

# How to stop 24/7 email ruining your life

Hannah Jane Parkinson

A work email drops into your inbox at 11pm. You have to answer it, right? No, you don't ...

Friday 4 December 2015 08.00 GMT

It's 8pm. Your shift finished at 5pm. You're still at your desk. Everybody else is still at their desks. Nobody wants to leave, even though you're no longer being paid. When you do finally get home, you check your email. You don't want to be the person who didn't respond, even though the message arrived in your inbox at 11pm. Even though you're putting your kids to bed, or having drinks with an old friend, or in the middle of watching Homeland. And not being paid.

It's fair to say that John Maynard Keynes got it wrong when he predicted in a 1930 essay that in the future we'd all be working 15-hour weeks and living a life of leisure the rest of the time.

Instead, the average working week in the UK is up to 42.7 hours for those in full-time employment (according to 2011 ONS figures) and, along with a few other countries, the UK has a partial opt-out of the EU limit of 48 hours. In Europe, Greeks work the longest hours, but worldwide, Mexicans put in the most graft. Donald Trump, I hope you're reading.

While there are cultures that seem less invested in the rat race - France, for instance, has limited its working week to 35 hours since 2000 (although in practice, this doesn't quite hold true), and Swedes (who are good at everything) trialled a six-hour working day, many of us feel the pressure of presenteeism and a 24-hour work culture.

The worst part of all this? Email. It makes me want to throw up when I get an email from someone "reaching out" to request we "touch base" - but especially when I get it at 9pm on a Saturday.

How, then, can we switch off and log out?

The first person I turn to for advice is Guardian columnist Oliver Burkeman, who, along with Ferris Bueller, is one of my lifestyle gurus. I have literally never seen Burkeman in the office, so I figure he's a good person to ask about how to do less work (I'm joking, of course - this attitude is precisely part of the problem).

"Obviously the ideal situation would be if managers everywhere understood that presence in the office isn't the same as results," writes Oliver.

"But in the absence of such enlightened bosses, I think the best bet is to cultivate a

reputation for reliability, as a substitute for 24/7 availability - if you can be depended upon to answer emails, say, within a modest and predictable amount of time, you're more likely to be forgiven for not answering them instantaneously at 9pm."

I note down Oliver's advice, which he sends to me in an email that I read at 11pm.

Psychotherapist and writer Philippa Perry is even more forthright:

"I'm sure it was less 24/7 before we had mobiles. My advice is to switch them off. Stick to your contract, put down boundaries and in working hours work and out of hours don't. You know, make a decision, stick to it, take charge of your life. You can decide to have a life outside of work and follow through. And people don't concentrate more if they're 'on' 24/7. We do better with boundaries."

I note down Philippa's advice, which she sends to me in an email that I read at 11pm.

I have written before about how to craft the perfect out-of-office reply. About how people don't understand the word "urgent"; about how important it is not to include a horrific typo that will go viral while you're on a beach in Bora Bora, entirely oblivious. My own current OOO reply is succinct to the point of brutality. It consists, in its entirety, of the body copy:

" . Me <-distance-> . The office"

I don't even leave addresses of alternate contacts any more because, perhaps sadistically, I think the onus is on the person to find out. If it's a colleague, it shouldn't be difficult to discover, and if someone is emailing from outside the organisation; well, there's Google (other search engines are available). If some effort on their part is required to email someone else, they usually realise it's not that urgent at all. That it can - horror - *wait*.

Of course, I'm not as disciplined as all this suggests. I admit to scrambling across rocks in Anglesey to get a mobile phone signal, and I've spent a whole day mainlining lattes just to use a cafe's Wi-Fi - when I was supposed to be on holiday. I have interviewed people at 3am - *because timezones!*

Recently, however, I've begun to notice colleagues switching their out-of-office replies on in the evening. They aren't sick, they aren't on holiday, they've just, you know, gone home. Their working day is finished. It's 7pm and, as Burkeman says, getting back to a mail within a reasonable amount of time should be enough.

It speaks to how insidious 24/7 working culture is that the first time I noticed a very senior colleague had switched on her OOO in the evening, I remarked that I didn't know she was going away anywhere. And she hadn't - she'd just gone home.

Jonathan Crary is a critic and professor at Columbia University who has written extensively on around-the-clock working and the modern economy. I ask about the psychology behind this culture - why am I answering work emails on a smartphone in bed at night?

"The economic principle of competition has penetrated almost every area of social and

personal life, which disempowers and isolates us in so many ways,” he says.

“We’re not only competing against others but against our own performance as well. Mere consistency or dependability on the job is no longer acceptable. This is why the possibility of down time for rest or regeneration is incompatible with current economic demands and expectations.

“Wherever one works now, it’s imperative that one fully internalises the demand for maximum performance regardless of the toll it might take on one’s health, family or sanity. One is expected to fashion one’s existence as something perpetually flexible and adaptable.”

Flexitime, which was introduced to liberate the worker, is almost made redundant when, no matter what hours or arrangements an employee has, the expectation still seems to be, as Crary notes, that all workers are constantly available.

So, what to do? Introduce a law like the one in France (often wrongly reported) that means certain non-full-time employees in technology and consultancy industries have to disconnect after 13 hours of work? Go back to Bora Bora and spend a life marvelling at how, like, really really blue the water is?

Here’s what I suggest. Taking a cue from my boss, I’m going to be turning on my out-of-office reply when I actually leave the office in the evening. On time. For homeworkers, or flexiworkers, that means when your shift is over. Because an automated out-of-office email that reads:

“Hi. Thanks for your email. I’ve finished work for the day and I have left the office. I’m now bathing my son and about to watch that new drama - the one with Ben Whishaw - and have a couple of glasses of pinot, but if anyone asks I’ll say it’s one. Might even order a takeaway. I’ll be able to answer your email in the morning, when I’m being paid to, at around 9am. Have a lovely evening too.”

... well, that would probably go viral.

More comment

## Topics

Work & careers

Email

Work-life balance