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Should Employers Ban Email After Work Hours?

by James Harter | 8:00 AM August 8, 2014

Like many of you, I often work outside of regular office hours while at home, in the airport, and sometimes on vacation. Mobile technology has created a "new normal" work life for a lot of us: Gallup's research reveals that nearly all full-time U.S. workers (96%) have access to a computer, smartphone, or tablet, with 86% using a smartphone or tablet or both. And a full two-thirds of Americans report that the amount of work they do outside normal working hours has increased "a little" to "a lot" because of mobile technology advances over the last decade.

But is this a net gain or net drain on our well-being? And how should leaders manage this after-hours work?

To answer these questions, it's important to understand why we turn to mobile technology in the first place. For many people, it's because we're excited to share an idea with a colleague, or want to finish a task so it doesn't become a burden the next day.
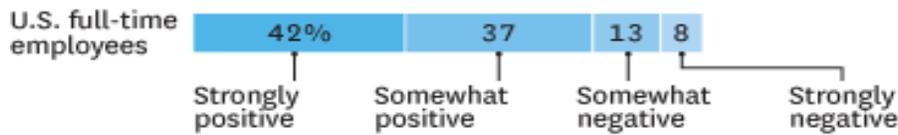
Yes, taking care of work during non-work time may hurt our relationships with family and friends — but still, more than three-quarters of full-time workers tell Gallup that the ability to use mobile technology outside normal working hours is a somewhat to very positive development.

EMPLOYEES' VIEWS ON WORKING REMOTELY

"Is the ability to use your computer, tablet, or smartphone to work remotely outside of normal business hours a positive or negative development?"

U.S. full-time employees

42%	37	13	8
Strongly positive	Somewhat positive	Somewhat negative	Strongly negative

GALLUP DAILY TRACKING, MARCH 24–APRIL 8, 2014
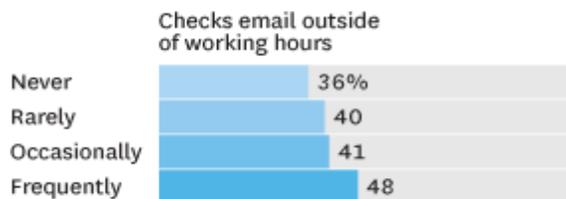**SOURCE** GALLUP

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Going deeper, we found that just over a third of full-time workers say they frequently check email outside normal working hours — and those who do are 17% more likely to report better overall lives compared with those who say they never check email outside work. This finding holds even after controlling for differences in income, age, gender, education, and other demographics. Similarly, those who spend seven or more hours checking their email outside work during a typical week are more likely to rate their overall lives highly than those who report zero hours of this activity.

But here's the conundrum: About half of workers who report checking email frequently outside work are also more likely to report having "a lot of stress" yesterday, compared with just one-third of those who never do.

STRESS AND REMOTE WORKING HABITS
Those who frequently check email outside of working hours report feeling more stress.

"Did you experience stress a lot of the day yesterday?"

Checks email outside of working hours

Never	36%
Rarely	40
Occasionally	41
Frequently	48

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SOURCE GALLUP

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In other words, the "evaluating self" disagrees with the "experiencing self." The "evaluating self" probably says life is better because we have the flexibility to check email when we want, while the "experiencing self" feels the stress associated with the extra work, pressure, or guilt during our after-hours working time.

This inner conflict is not new to psychologists. For example, research suggests our "two selves" also differ in how they interpret having money and children. Being a parent and having more money is associated with higher life evaluations; but above a baseline of income, having more money doesn't relate to less daily stress, and having kids brings more daily stress, on average. The "evaluating self" responds to status, while the "experiencing self" responds to daily and momentary life.

Thus, while checking email frequently appears to be stressful, it is also most likely associated with status and perceived importance.

So for optimal workplace well-being, what should employers do in light of this conundrum? Expect workers to check in during non-normal working hours? Or implement policies that discourage work during non-normal work times?

Sure, employees who say their employer expects them to check email outside normal working hours report stress 19% more frequently than those whose employer doesn't expect them to check email. This might lead employers to think they should put the needs of the "experiencing self" of the employee ahead of the "evaluating self" and place specific parameters around expectations that employees check in during off-hours.

Not so fast.

Problems arise when companies make such policy decisions without considering whether their employees are engaged. If we assume work can be engaging and rewarding, rather than a necessary burden, our assumptions about people and policy become quite different. Gallup's research has found that high levels of engagement are more important than specific well-being policies.

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<u>Gallup has identified three types of workers: engaged, not engaged, and actively disengaged</u>.

Thirty percent (30 %) of U.S. workers are engaged — they are involved in and enthusiastic about their work and company.

At 52%, not engaged workers make up the vast majority of the U.S. workplace — they are indifferent and basically just show up, do the minimum required, get their paycheck, and go home.

Actively disengaged workers comprise 18% of the U.S. workforce and actually work against the aims of the organization. (Gallup measures engagement through <u>12 elements</u> that explain differences between highly productive and less productive workplaces.)
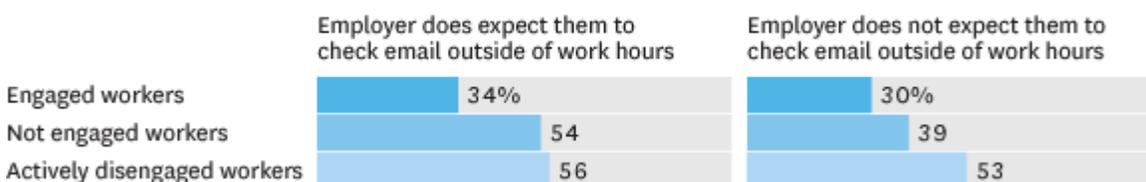
Daily stress is significantly lower for engaged workers and higher for actively disengaged workers, regardless of whether their employer expects them to check email during non-work hours or not.

And it is the vast swath of "not engaged" or "indifferent" workers who are most influenced by policy decisions of this nature. Among the "not engaged" workers who say their employer expects them to check email outside normal working hours, 54% report a lot of stress the previous day. Of those who say their employer does not expect them to check email, 39% report a lot of stress.

WORKING REMOTELY AFTER BUSINESS HOURS DOESN'T NECESSARILY RESULT IN STRESS
Engagement is a much better predictor.

Those who reported a lot of stress the previous day:

	Employer does expect them to check email outside of work hours	Employer does not expect them to check email outside of work hours
Engaged workers	34%	30%
Not engaged workers	54	39
Actively disengaged workers	56	53

SOURCE GALLUP

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These findings suggest workers will view their company's policy about mobile technology through the filter of their own engagement. Thus, instead of tinkering with their policies, companies would be better off developing a strategy to engage more of their employees.

For instance, while more hours worked, less vacation time taken, and less opportunity for flextime generally relate to lower well-being in our studies, that doesn't hold true when workers are engaged in the workplace.

It turns out that among engaged employees, their well-being remains high, regardless of these types of policies. As an extreme example, employees with six or more weeks of annual vacation time who are actively disengaged in their work and workplace have lower overall well-being than those who are engaged and have less than one week of vacation time.

Similarly, while long commutes generally relate to lower well-being in the average non-engaged worker, it isn't true for those who are engaged. Our research shows that well-being levels are similar among engaged workers, regardless of their commute time. These findings underscore the importance of employee engagement to workers' well-being in the workplace. Engaged workers are more productive and profitable, are more likely to show up to work regularly and make a difference with customers, and are loyal, advocating partners to the organization. They view their lives more positively because they work in organizations that get the most out of their talents.

While just 30% of employees nationally and 13% internationally are engaged, it doesn't have to be that way. Many organizations — even very large international organizations— have more than doubled these percentages by not accepting a fatalistic status quo.

Through quality measurement, accountability, developmental plans, good communication, and aligned strategy, they have developed environments where the norm is for workers to be engaged rather than indifferent.

This starts and ends with hiring and developing quality managers who have the natural talents and skills to engage and develop each person they manage, thereby improving how people both evaluate their lives and experience their days.

Most full-time employees consider the option to use mobile technology away from work an advantage rather than a hindrance, probably because of the flexibility it invites. With the help of great managers, engaged employees leverage this flexibility without feeling extra stress. And while organizations can set blanket policies that assume indifference among employees, they might be better off engaging them first. Policies are important — but they shouldn't be any manager's starting point.

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