

Press Release

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OUT-OF-HOURS COMMUNICATION: PROTECTING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING WITHOUT SACRIFICING PRODUCTIVITY

Using work-related information communication technology (ICT) outside of office hours is known to have a negative effect on employee wellbeing, but can be unavoidable. So if we do have to use ICT, what is the best way in which we can do it? To answer this question, a recent study published in HRM examined how different ICT channels impact on employee wellbeing and productivity.

The lack of psychological detachment from work has been linked to detrimental health outcomes, such as burnout and sleep problems. A [study](#) recently published in *Human Resource Management (HRM)* examined how people's psychological detachment is influenced by the use of different work-related information communication technology (ICT) channels (email, phone call, chat app and SMS/texting) outside of office hours.

"These days, a lot of companies increasingly care about their employees' wellbeing, their mental health. With technology being everywhere and with new work arrangements, such as remote work, it is important to understand the subtlety of how technologies influence us. Our study connects the use of technology to psychological detachment, which is one of the key constructs that capture people's mental wellbeing", said Adela Chen, the lead author of the study and an associate professor of Computer Information Systems at Colorado State University, USA.

The study points to the need for understanding of how the use of ICT can be both less harmful for employee psychological detachment and more helpful for employee productivity (how much an employee feels they are able to accomplish during their out-of-hours work), as well as how organisational expectations and organisational identification (the importance of the organisation to an employee) may influence these effects.

"Organisational identification and organisational expectations reflect people's intrinsic motivation and extrinsic pressure, and as such have the push-and-pull type of tension going on. Bringing in organisational identification and organisational expectations enables us to see how those different forces influence how people really experience technologies in their work", said Chen.

Organisations that expect employees to work outside of office hours can be especially problematic for employee psychological detachment. While many countries have laws that protect employees from having to work outside of office hours, some level of communication during this time may still be expected in certain situations or occupations (for example, healthcare on-call work or work in multinational firms that often requires communication with offices outside of the country).

"Previous research clearly says that we just shouldn't use work-related communication technology after hours because it's not good for our wellbeing. It's not good for detachment. But there isn't a lot of research out there that says, if we have to do it, what's the best way that we can do it? And so that was really our motivating question for this paper", said Samantha Conroy, one of the study authors and an associate professor in the Management Department at Colorado State University.

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The authors conducted a daily diary survey of the use of ICT outside of office hours by almost 500 employees, over three consecutive workdays. This captured just short of 1500 examples of ICT use. The study found that engagement with any form of ICT outside of office hours - whether it is email, chat apps, phone calls or SMS - reduces psychological detachment, which confirms previous research. This suggests that organisations should aim to minimise ICT use outside of work hours whenever possible to prevent a negative impact on employee wellbeing.

A particular contribution of the study is in that it provides a nuanced view of the influence of out-of-hours use of different ICT channels on employee psychological detachment and productivity. ICT channels differ in terms of communication synchronicity: email, chat apps, and SMS are asynchronous ICT channels because communication through them occurs without having all communicators engaged at the same time. Asynchronous ICT channels have relatively high “reprocessability” (the extent to which they enable a message to be re-examined) and high “rehearsability” (the extent to which they enable a message to be revised/rehearsed before being communicated). A phone call, on the other hand, is an example of a synchronous ICT channel. Synchronous channels provide less opportunity for rehearsing and reprocessing; hence, communication through them is less likely to lead to prolonged or repeated engagement with work-related tasks than that via asynchronous technologies. Given that different ICT channels are going to engage more or less reprocessing and rehearsing, the study also found how each of them (i.e., phone call, e-mail, chat app, and SMS) influenced employee outcomes.

“Usually, when we look at technologies, we just talk about technologies. But there are different colours, different layers there, and these technologies have different capabilities, and because of that, they have different impact”, said Chen.

“We found that some of these technologies are going to be better after-hours than others for this productivity-detachment trade off”, said Conroy.

The study found that email and chat apps are particularly associated with the lowest levels of psychological detachment. Email has the most potential to lead to one’s psychological preoccupation with work outside of office hours given that it is not time bound, and requires rehearsing, drafting, interpreting and reprocessing the message. However, email was found to be good for productivity:

“Emails and chat apps are the worst in terms of preventing people from recharging and disconnecting from work. As such, they are more detrimental to people’s wellbeing compared to other technologies. When you look at it from a different angle however, we know emails can be really good for productivity, as shown in the results as well, because you work on email without relying on the availability of your communicators. So, it’s a nice contrast here that really shows the subtlety of the influence of technology on our lives. It’s not black and white. There’re so many layers to it. It really depends on the angle that you choose to look at this”, said Chen.

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“Text messaging - SMS - has the best trade off: it was associated with the most productive episodes and the most ability to detach after the event”, said Conroy.

“We also know from previous studies that phone calls can be very intrusive. When you have a phone ringing, you feel like you have to take some action at that moment. However, a phone call is also time-bound. So, from that perspective, it does less harm to people’s psychological detachment”, said Chen.

“The phone call was good for detachment, but the productivity wasn't really there, so it’s a trade-off”, added Conroy.

Overall, the study points out that organisations should be more mindful of these multifaceted effects of ICT use:

“We make organisations and employees aware of these subtleties so that they can make better-informed decisions when they have to make these trade-offs”, said Chen.

Chen’s and Conroy’s co-author was Tori Crain, an associate professor of Applied Psychology at Portland State University, USA.

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Read the full article [here](#).

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