivity coaching is starting to catch on in some companies to help employees evaluate their work styles and figure out the best and most productive ways to accomplish what they need to do and reduce the stress and pressure of the workload," she says.