

Why employee's mental health might be undermined by companies' working hours



Round-the-clock working cultures within many UK-based multinationals could be a false economy. Employers should help workers to switch off.

Many employers and employees seem to have differing views over what is beneficial to employee wellbeing and productivity. This disconnect could be undermining employers' well-intentioned initiatives to boost employee health and wellbeing.

A quarter (26%) of employees believe that working outside of traditional working hours harms their mental wellbeing, according to Lockton's recent research. A fifth (20%) of employees also think it negatively affects their output.

Yet 90% of employers believe that working longer hours does not affect productivity. And currently three quarters (74%) of staff at large companies are contractually obliged to be available outside of office hours.



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These findings are from Lockton's inaugural [Global Benefits Forum Survey](#), which involved 400 interviews with both HR Directors and employees, respectively, from multinational companies.

Many large employers are spending millions of pounds on health and wellbeing initiatives. For instance, half of employers (50%) offer mental health resilience support for their employees.

A further quarter (24%) of employers expect to do the same in the next decade.

Yet many are failing to acknowledge arguably one of the biggest risks to their employees' health, wellbeing and productivity: outside-of-office-hours working. This could leave employees performing sub-optimally or even burning out altogether. It also constitutes a false economy.

Stressed out

Of course, some of the employees we interviewed might have simply over-estimated the ill effects of working outside of traditional working hours. Broader research would seem to be on employees' side, however.

A growing number of studies indicate that longer and longer working hours are leading to burnout (work-related physical, emotional and mental exhaustion) becoming an occupational disease.

According to [research from CV-Library](#), many employers' 'always-on culture' is affecting employees' sleep quality, stress levels, energy levels, family life and work-life balance. One study found that just the [anticipatory stress of expecting after-hours emails](#) might negatively affect well-being.

Conversely, a [2015 study from the University of British Columbia](#) found that people who were limited to checking their email just three times a day had lower stress levels than when allowed to check it an unlimited number of times.

Switching off

Providing more flexible working to employees may help to relieve the pressure of an 'always on' work culture, by allowing employees to work when it suits them. It might also improve companies' talent acquisition: half of employees Lockton surveyed cited flexible working hours as the most important benefit they could receive in the next 10 years.

Conversely, many employees are drawing a line between their work and home lives: nearly half (46%) of employees say they would not even consider a job if it required availability beyond core office hours.



An 'always-on culture' could affect employees' sleep quality, stress and energy levels, and family life.

Another way to tackle the problem is to discourage the sending of emails outside normal working hours or by disabling email servers during designated timeframes.

In 2012, for example, [Volkswagen blocked all emails](#) to employees' Blackberries after-hours. Daimler took the step of [deleting all emails](#) received by employees while on vacation. In 2014, the German labor ministry [prohibited managers from calling or emailing staff](#) after work hours, except in an emergency. In 2017 a law was introduced in France requiring companies with more than 50 employees to establish hours when staff should not send or answer emails.

Whatever policy a company implements, as always, senior management should practise what they preach (and believe it) – otherwise any policy will lack credibility and sustainability.