

'Always on' employee culture can be bad for company morale

Pocket-sized technology means a missive from your boss is never far away. It's time for HR and organisations to help workers 'disconnect', writes **Gareth Naughton**

When news emerged last month that the French had banned companies from emailing or contacting workers outside office hours, eyebrows were surely raised across Ireland where work is increasingly encroaching on home life.

The initiative was introduced by some employers and unions in line with French freelance contractors' "obligation to disconnect" for an 11-hour period each day.

While there is nothing to say that these same workers might not be working for far longer periods, albeit without contacting the office directly, the idea of a statutory daily limit to work-based communication will, no doubt, appeal to overstretched Irish professionals. Deloitte's recently published Human Capital report found that HR and business leaders identified the "overwhelmed employee" as the most significant challenge facing Irish organisations. Across the rest of the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region, by comparison, the overwhelmed employee comes in a lowly ninth.

The finding is not altogether surprising, given the economic turmoil of recent years. Companies forced to pare back their workforce have been asking employees to do more, often for less money.

Add to this the reality of modern communications, where we are essentially on hand 24 hours a day, seven days a week, thanks to the mobiles and mini-computers we all carry around in our pockets, and it is easy to see why many employees feel they have no time to switch off.

Presenteeism

This situation benefits neither the employee nor the employer, said Valarie Daunt, director of human capital with Deloitte. She believes that a

tired, overburdened employee is largely ineffective.

"A lot of organisations are starting to see presenteeism. What they are finding is that their absenteeism rate has not necessarily increased, but productivity may be decreasing," said Daunt.

An overwhelmed employee is stressed in a negative sense, feels overburdened and, therefore, their productivity wanes as does their decision-making capability.

A negative cycle then begins, where poor decisions are the norm and the employee can no longer work as quickly as they ordinarily would, leaving them with an ever-lengthening to-do list.

Mental health

Occupational psychologist Leisha McGrath, from Leisha McGrath & Associates, said it was unsurprising that we are seeing mental health issues peaking at this particular time.

"All of a sudden, people have been faced with more and more work and, in many cases, for less money," she said.

"They are expected to pony up with a smile on their face and, funnily enough, morale in the place has gone sharply downward. The more you overburden people – the more you give them increasing numbers of things to do within the same timeframe and for the same or less money – the more likely they will become stressed.

"They will start to make poor decisions because they are overwhelmed, become fairly alienated and lacking in engagement with their employer and, in some cases, burn out."

The "always on" nature of today's working world is making it increasingly difficult for employees to separate their work and private lives. This is a challenge employees have largely been expected to manage themselves – unless they have approached HR complaining of stress.

Daunt believes that companies need to take a more active role in helping their employees to manage their work-related activity. "Organisations are starting to see that they need to do something in this area. They need to start looking at how they could make things a little bit easier for employees. How they can make things simpler. Look at the processes, improve the system," she said.

"Should they reduce team sizes, for instance? Research has shown that if you have a small team, they are much more agile and better able to position themselves when things come up and decisions have to be made."

"Train them and give them support in how to know what is a priority, because everything is not urgent. It just isn't. Being able to decipher and have that control to make those decisions around what they need to look at now and what can wait is important," she said.

Long-hours culture

A change of mindset is also needed – not just for the employer, but also for the employee. The culture of being seen to work long hours can be counter-productive.

"It is fine to take your downtime. Working late does not mean that you are working harder. It is about how you are actually managing your time. Are you producing what needs to be produced in the time that you are working?" said Daunt.

"It is about focus – where do you focus your time as opposed to time management, which everyone sees as to-do lists and allocating time for certain tasks.

"Focus on the right things and how many steps you are taking to deliver that. Can they be reduced? It is more goal-orientated."

The business of being "always on" can be draining for everyone, including the 'Gen Y-ers' who are used to a high level of stimulation, according to McGrath. However, she believes this new working environment provides an opportunity for HR to step up.

"It is an opportunity to take a two-tiered approach. If you are asking people to be available or asking them to be 'on' more often than not, then create the space where they have the autonomy and control to make decisions.

"Throughout the week, the tech company's employees attended talks from The Voice judge Niall Breslin and former Irish rugby player Alan Quinlan, as well as workshops with Dr Mark Rowe, a specialist in health, happiness and high performance.

The week is part of a rolling programme of wellbeing initiatives undertaken by HP Ireland to look after the physical, financial and mental health of employees. Previous initiatives have included a skin cancer screening programme attended by 800 employees, and a mini-health check including a flu jab taken up by more than 600 workers.

"The whole area of health and wellbeing has been very much part of the HP DNA anyway in terms of our own corporate culture," said HP Ireland managing director Martin Murphy, "so we are really just making a big investment in bringing to life those values which had always been very much part of the HP culture through a structured series of programmes," he said.

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Valarie Daunt, director of human capital at Deloitte: 'Focus on the right things and how many steps you are taking to deliver that'

What the doctor ordered: workplace wellbeing

Employees at HP Ireland were given a "prescription for happiness" this week as the company tackled mental health awareness as part of its ongoing programme promoting wellbeing in the workplace.

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The take-up by employees has been strong, with hundreds taking part in the programmes and still

more attending awareness briefings. The mental health awareness week has a double benefit – it both informs employees about the issue, but also de-stigmatises it for those who might otherwise have thought they needed to keep it hidden.

"We have broad recognition now that it is an illness like any other, and any awareness we can drive around that – particularly for employees – we believe will be positive. If they can recognise it, they can appreciate the symptoms of it and be there to counsel and advise if they are to come across friends, family or people in the workplace who may be suffering from it," he said.

The business case for looking after your employees' wellbeing is strong, according to Murphy, who credits HP's wellness programmes as a key differentiator for the company.

"Why is it important to us? These programmes

have really set us apart as an employer. In terms of employees that we have, by seeing the company invest in these types of initiatives it makes HP a better place to work and sets us apart as an employer.

"It also drives higher levels of employee satisfaction, greater levels of productivity in the organisation, reduced absenteeism and a much more positive working environment," said Murphy.

Crucially, the company believes that creating that positive working environment also produces higher levels of creativity and innovation, but for some employees, they have turned out, literally, to be life-savers.

When the company introduced a Power of Prevention programme focused on screening for prostate cancer, five employees were found to have the very early stages of prostate disease.

People Problems Relationship Breakdown

How chef's treatment by employer left a very bad taste in the mouth



Gerald Flynn

Among the more controversial columns in newspapers and magazines are often the restaurant reviews. One reviewer's idea of an enjoyable or hearty meal, may merely be run-of-the-mill – or worse – for another.

Food was at the centre of chef-manager Peter Theloke problems when he was employed by BaxterStorey (Ireland) Ltd, a British firm with a turnover of €275 million (€330 million) offering outsourced corporate catering services.

BaxterStorey operates canteens for companies employing more than 500 people, including AIB, Paddy Power, Brown Thomas and RTE.

In late 2009, it took over a catering contract for State

Street International, a financial services company with an operation in Kilkenny, where Theloke had worked since 2004 with a team of six canteen staff.

The canteen staff had catered for an employee body that had grown from 200 to 350, but there seemed to be a cultural shift between the previous catering firm and BaxterStorey's corporate approach.

In late 2009, an executive development chef joined the canteen to provide training and expand the range of recipes on offer.

By the summer of 2010, the executive chef returned and found that the catering staff had reverted to their previous recipes.

She concluded that Theloke had "no interest in improving and developing himself or the food offer".

Theloke was on holiday when the executive development chef next visited and found that the canteen "did not look clean and there were a myriad of problems".

Yet, when he returned, the premises looked good once more. By November she reported that it was "a great site visit with a great array of fresh food displayed well".

In early 2011, BaxterStorey appointed a new operations manager. On his first visit to the State Street site in Kilkenny, the operations manager detailed 31 issues relating to Theloke's work performance.

A lot of his complaints centred on transferring invoices, tracking food wastage and operating computerised controls. The chef said he addressed 26 of the issues raised and explained that he was having difficulties resolving the remaining five items.

A month later, the operations manager wrote to the catering firm's general manager complaining that the chef had been "incredibly disrespectful" to him and had been engaging with canteen customers when he was trying to talk to him. He added that Theloke "displays absolutely no responsibility or ownership of the management of the site" and asked the general manager to "take action with his shortcomings".

Relations between the chef and the operations manager continued to deteriorate and the general manager called an investigation meeting, for which he gave Theloke just one day's notice.

Had he been given more notice, he could have brought

relevant documentation, Theloke claimed. He also complained that he had been "intimidated and bullied" at the meeting and was not given time to respond to the issues raised.

He put his complaints in an email detailing the "intimidation, aggression, bullying and harassment" to which he claimed he was subjected by BaxterStorey's general manager.

As he was not well trained in the use of computers, however, he mistakenly sent this e-mail complaint to his own address, not that of the operations manager.

As threats of disciplinary action continued, Theloke made a plea to his bosses. "I have worked here for seven years and, believe it or not, I actually love my job. If, in the eyes of BaxterStorey, I am not achieving the standards required, why not support me and enable me to meet them? Constructive criticism I would welcome. However, I am made to feel incompetent, useless and inadequate."

Nonetheless, the company's human resources team proceeded with disciplinary steps and told him that they would not be following up his complaints about bullying

and harassment by the general manager, who by then had left the company.

Overall, it was found that Theloke's management had not given any consideration to his responses or the fact that he was working in a very pressured position.

The management had been critical and unhelpful as evidenced by the wide array of complaints they made against him, despite canteen customer surveys showing an overall satisfaction with the catering.

A colleague gave evidence to the Employment Appeals Tribunal (EAT) that Theloke was "a very fair and understanding manager and he was always very busy". She added that complaints about the canteen food increased, as did the prices, following his dismissal.

BaxterStorey's current general manager did not attend the EAT hearing, but his firm was ordered to pay the hard-working chef €28,000 in compensation for the way in which they had treated him when they won the State Street contract.

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Joanne Foley is the new branch manager for Matrix Recruitment Group in Dublin. Foley had been a recruitment consultant at the company's Carlow office for six years. Prior to that, she spent 12 months as a HR graduate with the Musgrave Group.



Mary Curtis has been appointed head of channel at UTV Ireland. Curtis has been an independent broadcast and public information consultant for the past year. Prior to that, she spent three years with RTE as director of digital switchover.



Law firm McCann FitzGerald has announced several new partners. Tom Dane has been appointed partner in the firm's Banking and Financial Services department. Dane has been a solicitor with the department for the past seven years.



Shane Sweeney has been appointed a partner in McCann FitzGerald's Real Estate department. Sweeney joined the department eight years ago. Before that, he was a solicitor in the Banking & Financial Services department for 12 months.



Catherine Derrig has been appointed partner in Dispute Resolution & Litigation at McCann FitzGerald. She joined the department eight years ago, after graduating from UCD with a Degree in Business and Legal Studies.



Megan Anne Hooper has been appointed partner in McCann FitzGerald's Dispute Resolution & Litigation department. She joined the department as a solicitor 11 years ago, having worked for 12 months as a solicitor in general practice with Brisbane firm McCullough Robertson.

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