

Should companies restrict use of e-mails during evenings and weekends?

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France was recently in the news for [regulations to restrict companies from sending e-mails](#) to employees during non-working hours. Those in favor of restricting e-mail can cite research that feeling a need to respond to e-mails during non-working hours can have [negative impacts on productivity and well-being because it prevents employees from feeling fully “off work”](#). Those arguing against e-mail restrictions can cite [benefits of being able to integrate work and non-work activities](#) in a way that increases the productivity of both. Excessive use of e-mails is clearly a bad thing, but should companies actually implement regulations that formally restrict e-mail use?

E-mail is not the problem; the problem is how people use e-mail.

People spend a lot of time on e-mail. [A 2015 study](#) suggested the average US professional employee spends around 6 hours a day on email. We suspect this may over-estimate e-mail usage for many jobs, but e-mail has clearly become a fundamental part of work. In this sense, e-mail might be viewed the same way we view meetings. Meetings are a necessary part of work, but not all meetings are necessary nor productive. The same is true for e-mail. The danger of e-mail is it can quickly create a lot of psychological “noise” in the form of messages that don’t deserve attention but still serve as distractions. The question we should be asking is not how do we limit emails, but how do we limit unnecessary or ineffective e-mails?

The main problem is many people don’t know how to use e-mail effectively. First, they don’t know how to write effective e-mails. [There is an art and skill to creating an effective e-mail message](#). But we rarely train people on writing e-mails. As a result we waste a lot of time sifting through poorly worded or irrelevant messages. People also struggle to determine what issues are worthy of an email message. When we send an email we do it because the topic it addresses seems important to us. [The problem is people naturally think interruptions initiated by them are more important than interruptions initiated by others](#), so we end up being flooded with e-mails that are important to someone else but not to us.

The challenge is getting people to see their e-mails from the perspective of others. This means writing e-mails that are easy for others to quickly process, and to only send an e-mail when the message is truly important to the person receiving it. Corporations are some of the biggest offenders in this area, bombarding workers with lengthy company announcements full of information about policies, business strategies, and organizational restructuring that often mean little to the employee’s actual job.

When is the right time to send an e-mail?

Most people would not call someone at 10pm to ask a work question unless it was extremely critical. But many people think nothing of sending e-mails at 10pm on relatively trivial topics. They justify this by thinking “I don’t expect them to read it right away”. The problem is the person receiving the e-mail doesn’t know if the message is important enough to read right away until after they open it. And the mere act of knowing you have a message creates a sense of felt urgency to read it. On the other hand, there are times when it does make sense to send an urgent e-mail during non-work hours. And many people prefer to check e-mail a few times during evenings, weekends and vacations rather than face a mountain of e-mail when they get back to the office.

We believe the best way to reduce inappropriately timed e-mail is to create work cultures that respect people’s time, only ask for people’s attention when it is truly relevant, and encourage co-workers to

fully unplug from work when they are not in the office. Leadership role modeling is critical to such cultures. Leaders must demonstrate sensitivity toward e-mailing or otherwise contacting employees outside of normal working hours unless it is truly an urgent, time sensitive matter. This doesn't mean people cannot write and look at e-mails on weekends and vacations. In general, we believe people should be given freedom to work whenever and wherever they want. But they should avoid sending messages during these times, and should assume other people will NOT respond to e-mails sent outside normal work hours. One leader exemplified this culture by setting her computer so e-mails she wrote over the weekend were not actually sent until Monday. This way she could work over the weekend but did not make others feel they had to work on weekends as well.

Instead of focusing on restricting technology we should focus on supporting people.

The French move to restrict e-mail calls attention to risks of working in an "always on" digital world and the impact that allowing people to fully recover from work [has on long-term employee health productivity](#). But it assumes emails are the problem when they are really just a symptom. Restricting e-mails could actually hurt more employees than it helps. For example, an employee might spend the weekend worrying about potential emails he cannot access. This will create the very stresses around psychological recovery that the restriction was designed to prevent.

Restricting people's freedom to use technology that allows them to work when and where they want does not seem like the best way to reduce employee stress. Instead we should focus on training employees on how to more effectively use e-mail technology. And create company cultures that respect people's time both during and outside of normal working hours. This is not about telling people what technology they are not to use and when they shouldn't use it. It is about being clear about when we expect people not to work at all regardless of their ability to access e-mail technology, mobile technology or any other technology that prevents them from fully detaching from their jobs