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Managing a Work-Life Balance in the World of Smart Phones, Tablets and Laptops

The Rise of the “Always-On” Workplace Culture

The term “always-on” has come into being as a way to describe how, due to modern technology, most people are almost always available via phone, text or email. We’re “always-on” some form of technology that allows us to communicate, or to be communicated with. At a first glance it’s hard to see a problem with this, if we didn’t want to be reachable why would we have mobile phones? And surely we can just ignore them if they go off, can’t we? Unfortunately for many working people, that isn’t the case.

The rise in popularity of emails, smart phones, laptops and tablets has led to many employees checking work emails or taking work related phone calls out of working time. Many employees view their willingness to check in with work in their free time as a sign of their commitment. Indeed, during the recession this became a common activity of employees who were attempting to prove their worth and avoid redundancy. Some employees are even proud of never really being away from work, claiming that their constant contact with the workplace is proof of their success and value.

It has become very common for employees to check emails before their day starts, during their lunch, and in the evening, but is this right?

Why Is This A Problem?

Many employers are aware of the “always-on” culture and view it as a part of the modern world of work, but many also fail to see the potential problems. Whilst advancements in technology have enabled the work place to become much more flexible, it has also blurred the lines between working time and free time, causing many employees to feel like they can never switch off. There have been many studies into the effects of the “always-on” workplace culture, and it has been shown repeatedly that employees find it stressful.

Michigan State University conducted a study, and found that employees who checked their smart phones in the evening for work related purposes felt less engaged with work the next day, due to feeling fatigued. Research from the Institute of Leadership and Management (conducted on 1,000 employees), has also shown that 94% of employees work beyond their contracted weekly hours, and 65% do so because they feel pressurised by the constant workplace communication. Employers want workplaces to be full of positive, passionate, productive and engaged people, but for that energy to be there employees need to have had sufficient time to rest. Without regular rest breaks, an employees’ health can take a nose dive, how many of us have booked a holiday only to come down with a cold as soon as we put our feet up? That is your immune systems way of telling you that it cannot cope. Stress has now become the biggest cause of long-term employee absence, showing us that perhaps the “always-on” culture needs to be turned off once in a while.

Employees’ feelings aside, there are also legal reasons why these practices may not be best practice. The

Working Time Regulations state that most employees must have an eleven hour break in every 24 hours, and two days away from work in every fourteen day period, but if employees are doing work related activities in the evenings and mornings they may not be getting these rest periods. Also, if employees are doing work related activities outside of their working time, it could be argued that they should be getting paid for it or deserve to be paid more. Whilst many employers would say that employees are choosing to waive their break periods, and choosing to do this work at home, it is up to the employer to ensure Health and Safety practices are put in place, and it is the employers responsibility to ensure statute is met.

What Can Be Done?

To prevent employees "burning out", many employers are now introducing a "weekend ban" or something similar. This means that no workplace emails can be sent or read over the weekend, unless there are extreme mitigating circumstances. Employers are also legally required to monitor the working hours of their employees, so another approach could be to warn employees if they are getting too close to the 'healthy' working hour limit. If you'd rather have a simpler approach, you could also consider implementing an Employee Well-Being Policy, a policy on Stress Management, and also Stress Awareness training for your management team. A workplace culture can be changed over time, if the correct steps are taken. By ensuring your employees are getting the appropriate rest periods you will hopefully see the benefits of a happier and more productive team.

How Can We Help?

We regularly design policies and procedures for our clients, if after reading this newsletter you feel you would benefit from an Employee Well-Being Policy or a Stress Management Policy, then we can create this for you and discuss in confidence any related factors. If you have any queries relating to any of the subjects raised within this newsletter then please do not hesitate to contact us at hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk

For clarification of any of the above updates or for advice and guidance on any HR and/or Health and Safety Concerns contact us by emailing hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk or by calling 02476 664092.

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