

Morning, noon and night

The infiltration of work email into personal and family life

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University of
South Australia

Centre for
Work + Life

© May 2013

Published by the Centre for Work + Life

University of South Australia

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/Centre-for-Work-Life>

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978-0-9875120-1-7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for this study included an Australian Research Council Linkage grant in partnership with the South Australian Government through SafeWork SA and the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Data for this study was collected as part of survey conducted by The Australia Institute (www.tai.org.au).

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Introduction

We live in a time of rapidly changing technology that impacts on every aspect of our lives. Perhaps the most noticeable changes are developments in technologies that enhance our capacity to communicate with each other and access information. Smartphones, laptops, broadband and wi-fi provide 24/7 access to data, information and each other that is unprecedented in human history. The way in which we interact with friends, family, clients, customers, co-workers and others is also radically altered. In this study we focused on the implications of this technological revolution for the way in which we work.

Working some of the time away from a physical workplace is becoming more common for many workers. Professional, service and technical jobs are increasing as a share of employment, with fewer Australians employed in manual and blue collar jobs that are more likely to be bound to a workplace (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Use of technologies such as smart phones and home computers is increasing, supported by improvements to technological infrastructure such as faster internet services. Not everybody agrees with the potential benefits of untethering workers from their physical workplaces. A recent example that received global attention was the Yahoo company's new Chief Executive Officer who instituted a ban on working from home. In her view, having workers physically present in the workplace would enhance communication and collaboration. Putting to one side the debate about whether this is an accurate view or not, it is worth noting that this argument reflects a very traditional view of the 'ideal worker' who is continuously available to the workplace, unconstrained by commitments and responsibilities outside of work (Williams, 2000). The CEO avoided this problem in her own life by funding the custom building of a nursery for her infant child next door to her office. Unfortunately, such provisions are not available to most workers managing work and caring responsibilities.

In an earlier 2012 study we examined working from home, a change in working patterns that is often facilitated and enabled by technology. In our Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) survey we found that around 40 per cent of workers said they took work home when they needed, and that around half the hours worked from home are unpaid (Pocock, Skinner, & Hutchinson, 2012). That research also showed that doing unpaid hours from home, whether in combination with paid hours or not, is clearly associated with worse work-life-interference – the intrusiveness of work into home, family and social life and feelings of time pressure.

Other research in Australia and internationally has also emphasised the importance of having time for rest and recovery on a daily and weekly basis, with clear detriments to physical and mental health when this 'downtime' is missing in daily life (Binnewies & Sonnentag, 2008).

In this study we focused on how often workers check and respond to work emails. Email has evolved to become the primary way that many workers communicate with colleagues, customers, clients and others within and outside the organisation. Developments in technology mean that it is possible for many of us to check email anywhere and anytime, including evenings, weekends and on holidays. There is increasing concern about the extent to which work emails are intruding into non-work time. Two recent and prominent examples of the intrusiveness of email into non-work time come from the U.S and Germany. In the U.S the Chicago Police Department is being sued by an employee for overtime owing due to an expectation that emails are checked after hours (Tarn, 2013). In 2011 Volkswagen announced it would stop its Blackberry servers from sending emails to employees out of hours as a result of complaints that work was intruding excessively into employees' home lives (BBC News, 2011).

The effects of technologies such as smartphones on the way in which we engage in paid work have also been the focus of recent academic research. Mazmanian et al. (2013, p. 2) observe that the use of mobile email devices simultaneously increases professional workers' autonomy by enabling them to work 'anywhere, anytime', and at the same time reinforces an expectation from colleagues and clients that they are available 'everywhere, all the time'. In their qualitative study Mazmanian et al. observed that this 24/7 availability was experienced by these professionals as beneficial with regard to feelings of competence, productivity, control over work activities and communication, and flexibility. At the same time it also created undesirable consequences by contributing to shared expectations (a collective norm) of being constantly available and responsive, with participants feeling a compulsion to remain continually connected to incoming emails on their device. This, in turn, meant that their daily life lacked 'downtime', with tension and stress a common experience. This notion that 24/7 email accessibility is a 'double edged sword' that enables flexibility and autonomy and also contributes to feelings of work overload and intrusion into non-work time is a common theme in the research literature (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Gregg, 2011). It also reflects a cultural norm that is particularly prevalent in professional and managerial occupations where there are few or no formal controls on working hours and where jobs are demanding and 'greedy' (Cosser, 1974), poorly designed and too big to fit within nominal working hours.

In sum, the existing research literature indicates that interacting with email outside of work hours is a common practice, especially for those in managerial or professional positions. This practice has complex and contradictory outcomes, providing much valued flexibility and autonomy in deciding when and where to work and respond to communications, and at the same time contributing to a sense of overload and lack of 'downtime' that is experienced as stressful.

Much of the existing research has been conducted within single organisations or within specific occupational or industrial sectors. The aim of this study is to examine the prevalence of this behaviour in the Australian working population, and to investigate Australians' views and experiences of the 'anywhere, anytime' use of work emails. Specifically we examine the factors that drive this behaviour, the positive and negative feelings workers have about this behaviour and how checking emails in non-work time is associated with work-life interference.



Method

This study was conducted using an online survey conducted by The Australia Institute. The survey was conducted in February 2013. A total of 1376 respondents were surveyed, of whom 792 reported being in paid work. The survey sample was sourced from an independent online panel provider. Survey respondents were provided with a small incentive to encourage participation. The survey sample was broadly representative of the broader Australian adult population by age and gender. The results reported in this paper have been post-weighted to precisely match the population profile by age and gender.

Sample

The sample for the current study comprised 792 workers, 414 men and 378 women (47.7 per cent) aged between 18 and 65+ years, with the majority aged between 25 and 54 (69.7 per cent). Most participants worked full-time (64.1 per cent) and lived in a metropolitan area (53.8 per cent). Around one in four participants were parents (16.9 per cent men, 21.8 per cent women). Participants were drawn from all Australian states and territories, with the majority residing in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

Because of sample size restrictions, an in-depth analysis by occupation was not possible. However, we can reliably distinguish between managers/professionals and other occupations, where statistically significant differences were observed.

Survey instrument

This paper reports on a set of 10 questions regarding respondents' use of a mobile device that allows them to check work emails outside of work hours, the frequency and timing of these actions, motivations for this behaviour and views on its benefits and disadvantages. Respondents also completed the five item work-life index, a measure of the degree to which work is perceived to interfere with other non-work activities (e.g. family/personal time, community connections), time pressure and satisfaction with work-life balance. The work-life index is scored on a scale of 0 (lowest work-life interference) to 100 (highest work-life interference). The 2012 average score for working Australians was 42.8 (Pocock, et al., 2012).



Findings

Here we summarise key findings with regard to the use of mobile devices to check work emails outside of work hours, participants' views and experiences of this behaviour, and how this behaviour is related to work-life interference. Differences by gender, occupation and part-time/full-time working hours are also discussed where these contrasts reached statistical significance ($p < .05$). We also considered differences by employment type (casual, fixed-term contract and permanent), finding no statistically significant differences in responses according to employment type: casual, fixed-term and permanent workers are similar in their mobile device behaviours, motivations and associated work-life outcomes, as described below.

Availability of mobile device to check emails

Two-thirds of respondents (64.7 per cent), had a mobile device that enabled the checking of emails from work at any time (Table 1). Those most likely to have a mobile device that allows the checking of emails outside of work are men, those aged 44 years and younger (particularly young adults aged 18 to 24 years), full-timers and those in managerial or professional jobs.

Table 1 Have a mobile device that lets you check work email at anytime

	Have a device
All	64.7
Men	71.2
Women	57.2
Age	
18-24	76.9
25-34	72.4
35-44	69.7
45-54	54.8
55-64	41.7
65+	64.7
Work hours	
Part-time	56.2
Full-time	69.3
Occupation	
Manager/professional	72.5
Other occupation	59.5

Note. * Insufficient sample size, (< 20 persons) estimate should be interpreted with caution.

Frequency of checking emails when not at work

As Table 2 shows, nearly half (48.1 per cent) of workers who had a mobile device with email access check their work emails once or a few times a day when they are not at work. Around 12 per cent check their emails very frequently – around every hour or so. Managers and professionals are most likely to check their emails frequently – a few times a day or every hour or so. Indeed, nearly one third of managers and professionals check their emails at least a few times a day when they are not at work.

Table 2 When not at work, how frequently do you check your work email

	Never	Occasionally/few days	Once a day	Few times a day	Every hour or so
All	16.3	24.1	20.8	27.3	11.6
Occupation					
Manager/professional	11.3	20.7	18.9	31.5	17.6
Other occupation	20.1	26.4	22.6	24.0	6.9

Timing of checking emails when not at work

When do workers check their emails outside of work time? Around three quarters (72.7 per cent) report that they do so at various times (Table 3). Just over one third (34.1 per cent) check emails in the evening, with men more likely to do so (41.7 per cent) than women

(25.2 per cent). The most distinct and statistically significant difference by occupation occurs around checking emails before breakfast: just over one quarter of managers and professionals with mobile devices check their emails at this time compared to around 15 per cent of those in other occupations. Checking emails whilst on holidays is also not common: 17.8 per cent of workers do so. This figure rises to a quarter of full-time workers (22.6 per cent) checking emails whilst on holiday, whereas less than 1 in 10 part-timers (8.9 per cent) do so. There is also some indication that managers and professional are more likely to check their emails whilst on holidays, but this contrast is of borderline statistical significance ($p = .07$).

Table 3 Timing of checking emails when not at work

	Before breakfast	In the evening	At various times during the day	When on holidays
All	21.1	34.1	72.7	17.8
Occupation				
Manager/professional	27.8	33.3	76.7	22.0
Other occupation	15.1	34.9	69.2	14.5

Reasons for checking emails outside of work time

The survey offered a number of reasons for checking email outside of work time and respondents could tick more than one reason. The most common reason for checking emails outside of work was in order to know what is happening at work (57.3 per cent). Nearly half also say that checking emails out of hours helps them to manage their work (45.8 per cent). This reason was much more common for full-timers: around half check emails out of hours to help them manage their work (49.8 per cent) and nearly forty per cent (37.8) of part-timers agree. One quarter of workers say that they check emails out of hours because work is an important part of their identity (24.5 per cent). This response was more common for managers and professionals: around one third (32.3 per cent) identified this reason (9.3 per cent of other occupations). Only 12.7 per cent of workers said they checked emails out of hours because it was expected by their manager, with even fewer saying they did so because they enjoyed being connected to work (10.6 per cent).

Attitudes towards having work email available all the time

Most workers have positive attitudes towards having work available at all times, with the majority saying that they find this availability helpful (57.7 per cent), and around nearly 40 per cent (39.1 per cent) saying that they found this availability efficient. Very few, less than 15 per cent, found having work emails available at all times a distraction (14.2 per cent), an intrusion (12.7 per cent) or tiring (13.0 per cent).

Associations with work-life interference

There is a clear association between frequent checking of emails outside of work and higher work-life interference (Figure 1). Workers who never check their emails out of hours, or do so once a day or every few days have average levels of work-life interference. Those who check their emails a few times a day have significantly higher work-life interference, although this contrast with less frequent checkers was not statistically significant. Those who checked their email every hour or so had the highest work-life interference, significantly higher than workers who check their email once a day or less often. This

pattern is evident for men and women, and for those in managerial/professional and other occupations.

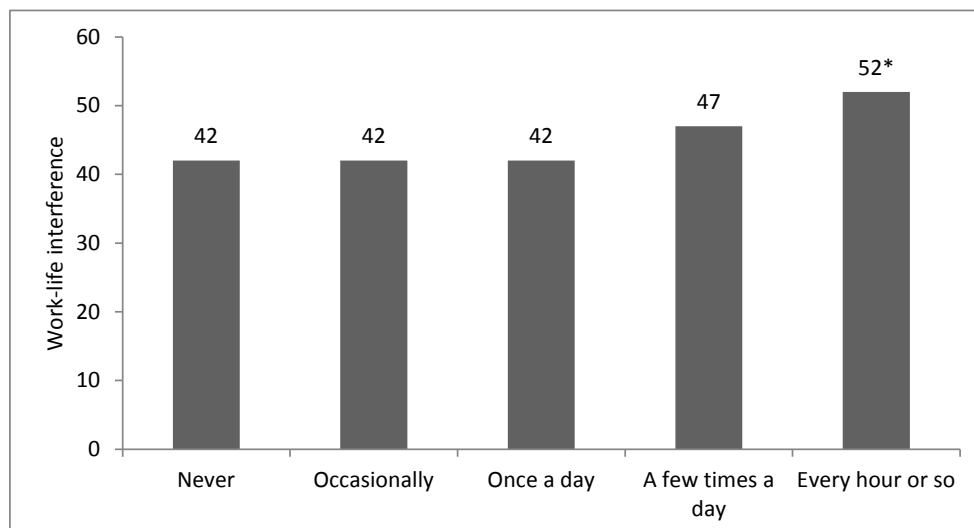


Figure 1 Work-life interference by frequency of checking emails
 Note. Higher score = worse work-life interference. * = score statistically significant from all other scores.

As Figure 2 shows, the timing of email checking has a stronger effect on women than men. For women, checking emails before breakfast or whilst on holidays is associated with higher work-life interference than men who also check their emails at this time. Indeed, these women have the highest levels of work-life interference of all workers who check their email out of hours. A similar pattern was observed for women checking emails in the evening; however this contrast did not reach statistical significance. While women report lower work-life interference than men, on average, this pattern is reversed for women who check emails before breakfast or on holidays: they have higher work-life interference than their male counterparts. In contrast, the timing of email checking has little effect on men’s work-life interference.

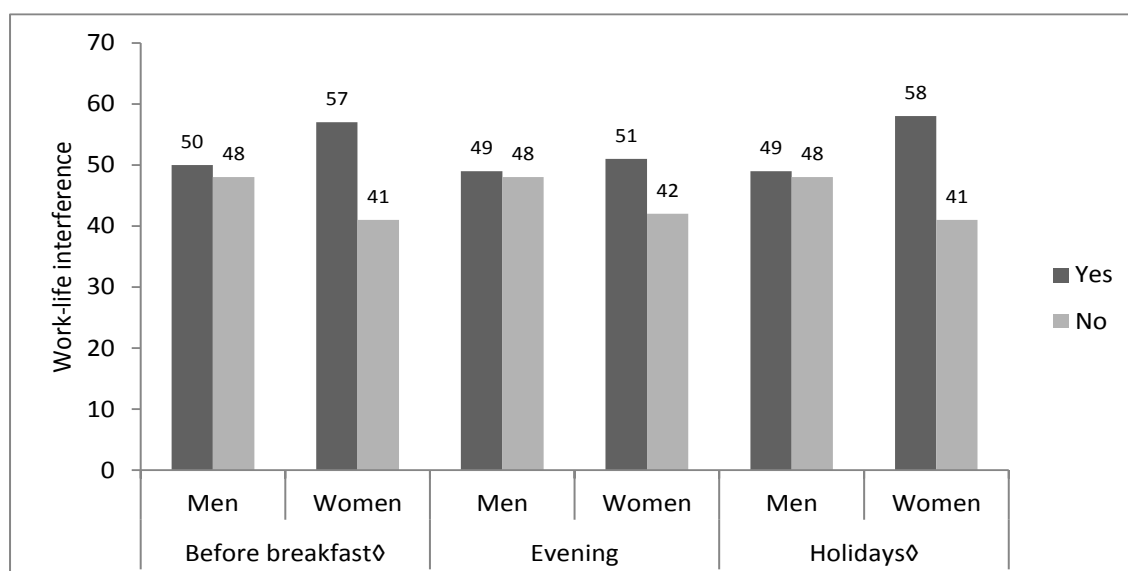


Figure 2 Work-life interference by timing of checking emails
 Note. Higher score = worse work-life interference. \diamond = statistically significant difference in pattern for men and women.

Study limitations

This study was conducted using an online survey to investigate the use of electronic media (email) in everyday life. Whilst the sample included participants from a wide range of employment circumstances and social-demographic characteristics, it is likely that the sample over-represents people who are highly engaged with electronic forms of communication. There is clearly a need for further research in this area, and the use of a range of electronic and non-electronic data-gathering methodologies (e.g. personal interviews, telephone surveys) would be preferable.



Conclusion

This survey is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind to quantify the prevalence of Australian's use of mobile technologies to interact with work emails in non-work time such as evenings, weekends and whilst on holiday. We find that the majority of working Australians have access to technology that enables them to do this anywhere and anytime. The frequent use of this technology to check work emails was predominantly reported by workers in managerial and professional roles: nearly half of managers report checking their emails a few times a day or more frequently when not at work, and around 30 per cent of professionals join them.

Of those that do check their emails, most report doing this at various times during the day. Of these email checkers, around 1 in 4 managers and professionals are checking email before breakfast, and one around 1 in 5 are checking emails whilst on holidays. Men are much more likely to check email in the evening than women.

When asked why they check work emails outside of work hours, the most common reasons relate to managing workload or work demands. Specifically, nearly 60 per cent of email checkers said they liked to know what is happening at work, and nearly 50 per cent said checking email out of hours helped them manage their work. Few workers did this because they enjoy checking work emails outside of hours. Similarly, very few reported that their manager expected them to do so. Rather, our findings suggest that workers check emails outside of work hours as a workload management strategy that they chose to undertake. As others researchers have observed (e.g. Mazmanian et al.) this suggests that workers have internalised a responsibility for managing high workloads and 'frame' their constant connection and engagement with work email as though a personal choice or decision about how they engage in work, rather than as a broader systemic issue reflecting unreasonable workloads and a workplace culture encompassing expectations of access and responsiveness to emails out of work hours. Consistent with this interpretation, most respondents reported that having 'anywhere, anytime' accessibility to work email was helpful and efficient, with very few reporting that this practice was intrusive or tiring.

Although respondents view checking emails out of hours as a useful workload management strategy rather than an intrusion into non-work time, a different picture emerges when we examined the associations with work-life interference. Very frequent (every hour or so) email checking in non-work time was clearly associated with increased work-life interference. Furthermore, for women the timing of this behaviour also has significant effects on work-life outcomes. For women, checking email before breakfast or whilst on holidays is associated with the highest work-life interference of all groups in the sample. Whereas for men, the timing of email checking had little impact on their work-life

outcomes. This finding probably reflects gender differences in caring and domestic work. In Australia, as with most countries, women perform much more of this work than men. It is probably be the case that early mornings and holidays are times when multi-tasking between work and family or personal activities is particularly difficult or intrusive. The sample size for this study did not support separate analyses of mothers and fathers. There is clearly a need for further research on the intersection of gender, technology and care and its impact on work-life outcomes with particular attention to total hours of work, occupation, industry, caring responsibilities, and the timing of email checking, as well as the effects of constant connection on work-life interference.

Some degree of flexibility in where and when paid work is done can be a crucial support in the 'struggle to juggle' that defines the lives of many workers. Our challenge now, for managers, supervisors and ourselves as work colleagues is to match our intelligent technology with wise workplace cultures that recognise and respect other life domains and priorities – including personal, family and social time.



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