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The Always-On Culture: Expectations for Work Communication Beyond Working Hours

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Abstract
The use of digital communication technologies has changed the way employees interact with their organization. Employees are able to stay connected with work at all times due to the use of smartphones and other digital communication technologies. This is reflected in the creation of an 'always-on' work culture. Employees feel a need to stay connected and available for work communication beyond working hours. This is a new way of interacting with work and is likely to impact employee outcomes. The aim of this article is to examine the existing research on the impact of work communication beyond working hours on employee outcomes. Studies on work communication beyond working hours and work-related smartphone use have found that employees feel compelled to respond quickly to work communication beyond working hours. This reduces the opportunity for employees to psychologically detach from work and is likely to increase stress and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the literature suggests that more frequent communication during non-working hours with work-related content can lead to higher levels of work-life conflict, sleep problems, and burnout. At the same time, the idea of being constantly connected to technology can create a sense of responsibility to be connected to supervisors and colleagues as well. In this respect, the "always connected" culture can actually contribute to an organizational culture that expects employees to be connected at all times. Overall, the article suggests that the "always connected" culture is becoming an increasing problem in modern organizations. Perhaps by developing clear communication norms and work-life boundaries, organizations can begin to mitigate some of the negative effects that can come with communication during non-working hours.

Keywords: *Always-on culture, After-hours communication, Work-life boundaries, Digital connectivity, Employee wellbeing*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital communication technologies have profoundly transformed the way employees relate to their work and to the organizations that employ them. E-mail, smartphones, instant messaging applications and collaborative platforms have made it possible for work to be carried out, coordinated and monitored independently of a fixed place or a fixed schedule (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). What was initially welcomed as a source of flexibility and efficiency has gradually produced a less visible consequence: the boundary between working time and non-working time has become increasingly permeable. Employees can now be reached by supervisors, colleagues and clients in the evening, during weekends and even while on holiday, and many of them feel that they are expected to answer.

This development is commonly described as the emergence of an "always-on" work culture. In such a culture, constant availability is no longer an exception reserved for specific occupations or emergency situations, but an implicit norm that shapes everyday working life. Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates (2013) showed that, among knowledge professionals, the individual choice to use mobile e-mail devices in order to gain autonomy over when and where to work gradually led to a collective expectation of continuous responsiveness, which in turn reduced the very autonomy the devices were supposed to provide. This "autonomy paradox" illustrates that being permanently connected is not merely a matter of personal habit, but a phenomenon that is embedded in organizational norms and social expectations.

The scale of the phenomenon has been documented at the European level. A joint report by Eurofound and the International Labour Office (2017) on telework and ICT-mobile work found that working anytime and anywhere is associated with longer working hours, an overlap between paid work and personal life, and higher levels of stress among employees who frequently use these technologies. The shift towards remote and hybrid work arrangements in recent years has further reinforced the importance of the topic, as the physical separation between the workplace and the home has diminished for a large part of the workforce. At the same time, the issue has entered the public and legislative agenda, with debates on the so-called "right to disconnect" being held in several European countries and at the level of the European Union.

Research on work-related communication outside working hours has grown considerably in the fields of organizational psychology, management and occupational health. Studies have examined after-hours e-mail use, work-related smartphone use during leisure time, extended work availability and the pressure to respond quickly to work messages (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Schlachter, McDowall, Cropley & Inceoglu, 2018). Their findings are not entirely uniform: while some employees experience after-hours connectivity as a useful resource that increases their control over work, a growing body of evidence suggests that it can interfere with recovery, family life and health. Nevertheless, these studies remain dispersed across disciplines and often focus on isolated outcomes, which makes it difficult to obtain an integrated picture of how the always-on culture develops and why it matters for employees.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to examine the impact of work communication beyond working hours on employee outcomes, with a particular focus on the role of organizational expectations. More specifically, the article seeks to answer three questions: (1) what factors lead employees to remain connected to work outside their formal working hours; (2) what are the consequences of this permanent connectivity for

psychological detachment, stress, work-life conflict, sleep and burnout; and (3) how can organizations limit the negative effects of the always-on culture. To address these questions, the article draws on empirical studies and established theoretical frameworks, including boundary theory, the effort-recovery model and the conservation of resources theory.

2. Conceptual and theoretical background

2.1. Key concepts

Research on work communication beyond working hours uses several related concepts that capture different aspects of the same phenomenon. In one of the first studies on the topic, Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2007) examined the use of communication technologies after hours, defined as the use of devices such as mobile phones, pagers, laptops and e-mail to perform work or to communicate with work contacts outside regular working time. Fenner and Renn (2010) described a similar behaviour as technology-assisted supplemental work: the performance of job-related tasks at home, after normal working hours, with the help of information and communication technologies. Both concepts focus on what employees actually do once the formal working day has ended.

Other concepts emphasise the expectations and psychological states that accompany this behaviour. Extended work availability refers to a situation in which employees are expected to be reachable and to respond to work demands outside their regular working hours, even if they are not actually contacted (Dettmers, Vahle-Hinz, Bamberg, Friedrich & Keller, 2016). Workplace telepressure, introduced by Barber and Santuzzi (2015), describes a preoccupation with and an urge to respond quickly to work-related messages, regardless of when they arrive. Unlike after-hours technology use, telepressure is a subjective experience. It may be present even when no message is actually answered, and it captures the feeling of being "on call" that characterises the always-on culture.

A third group of studies concentrates on the device itself, analysing work-related smartphone use during leisure time (Derks & Bakker, 2014; Ohly & Latour, 2014). Smartphones are particularly relevant because they are carried everywhere, combine work and private functions in a single device and send notifications that interrupt non-work activities. In this article, the term "work communication beyond working hours" is used as an umbrella concept that includes receiving, reading and answering work-related messages, calls and e-mails outside formal working time. "Always-on culture" refers to the organizational and social context in which such communication becomes a normal and expected part of working life.

2.2. Boundary theory and the work-nonwork interface

The most common theoretical lens for analysing after-hours communication is boundary theory. Individuals create and maintain boundaries around their different life domains, such as work and family, in order to simplify and organise their environment (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). These boundaries can be placed on a continuum ranging from segmentation, where work and private life are kept strictly separate, to integration, where the two domains overlap and the transitions between them are frequent and easy (Ashforth et al., 2000). Work-family border theory adds that borders differ in their permeability, meaning the extent to which elements of one domain can enter

the other, and in their flexibility, meaning the extent to which they can be moved in time and space (Clark, 2000).

Communication technologies make the boundary between work and home considerably more permeable. A work e-mail read during dinner or a message answered late at night is an intrusion of the work domain into the private one, which requires a micro role transition from the role of partner or parent to the role of employee. Individuals differ in their preferences for segmentation or integration, and the fit between these preferences and what the work environment allows influences their well-being (Kreiner, 2006). Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy and Hannum (2012) also show that employees differ in boundary control, the perceived ability to decide when, where and how often they cross the boundary between work and non-work. The concept of boundary control is particularly important for the always-on culture, because it suggests that the effects of after-hours communication depend not only on how often it occurs, but also on whether employees feel they can choose to disconnect.

2.3. Recovery, resources and job demands

A second set of theories explains why after-hours communication may affect employee health and well-being. According to the effort-recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998), effort spent at work produces short-term strain reactions, such as fatigue, which are normally reversed when the demands are removed and the individual has the opportunity to recover. If recovery is incomplete because work demands continue to be present during non-working time, strain accumulates and can lead in the long term to health problems. Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) identified four recovery experiences: psychological detachment from work, relaxation, mastery experiences and control over leisure time. Psychological detachment, the state of mentally switching off from work, has received the most attention, as it is consistently associated with better well-being (Sonnentag, 2012). The stressor-detachment model further argues that job stressors reduce detachment, which in turn explains part of their negative effect on employees (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers a complementary explanation. It states that people strive to obtain, retain and protect the resources they value, such as time, energy and attention, and that stress occurs when these resources are threatened or lost. Constant availability for work consumes resources that would otherwise be used for rest and family life, and it prevents their replenishment. Finally, the job demands-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) distinguishes between job demands, which require sustained effort and are linked to exhaustion, and job resources, which support motivation and engagement. From this perspective, after-hours communication can operate both ways. When it is experienced as an obligation, it acts as an additional demand. When it increases flexibility and control, it may function as a resource. This dual nature runs through the rest of the article and explains why the consequences of the always-on culture are not the same for all employees.

3. Why employees stay connected: drivers of the always-on culture

Understanding the consequences of after-hours communication first requires understanding why employees remain connected to work once their formal working day has ended. Research suggests that this behaviour cannot be explained solely by individual choice or by the technical possibility of being reachable. It results instead from a

combination of organizational expectations, psychological pressures, social norms and personal motivations, which reinforce each other over time.

3.1. Organizational expectations

One of the most consistent findings concerns the role of organizational expectations. Fenner and Renn (2010) showed that employees' perceptions that their organization expects them to use technology to work after hours were associated with more technology-assisted supplemental work, which in turn was related to higher work-to-family conflict. These expectations are rarely formalised in contracts or internal regulations. More often, they are communicated implicitly, through the behaviour of managers who send messages late in the evening, through the speed with which colleagues reply, or through the informal rewards given to those who are always available.

Piszczek (2017) argued that organizational expectations for technology use at the work-family interface limit the boundary control of employees, reducing their ability to decide when they engage with work outside working hours. Similarly, Mellner (2016) found that perceived availability expectations were associated with more work-related smartphone use during leisure time and with lower psychological detachment from work, and that this relationship depended on the boundary control employees perceived. Belkin, Becker and Conroy (2020) went further and showed that the expectation to monitor e-mail after hours can be harmful even when employees spend little actual time on it. In other words, it is not only the work done after hours that matters, but also the feeling of being expected to be available, which they described as an "invisible leash".

3.2. Workplace telepressure

Organizational expectations are often internalised by employees as a psychological pressure to respond quickly. Barber and Santuzzi (2015) defined this experience as workplace telepressure and showed that it is associated with perceived workplace norms regarding responsiveness. Employees experiencing high telepressure reported poorer sleep quality, higher levels of burnout and more absences due to health reasons. Telepressure helps explain why many employees check their messages even when nobody has explicitly asked them to. The urge to respond becomes a habit, and the delay between receiving a message and answering it is perceived as a potential sign of low commitment or lack of professionalism.

3.3. The autonomy paradox and the cycle of responsiveness

Mobile technologies are often presented as tools that increase employee autonomy, as they allow people to choose when and where they work. However, research shows that this autonomy can become a source of constraint. In their study of knowledge professionals, Mazmanian, Orlikowski and Yates (2013) found that individuals used mobile e-mail devices to gain flexibility and control over their work, yet the collective use of these devices raised expectations of availability across the whole group. As each person became more responsive, the others felt compelled to do the same, and the freedom to disconnect gradually diminished. The authors called this the autonomy paradox.

Perlow (2012) described a similar mechanism as a "cycle of responsiveness". Pressure to be available leads employees to respond more quickly and more often. Their responsiveness raises the expectations of clients and colleagues, which in turn increases the pressure to be available. Over time, constant connectivity becomes the norm and is no longer perceived as a choice. Both studies show that the always-on culture is produced

collectively, through everyday interactions, and cannot be reduced to the habits of a few individuals.

3.4. Social norms and individual motivations

The norms that exist within teams and work groups also shape after-hours behaviour. Derks, van Duin, Tims and Bakker (2015) found that daily work-related smartphone use was associated with higher work-home interference, especially among employees who perceived a strong norm of being available. Gadeyne, Verbruggen, Delanoeije and De Cooman (2018) similarly highlighted the importance of integration norms, work demands and individual preferences for integrating work and home in explaining the relationship between after-hours ICT use and work-to-home conflict. When high workloads and norms of constant availability come together, employees have few alternatives to answering messages outside working hours.

Individual factors also play a role. Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2007) found that employees with higher ambition and greater psychological involvement in their job were more likely to use communication technologies after hours. Ohly and Latour (2014) showed that the effects of work-related smartphone use in the evening depend on the motivation behind it: use that is autonomously motivated, out of interest or personal importance, is experienced differently from use that is driven by external pressure or a sense of obligation. In a broader synthesis of empirical studies, Schlachter et al. (2018) likewise underlined the distinction between voluntary and expected technology use during non-work time. Nevertheless, as the studies above suggest, the boundary between voluntary and imposed connectivity is often blurred, since "voluntary" choices are made within an organizational context that rewards availability.

4. Consequences of work communication beyond working hours for employee outcomes

Most of the research on after-hours communication has examined its consequences for employees. Although the studies differ in their methods, samples and the specific behaviour they analyse, their findings point in a similar direction: when work communication extends into non-working time, employees lose opportunities to recover, and the effects can accumulate in the form of stress, work-life conflict, sleep problems and burnout. This section discusses these consequences in turn.

4.1. Psychological detachment and recovery

The most immediate consequence of after-hours communication concerns psychological detachment from work. As shown in the previous section, recovery requires not only physical distance from the workplace, but also the ability to stop thinking about work (Sonnentag, 2012). Messages that arrive in the evening or at the weekend interrupt this process, as they reactivate work-related thoughts, problems and tasks. Park, Fritz and Jex (2011) found that the use of communication technology at home was associated with lower psychological detachment from work. They also found that technology use helped explain why employees with stronger segmentation preferences, as well as those working in organizations that supported segmentation, detached better from work.

Diary studies, which follow employees from day to day, confirm these findings. Derks, ten Brummelhuis, Zecic and Bakker (2014) showed that, among employees who use their smartphones intensively, work-related smartphone use during the evening hinders recovery activities such as psychological detachment and relaxation. Mellner

(2016) similarly reported that perceived availability expectations were associated with lower detachment, especially among employees with low boundary control. The literature therefore suggests that the always-on culture affects employees not only through the time spent working after hours, but also by keeping work mentally present during the time that should be dedicated to rest.

4.2. Stress and emotional exhaustion

When recovery is repeatedly incomplete, the strain produced by work accumulates, in line with the effort-recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Several studies show that even the mere expectation of being available can produce stress. Dettmers et al. (2016) compared days on which employees were required to be available for work with days on which they were not. On availability days, employees reported a lower mood at the start of the day and showed a higher cortisol awakening response, a physiological indicator of stress, even if they were not actually contacted. Dettmers (2017) further found that extended work availability was associated with lower well-being, an effect explained by reduced psychological detachment and increased work-family conflict.

The role of expectations is also highlighted by Belkin et al. (2020), who found that organizational expectations to monitor e-mail after hours were associated with emotional exhaustion, whereas the actual time spent on e-mail was not the decisive factor. From the perspective of the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), constant availability can be seen as a continuous drain on resources. Employees remain in a state of anticipation, ready to react to a message that may or may not arrive. This state consumes energy and attention, which become unavailable for rest and personal activities.

4.3. Work-life conflict

Work-life conflict is one of the most frequently studied outcomes of after-hours communication. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as a form of inter-role conflict in which the demands of the work and family roles are incompatible, so that participation in one role makes participation in the other more difficult. After-hours communication generates exactly this type of conflict, as it requires employees to attend to work demands while being physically present in the family domain. Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2007) found that the use of communication technologies after hours was associated with higher work-life conflict, and Fenner and Renn (2010) reported similar findings for technology-assisted supplemental work.

The emotional content of after-hours messages also matters. Butts, Becker and Boswell (2015) showed that electronic communications received during non-work time affect employees' emotions according to their tone: messages perceived as negative generate anger, while those perceived as positive generate happiness. They also found that the time spent responding to such communications was associated with work-nonwork conflict. A recent scoping review by Blake, Hassard, Singh and Teoh (2024) concluded that most of the studies examining work-related smartphone use during off-job hours report a positive association with work-life conflict. It also highlighted the moderating role of factors such as boundary preferences and organizational norms.

4.4. Sleep problems and burnout

After-hours communication can also affect sleep, which is one of the most important mechanisms of recovery. Lanaj, Johnson and Barnes (2014) found that work-related smartphone use late in the evening was associated with shorter sleep, which in turn

led to greater depletion the following morning and lower work engagement during the day. Barber and Santuzzi (2015) linked workplace telepressure to poorer sleep quality. Conversely, Barber and Jenkins (2014) showed that employees who create technological boundaries before bedtime, for example by avoiding work-related technology use in the evening, report better sleep outcomes.

When stress, lack of recovery and poor sleep persist, they can contribute to burnout. Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic job stressors, characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and a reduced sense of professional efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Derks and Bakker (2014) found that work-related smartphone use was associated with work-home interference, which was in turn related to burnout. Their findings also show that recovery experiences play an important role in this relationship. Barber and Santuzzi (2015) reported that employees experiencing high telepressure also showed higher levels of burnout. From the perspective of the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), these findings suggest that permanent availability works as an additional job demand that, in the absence of adequate resources and recovery, leads to exhaustion.

4.5. Effects beyond the individual employee

Finally, the consequences of the always-on culture are not limited to the employee. Becker, Belkin, Conroy and Tuskey (2021) examined both employees and their significant others and found that organizational expectations to monitor e-mail after hours were associated with higher employee anxiety. This was in turn linked to poorer health and lower relationship satisfaction for employees as well as for their partners. Their findings show that availability expectations cross the boundary of the organization and affect the family as a whole. Seen from this angle, the always-on culture becomes a broader social issue, which reinforces the relevance of public debates on the right to disconnect.

5. Discussion: the always-on culture as an organizational phenomenon

Taken together, the studies discussed above show that work communication beyond working hours cannot be understood only as an individual behaviour or as a simple consequence of technological progress. Smartphones and e-mail make permanent connectivity possible, but they do not by themselves make it necessary. What turns the possibility into an obligation is the set of shared assumptions, expectations and practices that develop within organizations. In this sense, the always-on culture can be understood as a form of organizational culture: a pattern of basic assumptions learned by a group, which are taken for granted and transmitted to new members as the correct way to think and behave (Schein, 2010).

The process through which this culture emerges is largely informal. Managers rarely require employees to answer messages at night. However, a late e-mail from a supervisor, a colleague who replies within minutes or the appreciation shown towards those who are always reachable send clear signals about what is valued. Over time, these signals are interpreted as expectations, internalised as telepressure and reproduced through each employee's own responsiveness (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Perlow, 2012). This explains why the always-on culture is difficult to change through individual effort alone. An employee who chooses to disconnect may fear being perceived as less committed than colleagues, so the individual decision is constrained by the collective norm.

At the same time, the literature does not suggest that all forms of after-hours connectivity are harmful. For some employees, the possibility of checking messages in the evening reduces uncertainty, allows them to organise their work more flexibly and offers a sense of control (Ohly & Latour, 2014; Schlachter et al., 2018). The consequences depend largely on two factors. The first is the fit between the employee's preferences and the requirements of the work environment. Employees who prefer to integrate work and private life tend to experience connectivity differently from those who prefer to keep the two domains separate (Kreiner, 2006; Gadeyne et al., 2018). The second, and probably the more important, is boundary control: the extent to which employees feel that they can decide for themselves when to engage with work and when to disconnect (Kossek et al., 2012; Mellner, 2016).

This distinction helps to clarify the central argument of this article. The problem is not connectivity itself, but connectivity that is expected, implicit and difficult to refuse. When availability becomes a norm rather than a choice, the flexibility promised by digital technologies turns into a constraint. Employees lose control over their boundaries and the negative consequences discussed in the previous section are more likely to appear. This is consistent with the findings of Belkin et al. (2020) and Becker et al. (2021), who showed that organizational expectations of availability can affect well-being regardless of the actual time spent on after-hours communication. Kossek (2016) also argues that managing work-life boundaries in the digital age is not only an individual responsibility, but also an organizational one, as organizations shape the conditions under which employees can or cannot separate work from the rest of their lives.

Consequently, the always-on culture should be treated as a feature of the organizational environment that can be shaped through management practices and public policies, rather than as a personal problem of employees who fail to manage their time.

6. Implications for organizations and public policy

The analysis presented above has several implications for organizations. Since the always-on culture is largely sustained by implicit expectations, the first step is to make these expectations explicit. Organizations can develop clear communication norms that specify when employees are expected to be available, which channels should be used for urgent matters and what response times are reasonable outside working hours. Such norms reduce the uncertainty that fuels telepressure (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015) and give employees greater boundary control, which the literature identifies as a key protective factor (Kossek et al., 2012; Mellner, 2016).

Managers play a central role in this process. Because expectations are often inferred from the behaviour of supervisors, managers who avoid sending messages late at night, or who clearly state that such messages do not require an immediate answer, can help change the norms of their teams. Experiments with predictable time off have shown that collective agreements on periods of disconnection can improve both employee satisfaction and the quality of work (Perlow, 2012). Organizational support is also important. Day, Paquet, Scott and Hambley (2012) found that organizational support for information and communication technology can reduce the negative effects of ICT demands on employee stress and strain. At the individual level, practices such as keeping work devices away during the evening may protect sleep and recovery (Barber & Jenkins, 2014), but these practices are effective only if the organizational culture allows them.

At the level of public policy, the always-on culture has increasingly been addressed through the right to disconnect. France was among the first countries to introduce this

right in its Labour Code, through Law no. 2016-1088 of 8 August 2016, which requires companies to negotiate the conditions under which employees may disconnect from digital tools. Portugal followed in 2021 with Law no. 83/2021, which obliges employers to refrain from contacting employees during their rest period, except in cases of force majeure. At the European level, the European Parliament adopted on 21 January 2021 a resolution calling on the European Commission to propose a directive on the right to disconnect (European Parliament, 2021). After negotiations between the European social partners failed to produce an agreement, the Commission launched its own consultation on fair telework and the right to disconnect. However, no directive has been adopted to date. In Romania, the right to disconnect is not yet regulated by a dedicated law. The protection of employees relies on the general provisions of the Labour Code regarding working time and rest periods, as well as on Law no. 81/2018 on telework. The findings discussed in this article suggest that legal regulation can provide an important minimum standard. However, its effectiveness depends on whether organizations also change the informal norms that sustain constant availability.

7. Conclusions

This article examined the impact of work communication beyond working hours on employee outcomes, with a focus on the organizational expectations that sustain the always-on culture. The analysis shows that employees remain connected to work after hours not simply by personal choice, but as a result of explicit and implicit organizational expectations, workplace telepressure and team norms that reward constant availability. The consequences of this connectivity are predominantly negative. It reduces psychological detachment and recovery, increases stress and emotional exhaustion, intensifies work-life conflict, disrupts sleep and can contribute to burnout. Its effects can also extend to employees' families. At the same time, connectivity is not harmful in itself. Its effects depend largely on whether employees retain control over their boundaries.

The main conclusion is that the always-on culture is an organizational and social phenomenon, which requires organizational and policy responses rather than individual solutions alone. Clear communication norms, managerial role modelling and legal frameworks such as the right to disconnect can help restore the boundary between work and private life.

The analysis has certain limitations. It relies mainly on studies conducted in Western contexts and on research designs that do not always allow causal conclusions. Future research could examine the always-on culture in Central and Eastern European organizations, including Romania. It could also explore how different sectors and generations experience after-hours communication and how effective right-to-disconnect regulations are in practice.

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