



Introduction

This document provides employers and workers in Canada with information on the importance of disconnecting from work. It will explore the current situation, and possible options.

Background

Canadian labour standards outline the employment conditions for hours of work, payment of wages, leaves, vacation, holidays, and more. However, most labour standards (also called employment standards) were developed when Canada was primarily an industrial society. Most people reported to their workplace for an 8-hour shift (or other regular shift pattern) and then returned home. Since the work could only be performed at the worksite, this pattern created a natural disconnection.

The Canadian economy has changed, becoming less manufacturing based and more information and service based. This shift, due in part to the availability and adoption of information and communication technology, has created entirely new industries and changed the nature of many others. Many employers have adopted diversified work time practices to remain competitive and meet the demands of a global economy. In addition, there is also a trend to work remotely, away from a shared physical location.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the number of people working from home, and many of these arrangements have been successful. By continuing to use technology, it is possible that remote work will become even more prevalent, and for some, a permanent work option.

Changing Nature of Work

The ability to work remotely with relative ease has caused the boundaries between being “at work” and “not at work” to blur. Working remotely is possible primarily due to the rapid advancement and adoption of information and communication technology (e.g., high-speed internet, wireless communication, smartphones, and laptops). Before this technology was widely available, communication between workers occurred mostly at a communal workplace during defined hours.

The changing nature of work means that employers potentially have more access to workers during their private time. With more connectivity, workers may feel pressure to continue to work or be available after hours. This pressure may be heightened if they observe other workers or management conducting work during “off” hours (e.g., sending emails, particularly when expecting a response). Employers and supervisors may inadvertently reward this behaviour through promotions and bonuses. There is concern that these rewards unfairly disadvantage workers who are unable to remain connected due to family responsibilities, health reasons, or because they were not provided the tools to work remotely.

According to a [Government of Canada survey](#) there is broad worker support to have uninterrupted time away from work. The reasons given include:

- Checking and answering work-related emails interferes with family and personal time
- Workers need more time to rest outside working hours
- Thinking about work at home causes stress
- Supervisors and managers work more hours and sometimes need answers from workers

In the survey, employers point out that the nature of work has changed. Many organizations run continuous operations that sometimes require workers to be available outside traditional working hours. The reasons given for not allowing workers space to disconnect include:

- Business does not stop at the end of the workday
- Employers cannot always predict when work will need to be done
- Employees should be flexible to work whenever necessary
- Supervisors and managers work more hours and sometimes need answers from employees



Remote Work and Disconnection

Remote work has become more popular, and has both [benefits and challenges for employers and workers](#). With the ability to always be connected, workers' health may be at risk due to an imbalance between work and the need for rest (both physical and mental). Workers may also feel the need to stay connected, out of fear of repercussions.

The “Right to Disconnect” Concept

The concept of the right to disconnect was first introduced in France. The concerns that mobile technology could have a negative impact on work-life balance of French workers eventually led to the passing of a law to protect the rights of workers. Since then four additional countries have adopted right-to-disconnect laws.

What the Law Says in Canada

In Canada, many workers do not have a legislated right to disconnect. Currently one province in Canada has ‘right to disconnect’ legislation coming into force with several other jurisdictions considering their own legislation.

Provincial, territorial, and federal governments do have laws that require employers to provide time off from work, unless the occupation is exempt (e.g., police officer) or there are extenuating circumstances. Some employment standard laws include protections for workers to have time off work on a per day and per week basis unless other arrangements have been made (e.g., minimum 8 hours off work per day and one period of 24 consecutive hours off work per week). Any additional time worked might need to be compensated as prescribed by law or according to a collective bargaining agreement.

Some jurisdictions specifically state that “on-call” or “stand-by” workers are not considered to be working. However, if the worker is called in, they are considered to be working and must be compensated for their time.

In other situations, hours and terms of work may be negotiated in contracts, such as collective agreements with unions.

How to Help Workers Disconnect from Work

- Lead by example.
- Promote disconnecting at the end of the day as part of your corporate culture.
- Teach work-life balance skills as part of workplace health and wellness programs.
- Tell workers not to respond to work communications during their time off.
- Avoid rewarding workers who continue to work outside of their designated hours.

Disconnecting from Work

Disconnecting from work means having the ability to stop working and not feel obliged to respond to work issues or your employer outside of defined work hours (i.e., time when you are not exposed to work stresses). Having uninterrupted personal time allows your body and mind to relax and recover.

Depending on the nature of the work, it can be easy or difficult to disconnect. Workers who must work at a defined location may have less trouble disconnecting (e.g., manufacturing or construction). Workers that can easily work remotely may find it harder to disconnect (e.g., sales, finance, consultants, technical specialists, etc.).

If properly implemented, the digital transformation of the workplace can have a positive effect on the quality of life of workers. Employers can promote the disconnection from work as part of their corporate culture and health and wellness programs. Disconnecting from work is a skill that employers should encourage their workers to develop, or when necessary, taught to workers.

Health Effects from not Disconnecting

Constant connection may harm workers by causing musculoskeletal, psychological, gastro-intestinal and cardiovascular problems. Researchers studying work-related stress are evaluating the impact of being continuously

The Importance of Disconnecting from Work



connected.

Early indications suggest that the inability to disconnect from work could cause workers to experience poor recovery from work (due to the inability to “switch off”), increased work-life interference, higher levels of [burnout](#), a sense of fatigue, and increased health impairments.

How to Disconnect from Work

- At the end of your working hours, turn off your work communication devices or set them to silent, as appropriate.
- Keep separate devices for work activities, so you will be not able to access work e-mails on your personal devices.
- During your personal time, turn off your computer and put away files, paperwork and devices. Take your earned breaks and use that time to focus on something other than work.
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- Discuss your hours of work with your supervisor. If you are having difficulties working these hours, explore options with your supervisor.
- Have a ritual at the end of your workday such as going for a walk.
- Dedicate a space in your home that is reserved for work, if possible. When your workday is over, do not enter that space.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please contact your local hospital, call 911 immediately, or contact a [Crisis Centre in your area](#).



It is important that mental health resources and support are provided to all workers, including access to an employee assistance program, if available.

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Note that this guidance is just some of the adjustments organizations can make during a pandemic. Adapt this list by adding your own good practices and policies to meet your organization’s specific needs.

Disclaimer: As public and occupational health and safety information is changing rapidly, local public health authorities should be consulted for specific, regional guidance. This information is not intended to replace medical advice or legislated health and safety obligations. Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.