

Asking more of workers during off hours may backfire

By Clive Thompson, Mother Jones

My airplane home from Boston is delayed for takeoff, so the woman next to me pulls out her phones to get some work done. Like many of us, she has two—an iPhone for her personal life and a BlackBerry paid for by her employer. “It’s a dog leash,” she jokes. “They yank on it and I respond. If somebody from work emails me on Friday at 10 p.m., they’re pissed if I don’t write back in five minutes.” When I ask whether she ever just turns it off, she shakes her head in annoyance, as though I’d uttered something profane. “My team leader would kill me,” she says.

Cultural pundits these days often bemoan how people are “addicted” to their smart phones. We’re narcissistic drones, we’re told, unable to look away from the glowing screen, desperate to remain in touch. And it’s certainly true that many of us should probably cool it with social media; nobody needs to check Twitter that often. But it’s also becoming clear that workplace demands propel a lot of that nervous phone-glancing. In fact, you could view off-hours email as one of the growing labor issues of our time.

In a recent survey of workers, 50 percent said they checked email while in bed, and 38 percent “routinely” checked it at the dinner table.

Consider some recent data: A 2012 survey by the Center for Creative Leadership found that 60 percent of smartphone-using professionals kept in touch with work for a full 13.5 hours per day, and then spent another 5 hours juggling work email each weekend. That’s 72 hours a week of job-related contact. Another survey of 1,000 workers by Good Technology, a mobile-

software firm, found that 68 percent checked work email before 8 a.m., 50 percent checked it while in bed, and 38 percent “routinely” did so at the dinner table. Fully 44 percent of working adults surveyed by the American Psychological Association reported that they check work email daily while on vacation—about 1 in 10 checked it hourly. It only gets worse as you move up the ladder. According to the Pew Research Center, people who make more than \$75,000 per year are more likely to fret that their phone makes it impossible for them to stop thinking about work.

Over time, the creep of off-hours messages from our bosses and colleagues has led us to tolerate these intrusions as an inevitable part of the job, which is why it’s so startling when an employer is actually straightforward with his lunatic demands, as with the notorious email a Quinn Emanuel law partner sent to his underlings back in 2009: “Unless you have very good reason not to (for example when you are asleep, in court or in a tunnel), you should be checking your emails every hour.”

Constant access may work out great for employers, since it continues to ratchet up the pressure for turning off-the-clock, away-from-the-desk hours into just another part of the workday. But any corresponding economic gains likely aren’t being passed on to workers: During the great internet-age boom in productivity, which is up 23 percent since 2000, the inflation-adjusted wages and benefits for college graduates climbed just 4 percent, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

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