Managing "after hours" electronic work communication

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It is an understatement to say that technology has changed the nature of work. Electronic communication and the mobility afforded via technologies with Internet capabilities have fundamentally changed when, where, and how work gets done. One substantive change is employees becoming more and more tethered to their workplace even when they leave the office for the day or during vacations and other non-working days. This has led to the phenomenon of "the new night shift," when employees "log back on to work" (or never log off) to check and respond to email and texts. Research on this topic has evolved over the past decade along with the advances in these technologies. Much of the early work on communication technology focused on teleworkers (or telecommuters) as a specific group of employees who performed part or all of their jobs from virtual (typically, the home) rather than traditional offices. Yet with advances in and greater access to technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets), more and more employees of all types are able (or required) to attend to work matters beyond the time and location constraints of the traditional workplace. These devices essentially blur the lines between what would typically be considered a teleworker versus any typical employee with a mobile device and/or Internet access. As such, work in this area has expanded to more generally understand the drivers and effects of employee work connectivity beyond the traditional boundaries of the workplace.

With work communication via mobile technologies only likely to proliferate moving forward, it is paramount that organizations better understand and manage the consequences of employee connectivity, both good and bad. On the one hand, connectivity provides flexibility for employees in addressing the many and often competing demands of both the job and home life. An individual can attend to personal matters such as attending a child's activity or being away on vacation while still being connected to the office. Yet with this flexibility comes the feeling and perhaps reality of never being able to disconnect from work. The question then becomes: does the greater flexibility and efficiency in managing competing demands offset the disruption and stress associated with no clear delineation of work and home boundaries?

AFTER-HOURS ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION: ANTECEDENTS AND WORK—NONWORK STRESS

Nearly a decade ago, the use of pagers, blackberries, and cell phones afforded employees a new opportunity to remain connected to work beyond the traditional physical and temporal workplace boundaries. The early usage of such mobile devices, particularly "after hours," was typically viewed as volitional for employees because such technologies were not needed or at least not the norm across diverse jobs. Some organizations even began to wonder why employees would choose to stay connected, responding to and engaging in work-related correspondence, when it was not necessarily part of the job. Accordingly, an initial question of interest was "what drives employees to use communication technologies 'after hours'?" We studied 360 employees, including 130 supervisors/managers. The latter group was also given a survey for their 'significant other, defined as someone 18 years or older who is in a good position to assess the employee's work and personal life (e.g., spouse, adult child, romantic partner), to complete. A total of 35 significant others completed this separate survey. Employee respondents were surveyed regarding their communication technology (CT) use to perform their job during nonwork hours (i.e., "after hours") as well as regarding various individual

difference variables (i.e., affective organizational commitment, job involvement, ambition), demographic factors (i.e., sex, marital status, dependent status, position), and work-to-nonwork conflict. The sub-sample of significant others also reported their perceptions of the employee's work-to-nonwork conflict as well as some supplemental information about perceptions of CT and their own work experiences. This research study occurred at the beginning of the introduction of smartphones; thus, the focus was reported frequency (never to very often/several times a day) of using electronic communication technologies such as cell phones, email, voice mail, pagers, blackberries, and PDAs.

The findings revealed that career-related attitudes were particularly critical in driving CT use after hours. Specifically, more ambitious employees as well as those indicating stronger identification with work (i.e., eating and breathing one's work) were most likely to report staying connected after hours. Interestingly, feeling emotionally attached to a company did not necessarily play a role in an employee's maintenance of connectivity to the workplace after hours. One conclusion is that staying connected after hours is driven more by the desire to get ahead and progress in one's career than by the inclination to reciprocate toward the employer.

These early findings on what drives employees to stay connected after hours offer some initial insight to managers as to who is most likely to use (or not use) electronic technology beyond the traditional boundaries of the workday — to the extent that is desirable, or conversely undesirable, to the organization. Indeed, a second critical question, one that much of our work has focused on, centers on the consequences of staying connected after hours. This same initial study focused specifically on the potential resultant work–nonwork conflict (i.e., an individual's belief that the demands of work interfere with meeting the demands of one's family and personal life), finding, as expected, that staying connected after hours was associated with a heightened sense of work–nonwork conflict. It is important to note that the effects of staying connected on work–nonwork conflict were over and above an employee simply working more/longer hours. This suggests that there is something unique about being connected electronically that facilitates feelings of work intrusion, most likely due to the potential for spontaneous interruptions during personal time as well as the potential for distractions *wherever* the individual may be. Relatedly, we also examined the perspective of the employee's "significant other," revealing that interestingly enough, such individuals reacted *even more* unfavorably than the employee. We speculate that an employee may derive some level of benefit or gratification from staying connected after hours, resulting in tempering the perceived stress of the experience, while significant others are likely to only experience negative consequences associated with the intrusion and disruption of the home life.

THE NATURE OF THE AFTER-HOURS ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Moving forward several years later, a lingering question has remained, asking what it is about being tethered to work that is particularly problematic. It is generally recognized that the flexibility and potential for staying on top of one's workload

that electronic communication offers to employees is a realized advantage. However, are there elements of such communication that are particularly deleterious? Understanding the complete continuum of positive and negative consequences would offer practical guidance to employers on specific ways to perhaps maintain the good aspects of after-hours communication while perhaps simultaneously reducing the bad aspects.

A recent study on this topic examined how the daily occurrences of particular types of electronic communication impacted employees' personal lives. Specifically, we collected data from 341 employees for 7 days immediately after they received an electronic communication from work after normal business hours when they had left the office. We focused on key elements of the communication message itself (i.e., time it took to read and address the correspondence and affective tone perceived in the correspondence) as well as characteristics of the sender and the receiver. The outcomes included employee emotional reactions (i.e., anger as a negative emotion and happiness as a positive emotion) to the electronic communication and work-to-nonwork conflict. Adopting a daily sampling methodology allowed us to examine how day-to-day elements of after-hours communications vary within-persons in relation to daily changes in their emotional reactions and work-to-nonwork conflict.

Findings from this study revealed that as electronic communication (email and texts) took longer to read and comply with, employees experienced more anger. That anger caused people to feel that their work interfered with being involved in their nonwork pursuits (e.g., family, social activities). The tone of electronic communication also had effects on employees in that when the communication was negative in tone, employees exhibited more anger. Conversely, when the message was positive in tone, they displayed more happiness. However, the happiness dissipated much faster than did the anger and did not carry through to impact work-to-nonwork conflict as anger did. One proposed reason for the stronger effects of anger is due to what is called the "positive–negative asymmetry effect." Negative events (and their associated negative emotional reactions) are processed more extensively and contribute more to a person's overall impression than do positive events and associated positive emotions.

In addition, we found that the effects of electronic communication elements on emotions and work-to-nonwork conflict depend on characteristics of the sender (who the communication is from, the nature of the relationship with one's boss) and the receiver (employee preferences for segmenting work from personal pursuits). Employees tended to display more anger when the electronic communication was from their boss with whom they had a poor relationship and when this boss used a negative tone. Employees who are deemed as "segmentors" (those who prefer to keep their work and personal lives separate) viewed electronic communications as more interfering and bothersome to their personal lives even when these communications required very little time. These reactions increased dramatically as the communication took longer time to read and deal with. "Integrators" (i.e., those who like to mesh their work and personal lives), on the other hand, did not perceive the time needed to read and deal with work communications as interfering with their personal lives.

This study offers several important insights generally in regards to electronic communication and specifically in regards to employee connectivity after-hours. First, because electronic communication lacks important nonverbal cues present in face-to-face communication, there is a higher likelihood that employees "read into" emails and texts and view the message content more negatively than it was intended. Also, because we are naturally more drained at the end of the day, there is a higher likelihood that we, as email senders, craft messages to coworkers that are "rushed" and potentially ambiguous. We then react with replies that are more concise than would occur during normal business hours. This indicates that because after-hour communication may be particularly prone to misinterpretation and unfavorable reactions due to the perceived intrusion, more care is needed by senders in crafting correspondence (or even questioning whether the correspondence is needed at all) and by receivers in interpreting the correspondence. On the encouraging side, positive communications occur as frequently as negative ones and employees seem to appreciate when they receive positive communications after hours (i.e., praise, positive feedback), perhaps because they view it as a special situation where a colleague or boss took time out of his/her personal life to send a positive message.

The positive or negative impact of after-hours electronic communications is also dependent upon the quality of the interpersonal relationship an employee has with his/her boss and personal preferences for integrating or segmenting work from personal time. Employees who experience a negative or abusive relationship with their supervisor react more angrily to negative communications from their supervisor as well as from other coworkers. This underscores the fact that the subordinate—supervisor relationship is a salient aspect of the workplace that employees constantly draw upon when going about daily interactions with other employees through after-hours electronic communication. Regarding preferences for segmentation and integration, segmentation has often been lauded and recommended because it gives employees an opportunity to replenish from work after-hours and recharge their drained energy. However, when it comes to after-hours communication, which may sometimes be unavoidable, segmentors are more susceptible to the time ramifications of electronic communications on their personal lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFTER-HOURS ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

There are a number of important implications for employers, managers, and individual employees that stem from the work on CT and electronic communications after-hours. A summary of critical questions surrounding after-hours electronic communication and the implications for organizations, managers, and employees is provided in Table 1. Below, we highlight key underlying principles for effective after-hours electronic communication based on the work highlighted.

Principle 1: Deliberate Effort When Communicating

As with any other communication, including written and verbal communication, employees need to put deliberate effort into clearly communicating their message when dealing with others electronically and after hours. Unfortunately, the ease of sending electronic communication may sometimes be matched by the level of effort in crafting such messages. Indeed, emails, texts, and instant messaging are notorious for the misunderstandings they create. Research has identified that this may be due to the lack of richness of the communication medium, but it is also, arguably, due to the lack of care taken in creating such messages. If the message is important enough to justify interrupting the receiver's personal time, it merits careful composition and editing on the part of the sender to minimize the likelihood of a misunderstanding in terms of content or intent. As noted in Table 1, training on effective electronic communication is warranted, particularly with respect to content, style, medium choice, and other key considerations.

Principle 2: Training and Policies Regarding "After Hours" Communication

Just as companies (e.g., Deloitte, AccuTrans, Tekni-Plex) now have training on proper meeting etiquette, it would be beneficial for organizations (as well as each work group) to carefully establish protocols or boundaries for when electronic work communication should and should not be sent. To that end, the internal/external norms for "after hours" communication may be taken into consideration. Perhaps organizations could use it to their advantage (e.g., recruiting, retention) to have lower expectations for "after hours" communication than do their competitors. One of the important considerations for such a policy is to identify the most appropriate topics for discussion via electronic versus face-to-face communication. For example, an organization might establish that potentially sensitive concerns, such as job performance, should be discussed face-to-face during regular work hours, while more routine matters, such as setting up a meeting time, assigning work, or providing information for an ongoing project could be communicated electronically during regular work hours, reserving electronic communication during non-regular work time for particularly time-sensitive matters (such as a public relations concern or an urgent client problem). Such policies should also address what expectations, if any, there are for *responding* to electronic communication after hours. Presumably, at minimum, expectations for responding to work-related matters during off-work hours should be reserved for exempt employees, as communicating with and expecting responses from non-exempt employees during non-work hours would need to be carefully examined for legal implications (e.g., "on-call" work). Several organizations such as Boston Consulting Group and Volkswagen set explicit expectations regarding responsiveness during off-hours, with some requiring a 60 min response for urgent matters until 9 PM during the work week (for positions responsible for others' safety, for example), while others require email be checked only once a day during non-work days, with responses expected for critical matters. Another alternative is the strict disconnection of *all* after-hours electronic communication, or at least the assignment of boundaries around use (e.g., no weekends) at some companies such as McDonalds. In a program dubbed "Dublin Goes Dark," Google had their employees turn in their mobile devices before heading home from work, and those

Table 1 Questions to Consider for After-Hours Electronic Communication

	Organization	Manager (sender)	Employee (receiver)
Is after-hours communication appropriate?	• Establish clear policy for after-hour electronic communications • Consider ramifications of a ban on after-hours electronic communications (positive and negative)	• Reflect on how frequently after-hours communications are sent • Decide whether this communication can wait • Think about whether there is potential for the communication to be misinterpreted	• Communicate with others, including supervisor, on preferences for after-hour communication • Set boundaries (e.g., temporal) when possible to avoid being compulsively connected • Be purposeful in disconnecting from work as much as allowed by organizational policy and culture
How will after-hours communication be received?	• Train supervisors and employees on effective communication within messages and best mediums to communicate • Provide guidelines on use of communication features to maximize communication effectiveness such as salutations, capitalization, response time, and even emoticons • Assess group/departmental and profession/industry norms around after-hours communication	• Use subject line to clarify purpose of communication and whether it needs to be read after-hours • Frame communication as positively as possible • Be clear about whether action is required by other party, and, if so, when • Be mindful of message length; longer messages are more taxing on the receiver	• Do not overreact to (or "read too much into") electronic communication messages • Seek clarification if unsure about whether action is required
How can the potential negative impact of after-hours communication be minimized?	• Conduct formal on-boarding and regular training for employees on after-hours communications policies and expectations • Conduct periodic audits of electronic communications and establish system for addressing policy violations • Provide HR legal guidance to managers regarding inappropriate electronic communications	• Consider nature of relationship with receiver • Seek out and consider the preferences of the receiver • If after-hours action is required, be clear about expectations and why; consider compensation for additional work hours for exempt employees and ensure appropriate compensation for non-exempt employees.	• Be mindful of negative emotional responses to after-hours communications and resolve them before reengaging in non-work activities • Consider impact on non-work partner and others who may be impacted by after-hours work communication

employees reported more blissful and stress-free nights. At minimum, establishing clear expectations for sending and receiving electronic communication would be particularly valuable for employees who prefer to segment their work and life domains and/or for those who find it difficult to disconnect from work. Further, organizations should give careful consideration to the *types* of electronic communication that are appropriate. For example, should text messages be reserved for particularly time-sensitive, urgent communication after hours? Receiving routine work correspondence on one's personal cell phone is becoming more and more commonplace, yet it can be a particularly cumbersome and invasive communication tool for some work matters. Relatedly, should the use of social media to communicate work-related information after hours be strictly off-limits (e.g., messaging through Facebook or Linkedin)? Anecdotally, we know of work situations where co-workers and supervisors

have used such media to communicate work-related information, even when such communication is not invited by the recipient, per se. Similarly, uninvited information may be communicated via group emails or group texts to a work team or unit after-hours. Once such a policy is created, period audits should be conducted to ensure that the policy is, in fact, being consistently followed.

Principle 3: Consider the Sender

The structural relationship of the sender relative to the recipient will affect how the communication is viewed with respect to affect and time. That is, before sending an electronic message during non-working hours, the sender should ask himself or herself — What is my "stimulus value" to this recipient? Do I have control over his or her continued employment or other rewards? While a clearly positive email from a

supervisor would likely have a particularly positive effect on the recipient's reaction, an ambiguous or negative email/text from a supervisor or manager would likely elicit a negative reaction. Here, we urge supervisors and managers to err on the side of caution. Even under the best of circumstances, with the strongest of supervisor/supervisee relationships, a vague or ambiguous message during non-work hours may cause concern on the part of the recipient. Relatedly, a communication from a supervisor that demands a response may be perceived as requiring more response time just by the nature of the relationship between the sender and receiver. Of course, receiving a communication from a perceived agent of the supervisor (i.e., his or her assistant), such as "your supervisor would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience" may elicit a similarly negative response. Alternately, a particularly valued employee can elicit a similar response from his or her supervisor or manager. We know of one supervisor who panics whenever he or she receives a request to meet from a valued employee — often assuming the employee is planning to leave the organization.

Principle 4: Consider the Message

As the proliferation of communication technology has dramatically increased the pace of work, one important consideration to make before sending and/or receiving electronic communications during non-working hours is whether the content of the message is better suited for face-to-face communication and/or discussion during regular work hours. Although we noted the need for training and policy in this area, if an organization does not have a policy/protocol or is unable to reach consensus with respect to accepted norms, it is up to the sender to carefully discern whether the communication would likely be viewed negatively or whether it is sensitive in some way. Learning that a proposal (in which one has invested a considerable amount of time and effort) has been rejected may not have substantial employment consequences for the recipient, but receiving it during non-work time may make it linger even longer than it otherwise would during work hours. Indeed, negative information is already weighted greater than positive information. Unpleasant news can take on larger significance during non-work hours as there is more time for rumination and less time or opportunity to take action. Terminations should not be given on Fridays (as terminated employees are likely to have stronger reactions by ruminating over the weekend), so too should managers be judicious in sharing other negative information during off-work hours.

Principle 5: Consider the Individual

Individuals who prefer to keep their work lives separate from their personal lives (segmentors) tend to have a stronger reaction to their personal lives being interrupted by work-related concerns. Managers are advised to learn about employees' preferences for the separation of work and personal life, and, where feasible, take those differences into account when considering communicating during non-work hours. When it is not possible to honor varying preferences with respect to work—nonwork segmentation/integration, preferences with respect to the type of technology used (e.g., email vs. text) might serve to minimize potential negative reactions, or at minimum, enhance control over the boundary between work and non-work time.

Relatedly, although as individuals, we may not really change whether we are a "segmentor" or "integrator," it is important for job seekers to consider the "after hours" communication culture of the company for which they are wishing to work. Of course, managers can use after hours communication to their advantage and make concerted efforts to praise employees for a job well done after hours because it is viewed positively by employees and can put them in a positive mood at night. At a minimum, open communication between employees, managers, and other team members is important so that all are aware of specific preferences as well as personal demands/situations, mitigating misunderstandings about what is deemed appropriate versus disrupting. As an example, one of the authors shared with a supervisor that receiving texts or cell phone calls during off work hours made the author react strongly (and negatively!), but an email would be okay during off hours because the author would choose when (or where) to check emails during off hours. Thus, even different mediums for after-hours communication (i.e., cell phone, text, email, instant messaging) may be more or less desirable depending upon employee preferences.

Principle 6: Consider the Timing and Context

Another important consideration is time and context. With respect to time, the sender should give careful consideration to how much time the communication is likely to require in terms of both reading (and comprehending) as well as in responding to the request. Sending a link to "an interesting article that might help with your presentation" at 10:00 the night before an important early morning presentation may cause the recipient to spend a considerable amount of time (that is clearly already limited). You better be sure it is a great article! Alternately, sending a text to a recipient asking for information that is readily accessible (the name of an important client's spouse) to the recipient, may not be viewed as burdensome. Another consideration with timing is whether the motivation for communicating the information during off-hours is to get it "off your desk" or to request necessary, immediate attention. This recommendation might seem counter-intuitive to managers and supervisors who are trying to finish up items at the end of the regular work week (or Saturday). If one knows, however, that his or her employees would likely view such a communication as a request to begin working on it, then it would be better to save the correspondence (or put it on a delay timer) for regular work hours.

Another key consideration is the current context in the organization. Businesses going through restructuring or facing other sensitive situations, such as strained management—employee relations or public scrutiny for legal or ethical issues, would be well-advised to minimize communications that might be perceived as intrusions. Recovery time during non-work hours may be particularly valuable during more turbulent times. Managers must remember that electronic communications can almost always be saved and retrieved. Just as organizations are painstakingly

careful in the language they use for employee handbooks and technical manuals, electronic communications are also a type of explicit written communication that may conceivably be used against the organization from a legal standpoint.

Principle 7: Embrace the Benefits of After-Hours Communication When Appropriate

The implied catalyst of increased after-hours electronic communication has been that it tears down physical boundaries and helps increase the continuous flow of workplace communications. Certainly, this is valuable for businesses and in jobs that cross time zones, particularly in ones that engage in the global arena. Managing or engaging in global virtual teams is more feasible through such technologies where "after-hours" for one employee may be within the traditional temporal work boundaries for others. In regards to email communication after hours, managers can perhaps use this to their advantage for performance management and give praise and positive feedback to employees at all times of the day or night. Further, mangers may be wise to take note that after-hours face-to-face communications can now occur just as easily as written communication can due to the ubiquitous use of programs/applications such as Skype and Apple FaceTime. Thus, employees should weigh the cost and benefits of communicating via email or text or instant messaging versus communicating electronically face-to-face, as both mediums may be equally intrusive but electronic face-to-face communication is less susceptible to misinterpretation.

CONCLUSION

We sought to highlight our research findings on "after-hours" electronic communication. This research has offered insights on both the upside and downside of connectivity to work, providing practical guidance for organizations, managers, and individual employees to most effectively manage after-hours electronic communication and the blurring of boundaries that has become commonplace with advances in communication technologies. As workplaces move forward with further advances in communication technologies, practice-oriented research in the area of "after hours" work communications will continue to prosper — hopefully providing further understanding that will enable employees to most effectively manage the work-life interface.

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