

Member's Quarterly

Fall 2024 Edition

Feature

Learning to Shut Down: Email

It's the new law of the land

Q | *Wouldn't you like to just shut off the world for the weekend? Turn off your laptop? Put your phone on 'Do Not Disturb' mode?*

Now you can across Europe and thanks to the Right to Disconnect legislation, you can do it in Ontario as well. Most experts expect similar laws and regulations coming soon across Canada.

They appear to have a more, shall we say, relaxed approach to the intrusion of electronics into the bedrooms and the weekends of the nation.

It started on the continent

The Europeans appear to have a stricter approach to the intrusion of electronics into the bedrooms and the weekends of the nation. In Germany, Volkswagen, the automobile manufacturer, has programmed its email servers to stop delivering email to their employees 30 minutes after work and to begin sending them again 30 minutes before the start of a new workday. There are no emails sent out from the servers on weekends at all. It's not only Germany that has implemented some type of approach designed to disengage employees completely from the workplace once the formal workday is done.

In France, which has long been known for its overly generous vacation leave allotments, they have passed a law that gives employees the 'right to disconnect' from their phones and emails after working hours. This law is applicable to every French organization with more than 50 employees. All of them have to draw up a formal charter that sets out the normal hours when their staff are supposed to send or answer emails. If they require employees to answer outside of this time period, they must pay them an overtime supplement.

Ontario is leading the way in Canada

As part of a package to improve workers' rights, the Ontario government's right to disconnect law gives employees the right to detach from work activity outside of work hours. It applies to all companies with employees of 25 people or more. Those employers are required to have a written policy on disconnecting from work in place for all employees. They are also required to provide a copy of this policy to all employees. According to the legislation, "disconnecting from work" is pretty broad. It means not engaging in work-related communications, including emails, telephone calls, video calls or sending or reviewing other messages, to be free from the performance of work.

Why they're doing it

It is not surprising that the Europeans moved first in this direction because they have a different approach to work than many North Americans or Asians. The Germans, for example, have the reputation of being strong and focused workers with an intense desire to get things done. However, this is melded with the idea that you also need to take time off for self-care and relaxation and to come back to work ready and refreshed for the next challenge. No one would doubt the German success in all aspects of business and productivity.



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There are also legal frameworks and moral codes in France and other continental European countries that make generous vacation time mandated by law and viewed as a necessary and fundamental aspect of life. Not only do they have lots of vacation time, but all employees, from executives to clerks, are expected to take it all in the year that it is earned. Canadians appear to be catching up as the Ontario legislation demonstrates.

We still have work to do here

In Canada and across North America, the rise of the business email-friendly Blackberry meant that many of us were cracking away at our phones at all hours of the day and well into the night. One study by a major software company in the US estimated that 83 percent of professional workers said that they regularly checked emails after work. Two-thirds had taken their smartphone or laptop on vacation. More than 50 percent reported that they send emails while having dinner with their family and friends. What is wrong with us? We do not have the legal or societal frameworks to help us slow down. We also have an innate drive to try and add one more piece to the great puzzle we are

creating. Some people refer to this as allowing technology to help us implement a positive view we already have of ourselves. It also allows us to not just produce in this crazy modern marketplace, but to be able to prove that we are working and producing, should anyone ask. Others call it by its more appropriate name, an addiction to technology and working.

The times we check our emails are changing

More and more companies on this side of the Atlantic are trying to change the culture in their workplaces when it comes to the use of email after regular working hours. In fact, one study showed that about one in four major North American corporations have created rules similar to the Volkswagen model on email, including both formal and informal policies and directives to employees. What they are finding is that the overall productivity is not dropping as some feared, but is actually increasing.

That is because employees are more relaxed when they come back to work and thereby more effective and productive during normal business hours. They are also less stressed and that means they make better and more thoughtful decisions. In addition, they don't get sick as often which is a direct benefit to their employer with reduced costs of absenteeism, less money being paid out in company health benefits and fewer employees on both short and long-term disability plans. It is difficult for employees and employers to break their addiction to working around the clock, but it does appear that times are changing in this area. Vive la difference!

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