



# SWITCHING OFF THE **ALWAYS-ON CULTURE**

In mid-November 2021, Portugal made it illegal for bosses to contact employees after work. Legislators wanted to protect employees from work interfering with their personal lives. According to the new Portuguese bill, employers will also need to cap overtime hours and enforce the taking of leave.

Versions of this law protecting one's "right to disconnect" have already been introduced in the UK, France, and Spain.

Organisations themselves are attempting to implement work-time limits internally. Some use technology designed to get feedback related to employees' well-being,

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from posture to breaktime and work-hour compliance.

All of these enforced controls come in response to the new "always-on" workplace culture as the pandemic-induced, constantly connected work environment has blurred the lines between our public and private lives.

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## **EVEN THE SUN SETS AT THE END OF THE DAY**

In Portugal, many employees felt that bosses were taking advantage of the pandemic and that only government intervention would

force them to step back. This pressure may be worldwide. A survey by executive outplacement firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas revealed that a large percentage of North American managers contact their employees after hours, and 28.57 per cent of them expect a response within a few hours.

**In many Asian countries, it is deemed disrespectful to either arrive at the office after or leave before one's boss. Japan had to legislate the Work Style Reform Bill in 2018 in an attempt to combat 'Karoshi' which means Death From Overwork.**

Sadly, fewer than 10 per cent of surveyed companies have a policy regarding communication outside of work hours!

The peer pressure of an always-on team also makes it hard for individuals to disconnect. Employees don't want to appear unresponsive to those who are responsible for their promotion and bonuses.

As a result of these perceived pressures, many people, particularly those working remotely, report that they work longer hours than before, and this has taken both a physical and a psychological toll. The inability to detach from a "work-life" integration leads to emotional and physical exhaustion, which ironically erodes engagement and performance, despite the longer hours.

With this current new normal, it's easy to see why legislation was felt to be necessary. However, this willingness to fit in with the corporate culture, even at a personal cost, is not new.

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**SAME OLD, SAME OLD**

For many years, new doctors in Israel fought for a reduction in the expected 26-hour shifts. (Would you want a life-or-death procedure performed on you by a doctor in his or her twenty-sixth hour of work?) Only in October 2021, after years of struggle, did the Ministry of Health in Israel agree to reduce the shift length for new doctors.



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While death may be an extreme outcome, the effects of overwork are now commonplace and wide-ranging. They include prolonged stress, anxiety, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, depression, domestic strain or abuse, and much more.

The constant anticipation of work creates stress, leaving many to complain that they simply no longer have life outside work and are unable to be present with their loved ones during family time.

So, considering the impact, legislating to impose limitations sounds like a no-brainer.

But does it work? And at what cost?

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## HAS THE PENDULUM SWUNG TOO FAR?

Some leaders feel that an administrative decision to ban them from communicating with employees when they need to is counterproductive.

There are those who feel that such laws disrupt their creative process. Others just enjoy working long hours. Some are workaholics. In start-up companies, irregular and demanding schedules are usually a way of life. It is natural for many managers to feel that they have the right to send messages after working hours.

A significant number of them feel that controlling their work hours infringes their personal preferences. For example, some employees perform better at night – especially when their workday is disrupted with children and meetings.

Anyone working globally knows that their jobs come with adapting to working in multiple



time zones. Many need to align with a discussion held with decision makers in headquarters on the other side of the world. Not responding fast enough might mean an unacceptable delay, or a missed opportunity to influence or simply to be seen.

Legislating on work hours can also affect the company's bottom line. France lost years of competitiveness when it enforced very strict labour laws that made it extremely difficult to replace incompetent people. Many companies thought twice before choosing France to set up their European HQ or establish their new start-up. Over-regulated and heavily unionised America felt a sharp drop in competitiveness, followed by the migration of millions of jobs overseas.

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## THINKING LIKE A "POACH" (PARENT AND COACH)

Perhaps the solutions lie in the hands of each leader. Good parents protect their kids. The coaches of Olympic teams protect the health of their top athletes, so that they have sufficient rest and nutrition to avoid physical and mental decline, leaders also need to create a sense of psychological safety that lets their employees feel trusted to get their work done, whilst doing it according to the schedule that best lets them thrive both at work and home.






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## LEADERS ARE ALREADY LEADING THE CHANGE

There are leaders who are doing just that. Some are now including a disclaimer in their email signature, so they have the freedom to work when it is convenient for them and at the same time respect the well-being of others. Here are two examples:


*“I work odd hours because this schedule works for me and my personal life. I do not expect you to reply outside of office hours.”* (A leader from Amazon Web Services)

*“Getting this email out of normal working hours? We work at a digitally enabled relentless pace, which can disrupt our ability to sleep enough, eat right, exercise, and spend time*

*with the people that matter most. I am sending you this email at a time that works for me. I only expect you to respond to it when convenient to you.”* (A leader from Rio Tinto)

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## WHO'S IN CONTROL?

The pandemic has changed most workplaces. Nowadays, with the Omicron outbreak, we know that the only normal thing about the ‘new normal’ is that we can expect it to change, too. Maybe the solution is not to switch off the always-on culture. Maybe the solution is to make it easier and safer for each employee to have remote control over their time. 

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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