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# How to Combat an “Always On” Work Culture



By Winnie Jiang , Mark Mortensen , Andy J. Yap , and Spencer Harrison , INSEAD

**“Right to Disconnect” laws may be a piece of the puzzle. But leaders, managers and employees need to lead the change.**

Imagine a world where your boss could be fined for contacting you after hours. California is [considering a law](#) to make this a reality.

The "right to disconnect" movement is gaining traction globally, with [Australia](#) joining France, Italy, Slovakia, Luxembourg, Portugal and the Canadian province of Ontario in passing legislation to empower employees to switch off outside of working hours. But is legally banning after-hours communications the solution? Or is there a better way to change a work culture where employees are expected to be available and responsive around the clock?

INSEAD professors argue that true change requires a cultural shift within companies, and offer insights on how employees, managers and leaders can dismantle the "always on" work mentality.

## Turn “ideal worker culture” into “ideal workplace culture”

*Winnie Jiang, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour*

After-hours communications, in the form of work-related emails and text messages, can make it hard for employees to psychologically detach from work when they actually need to. This can exacerbate work-family conflicts and emotional exhaustion.

This is especially true for people who are high in “**telepressure**”— a term used to describe the extent to which an individual feels the pressure or urge to respond to work-related messages. If work-family conflicts and emotional exhaustion accumulate, people’s work performance is very likely to be undermined.

Dedicated and engaged employees find it harder to psychologically detach from work when they need to do so to rest, recharge and replenish. The difficulty they experience may find its origins in the “ideal worker culture” that has been dominating the modern workplace — a culture that expects and encourages employees to prioritise work above everything else in life and make themselves available for their work anytime, anywhere.

It may also be rooted in an individual’s perception of work as the most important part of their identity, or an essential source of their self-worth — almost as if they have no value as a human being if they stop working.

To effectively promote employee well-being requires companies to genuinely invest in changing the “ideal worker culture” into the “ideal workplace culture”, making work conditions conducive for employee well-being. It also helps for employees to diversify the sources of their self-worth, recognising that they are valuable in various ways, and not just because they are successful at work.

## Reclaim your time and pay it forward

*Mark Mortensen, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour*

Organisations have a duty to reduce the constant pressure to be connected, yet often fall short due to ignorance or inability. As a result, employees may have to take matters into their own hands to achieve a healthier work-life balance.

The first step is to reflect on your behaviour and pay attention to your technology use. Do a “tech audit” by asking questions like: How frequently do you receive and answer requests after hours? Do you sleep with your phone next to you? Is it on silent or airplane mode? And no, you don’t *need* your phone for its alarm clock – you can get one for 10 euros on Amazon.

Second, set yourself clear boundaries for what you believe are reasonable levels of after-work connectivity. Recognise that if your organisation prides itself on 24/7 availability, choosing not to be available might hurt your chances of getting promoted. Harsh as that sounds, you have to be realistic. If your organisation doesn’t align with your needs, it’s not the right place for you.

Third, once you’ve set your boundaries, communicate those to your colleagues and managers. Have an **honest discussion** with them about your needs and point out that by giving you the space you require, they are increasing your ability to deliver.

Finally, pay it forward. As a manager or colleague, give some thought to whether you create pressure for people to work outside their preferred hours and challenge your organisation to rethink whether “always on” is always better.

### **Leaders need to lead by example to replace “always on” culture**

**Andy J. Yap**, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

In most industrialised societies, people tend to have long working hours. This “always on” culture is often heavily enforced on junior employees by old guards, who had to uphold these “high standards” themselves. These work cultures are prevalent, which has led to numerous mental and physical health problems. Indeed, experts have dubbed overworking as an **epidemic** that needs to be addressed urgently.

Singapore has recently introduced **flexible work** guidelines to ameliorate employee well-being. Such arrangements may ultimately trickle down to boost overall productivity. However, leaders need to be methodical in implementing these changes. Changing organisational culture will take time and the careful execution of strategic plans.

Dismantling an “always on” culture needs to be enforced and encouraged from those in leadership positions, as these organisations tend to have high power distance, with the strongest concentration of power at the top. It is also important to implement a new culture and specify what it entails, why it is better and how it’s going to impact employees’ day-to-day lives. In essence, you can’t just eradicate an old culture without replacing it with a new one. Leaders need to clearly explain the purpose of the new culture, and lead by example.

Nonetheless, the careful implementation of flexible work policies is crucial to prevent abuse. Organisations with global teams need to consider time zone differences and manage expectations around working hours. The pandemic's remote work experience has prepared companies to transition to a culture that balances productivity and well-being. Leaders now need a mindset change to lead this workplace cultural revolution.

### **Healthy company culture starts with middle managers**

***Spencer Harrison***, *Professor of Organisational Behaviour*

There is often a key disconnect between a company's stated values (big-C culture) and the everyday interactions employees experience (small-c culture). As my co-author **Kristie Rogers** and I outlined in a recent MIT Sloan Management Review **[article](#)**, mid-level managers play a crucial role in bridging this gap.

Middle managers often assume that top leaders are responsible for handling company culture, passively accepting it as defined by C-suite executives or specialists in human resources. This leaves leaders lower in the hierarchy thinking that their job is to uphold and endorse the culture as is.

However, middle managers should assume a key role in both endorsing positive aspects of a company's big-C culture while also innovating within their teams (small-c culture). Doing so will create a work environment that aligns with the company's goals.

First, managers should actively celebrate and preserve aspects of the big-C culture that are relevant to their teams. This could involve finding ways to celebrate core values such as wellness or emphasising work-life balance.

Second, they should enrich the small-c culture by trialling new practices and empowering employees to contribute their ideas. This could involve experimenting with new meeting formats, communication styles and feedback mechanisms that prioritise employee well-being and discourage constant work availability.

By ensuring the big-C culture reflects the company's goals and fostering a small-c culture that respects boundaries, middle managers can help create a more sustainable and positive work environment.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/how-combat-always-work-culture>

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