

TECH | GEAR & GADGETS

How to Disconnect From ‘Always On’ Work Culture

In our ‘Always On’ world, colleagues text and email us at all hours, expecting a quick response. But with these strategies, you can be happily out of reach—and not out of a job



THE CHALLENGE OF OPTING OUT Sixty percent of Americans admit to feeling stressed when their phones are off or unavailable, according to a 2017 study by Asurion, a tech insurance company.

ILLUSTRATION: STEVE SCOTT

By *Matthew Kitchen*

Oct. 5, 2018 7:49 a.m. ET

I HAVE A MASOCHISTIC need to please bosses, so I’m never more than a few feet from my iPhone (notifications humming at all hours) and I never leave home without a MacBook in tow. Just in case. My manager, who once mentioned pointedly that he has a “perverse respect for workaholics,” recently emailed me a question at 11:11 p.m. When I responded seven minutes later, he shot back: “You = Always On.”

Whether it was a joke or a compliment, I’ll take it. Different generations might debate which technological advance launched the “always on” work culture that keeps us chained to our devices, and who’s most guilty of perpetuating it. As a millennial, I’d argue that it sprang up in the mid-1980s, when doctors first clipped on pagers and Michael Douglas introduced the

world to car phones in “Wall Street,” that cautionary tale about work/life balance (which famously declared that “lunch is for wimps”).

Today always-on is the default work setting for most of us. Ubiquitous smartphones, slim computers and innovative apps make every response a snap—quicker, easier, seemingly less painful. It just takes a second, right? But those rapidly accumulating seconds are just technology’s version of death by 1,000 cuts, expanding the workday’s boundaries until it seamlessly blurs with the rest of civilian life.

According to a 2016 study by the Academy of Management, employees tally an average of 8 hours a week answering work-related emails after leaving the office. Echoing that, a 2015 Harris Poll for the American Psychological Association found that 30% of men and 23% of women regularly bring work home. Similar percentages admitted to working on vacation and to bringing “work materials” along on social outings (we hope they don’t mean accordion folders). All of this, many experts in psychology agree, causes stress, ruins sleep habits and cripples our ability to stay active and engaged during actual office hours.

In 2017, France instituted a new labor law that supports a new frontier in human rights, the “Right to Disconnect.” Backed by unions advocating that employees disengage from electronic work communications once free of the office, the law stems from a 2004 French Supreme Court ruling affirming that an employee who is unreachable by cell outside of work can’t be dinged for misconduct.



SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED Actively disengaging from work can help you rest up so you're more productive during office hours. ILLUSTRATION: STEVE SCOTT

Similar rights have been extended in Italy and the Philippines, are being explored in Germany and Luxembourg and were proposed in New York City. And in July, the South Korean legislation began limiting weekly work hours to just 52, down from a max of 68. Surprise: America has no legal maximum.

“Always-on culture is weird. It’s not how humans thrive. It’s not how productive people break through to the next level,” said Greg McKeown, author of “Essentialism,” which details his philosophy of confidently saying no to things that don’t benefit you—a “disciplined pursuit of doing less,” but

doing it better. “Modern culture now acts upon us so constantly that we start reacting to it rather than acting for ourselves.”

Mr. McKeown argues that being selective about how we spend our time turns it into a valuable commodity to be traded, ultimately earning you respect and making you more productive when you’re “on.” For instance, saying no to aimless meetings frees up your office time to finish tasks, eliminating extra work at home. But many of us still are burdened by FOMO—the fear of missing out, or in this case the fear of missing opportunity, of being seen as less hardworking and less reliable than co-workers and thus expendable. According to a 2016 Harvard Business Review study, 43% of those surveyed “sacrifice or significantly suppress other meaningful aspects of who they are” and give in to always-on.

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So rather than using technology to augment our work, speeding us out the door in 6 hours instead of 10, or cutting down to an ideal four-day workweek, we’ve misused technology to bolster antiquated workaholic habits. Then again, what’s two minutes to draft a quick email so the folks upstairs know they can always count on you?

“We have to dismantle always-on before it dismantles us,” Mr. McKeown warned. How to actually achieve that dismantling is complicated. Much like that electronic cummerbund that promises to zap your stomach into a six-pack but only burns you in the end—financially and in my case literally—there’s no quick fix. While Big Tech brands have put in two decades of yeoman’s work to constantly and persistently connect people across all platforms, at all hours, they’re just now creating systems to help place healthy restrictions on communications.

Google Calendar’s new “Working Hours” function lets you automatically reject colleagues who send invites for meetings or calls outside set time windows, and conspires with your inbox to streamline the crafting of painless “out of office” replies.

Apple’s new iOS 12 features enhanced Do Not Disturb settings, letting you quiet notifications for a set time or even at a set location so incoming communications are withheld until you physically leave your home or favorite dinner spot, depending on your self-imposed parameters. It also lets you toggle on auto-reply texts, which you can customize to keep people at bay. For me, “Sorry, I’m busy but I’ll shoot you a note when I’m back” gets the message across.

If you have an iPhone, you also have a VIP inbox you’re probably not using, which lets you tweak notifications so your screen only flashes when you receive emails from those you deem worthy—a husband or manager but not Rick in accounting. Just tap the circled “i” next to “VIP” in your mail app to add preferred addresses, and then you can set custom alerts and notifications. That said, it’s often best to turn off most notifications as soon

as you download a new app, letting you control when you check your phone and respond to messages rather than reacting immediately to a chiming or rumbling phone.

Harking back to the good old days of AOL when “You’ve Got Mail!” was a thrilling welcome, not an existential crisis, some platforms are adopting AOL Instant Messenger’s red light/green light system that lets people know you’re online. Slack, a powerful and popular workplace communication tool, lets you customize a status so people know when you’re unavailable and what you might be doing. Slack also automatically sets you to “snooze” at 10 p.m., blocking notifications until 8 a.m. (the times can be customized to suit your needs and schedule).

By far the boldest method I’ve heard for shutting out work, however, is refusing to install work email on your phone. If you dare.

While wondering how I might employ these tactics to steal some of my life back, a serendipitously stupid thing happened: An overnight iOS update disabled my iPhone entirely. What started as panic morphed quickly into a feeling of freedom. I couldn’t check emails in the lunch line or be distracted by texts, DMs or gchats. I was utterly unreachable at times and it didn’t seem to matter. And I was more rested and more productive.

I got a new phone later that week, but in that short window I realized the ultimate key to work-life balance was—actually wait. Can you hold on a second? I gotta take this.

I’M ALWAYS ON IT! / A History of Tech’s

Invasion of Private Life

1984

Motorola DynaTAC

Costing a cool \$3,995 upon its release, the first commercial cellphone—dubbed the “Brick”—weighed 2.5 pounds, lasted 30 minutes on a 10-hour charge and couldn’t order Seamless. But it made us accessible on the road, transforming work interactions.

1986

Motorola BRAVO Pager

Beepers had existed more than 60 years by the mid-80s, but most were short range for emergency services. Motorola’s Bravo popularized long-distance paging among eager professionals and by 1994 more than 61 million devices chimed insistently world-wide.

1991

Apple PowerBook 100

The first modern laptop had an innovative trackball mouse and slid the keyboard up to the screen, giving traveling businesspeople a place to rest their wrists while punching out spreadsheets. The PowerBook series earned over \$8 billion in revenue through 1992.