Our Bosses Tell Us to Unplug From Work. We Don't Believe They Mean It. In an 'always on' work culture, employees feel shame about taking time off, even if company policies purport to encourage it

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FULL TEXT

In today's "always on" work cultures, employees feel they have no choice but to stay connected, the researchers say. PHOTO: Pete Ryan

There's no question it pays to disconnect from work after a long day. Disconnecting increases job satisfaction, eases work-family conflicts and reduces the chance of burnout.

Yet employees increasingly are reluctant to unplug from their jobs, whether that means silencing the work notifications on their phones, closing their work laptops or spending uninterrupted time on activities or with people they love.

In a 2019 Adobe survey of approximately 1,000 employees, the majority of respondents—76%—said they check their work email after hours. When over 20,000 employees were asked in a recent Glassdoor survey if they could fully disconnect or unplug during paid time off, more than half—54%—said "no." Perhaps even more problematic, those who do step away from work frequently report feeling bad about doing so.

If detaching from work is so beneficial, why are so many people reluctant to do it? And if they do step away, why doesn't it feel as good as advertised?

Don't do as I say

We believe that in today's "always on" work cultures, employees feel they have no choice—even if their manager's rhetoric and organizational policies seem to encourage unplugging. The result is that employees end up feeling ashamed for taking breaks from work.

Our research supports this premise. We recruited 194 full-time employees across a range of occupations and industries and had them complete three surveys a day for two weeks. In the evening, employees reported how much they detached from work. The next morning, employees reported how much shame they felt for detaching from work. And that afternoon, as they were leaving work, they reported on their behavior over the course of the workday.

Our primary and follow-up studies showed a consistent pattern of results: The more employees detached in the evening, the more shame they felt at work the next morning. Paradoxically, the very experience that's supposed to rejuvenate employees made them feel bad about themselves instead—like they were problematic employees.

We found that this effect was exacerbated when employees faced greater pressure at work. That is probably because people working in high-pressure environments have the most to lose by disconnecting from work. If a person's livelihood—bonuses, promotions or employment writ large—relies on meeting stringent performance standards, stepping away puts their livelihood at risk.

While shame has numerous negative consequences for employees, there also are clear costs for organizations. In our studies, we found that employees who felt ashamed about taking time for themselves were more likely to cut corners at work, sometimes in ethically questionable ways. For example, they were more likely to misrepresent or "inflate" their performance to others, making it seem as if they were busier and more productive than they actually were. The threat of falling behind and potentially damaging their reputations made employees feel as if they had to

get "up to speed" by any means necessary.

Undermined messages

Some of the blame for this dynamic lies with managers. While they may regularly espouse the importance of taking time to recharge, they often undermine their own message—for example, by sending emails to employees after work hours. This kind of behavior signals that work-life balance and detachment aren't genuine organizational priorities. What's more, if managers fail to take breaks from work themselves, employees might perceive messages about detachment as lip service.

Managers who reward or glamorize overwork also contribute to the problem. By praising employees who work long hours or sacrifice their work-life balance to meet deadlines, managers are signaling that such behaviors are valued and even necessary for success. This subtle pressure can undermine employees' belief that detaching from work is an acceptable and welcome practice.

Of course, working outside of typical hours is sometimes necessary. However, to avoid sending mixed messages, managers can explicitly clarify that an after-hours request is atypical, and provide employees with flex time to reclaim the additional hours worked. Explicitly addressing the importance of detachment—and acting in a way that is consistent with this message—is key.

Blanket policies

More broadly, organizations shouldn't assume that blanket policies or initiatives will facilitate shame-free detachment. For example, the rise of unlimited paid-time-off policies seemingly encourage detachment from work, but employees may be reluctant to take advantage of such perks. Instead, firms interested in advocating for well-being should consider more-targeted policies, such as requiring employees to take a certain number of days off or setting mandatory vacation days that clearly signal that detachment is part of the job.

Additionally, it may be time to turn down the pressure. Research has consistently shown that high-pressure work environments can yield minimal productivity benefits , hinder creativity , significantly increase stress and detract from employee well-being. As our work shows, high-pressure environments also transform otherwise beneficial activities such as detachment—a critical means of recovery—into negative and harmful experiences.

While the onus is on employers to fix this issue, employees have some power, too. For example, they should think twice before sending late emails or responding to Slack messages to avoid inadvertently perpetuating an "always on" culture.

By supporting employees' detachment from work after hours, organizations can promote engaged and committed employees. When employees are able to unplug without feeling ashamed, both workers and organizations win.

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