



Escaping inbox captivity: Managing technology for better employee well-being

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Overview



- 1** Understanding the prevalence, assessment, and costs of inbox captivity
- 2** Identifying problems with adopting disconnection policies
- 3** Diagnosing sources of inbox captivity issues for better solutions

Plugged in at work...



30%

Continuously have email open while working

58%

Typically respond within one hour

75%

Check their work emails on off days

...and at home



23%

Send work emails after midnight

59%

Receive emails after work from coworkers

70%

Check email after 6pm

Does high connectivity necessarily equal inbox captivity?

Need to directly assess negative psychological experience
of the “pressure” to stay connected

Assessing the pressure to stay connected

Workplace telepressure

Refers to a preoccupation with and urge to respond quickly to work-related messages

Assessed via a 6-item self-report measure



Why we experience telepressure

- Response expectations from organization and workgroup and technology overload
- Impression management, need to belong, and fear of missing out

When using message-based technology for work purposes...

1. It's hard for me to focus on other things when I receive a message from someone
2. I can concentrate better on other tasks once I've responded to my messages
3. I can't stop thinking about a message until I've responded
4. I feel a strong need to respond to others immediately
5. I have an overwhelming feeling to respond right at that moment when I receive a request from someone
6. It's difficult for me to resist responding to a message right away

Response options:

(1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree

Costs of the felt pressure to stay connected

Well-being costs of workplace telepressure

Predicts higher burnout, poorer sleep quality, more health-related absenteeism and presenteeism (working while sick), and lower work-life balance



Why it affects well-being

- Work recovery – Disrupts needed mental breaks and sufficient leisure time
- Controlled motivation – Represents felt obligation (have to) rather than desire



The growing urge to pull the plug

Survey results from over 300 U. S. - based and multi-national companies

21% reported having formal policies regarding technology use outside of work hours

37% said they were somewhat likely or very likely to adopt policies within the next 1 – 3 years to limit technology use outside of work hours



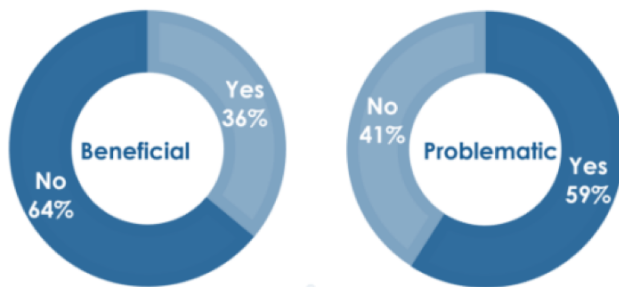
Are policies a good solution for reducing workplace telepressure?

Disconnection policies may not be desired or effective
for addressing the core problem

The problem with disconnection policies

Perceived cost-benefit tradeoffs

Among employees **WITHOUT** a disconnection policy, the majority reported that a formal policy would not be beneficial to them and would pose more problems



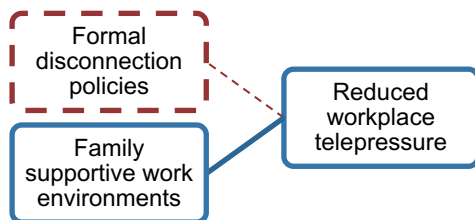
Survey of U.S. employees across diverse occupations (N = 482)



The problem with disconnection policies

Policies not linked to workplace telepressure

The pressure to stay connected is best reduced by family-supportive work environments



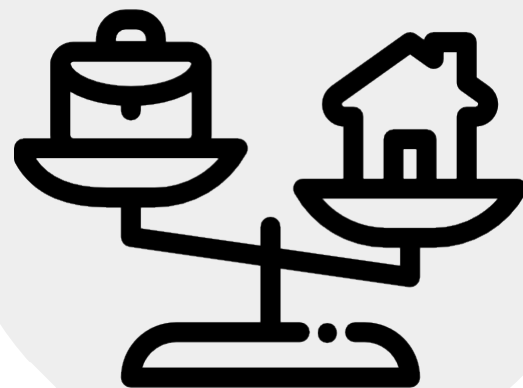
Survey of U.S. employees across diverse occupations (N = 482)

"The ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day"

"It is assumed that the most productive employees are those who put their work before their family life"

"Expressing involvement and interest in nonwork matters is viewed as healthy"

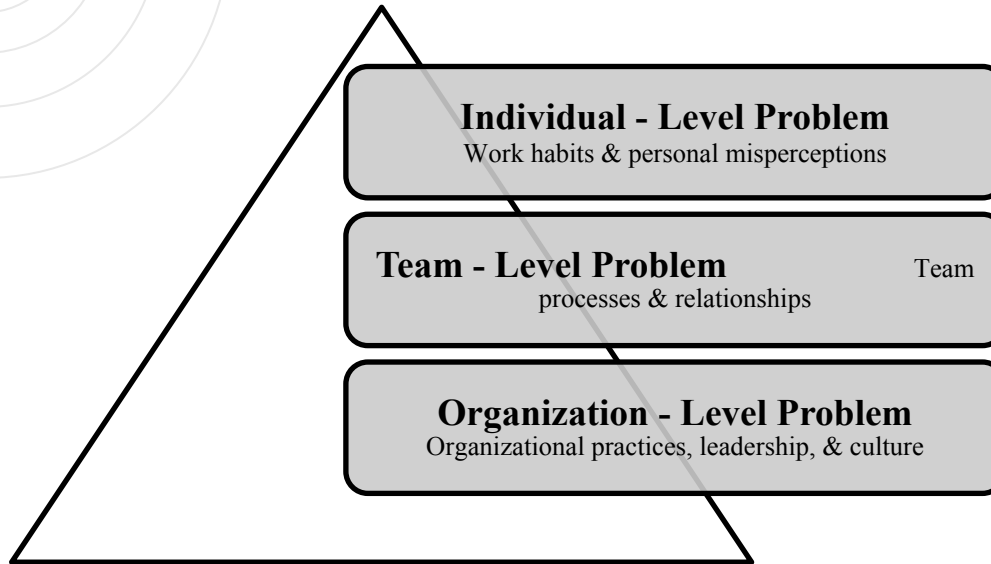
"Employees are given ample opportunity to perform both their job and their personal responsibilities well"



Is inbox captivity the core problem or merely a symptom?

Could be an individual problem...or just a side-effect of
other team / organization issues

Diagnosis considerations



Identifying the signs

Individual

Behavior limited to specific employees or supervisors

Why?

- Expectation misconceptions
- Impression management
- Poor time management

Team

Behavior limited to specific work group processes and relationships

Why?

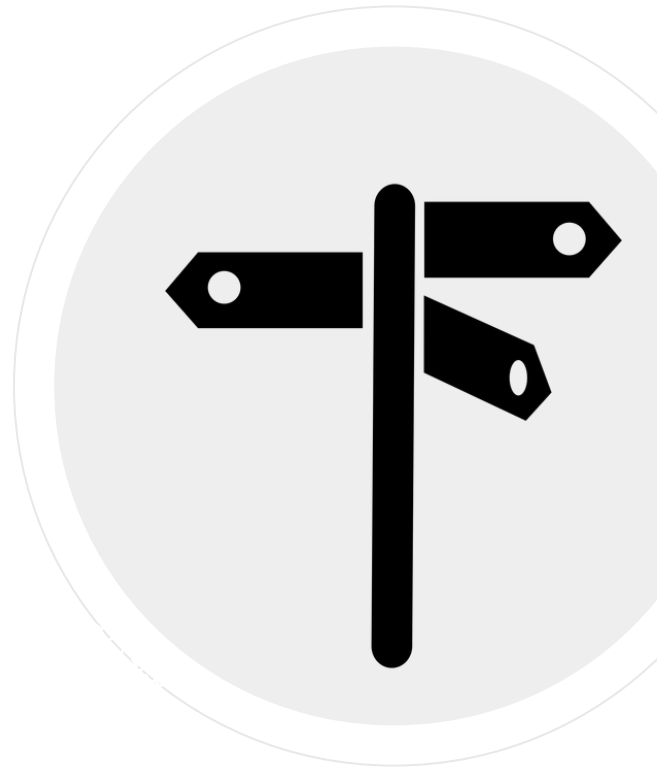
- Unpredictable schedules
- Dysfunctional work processes (bottlenecking)
- Miscommunication / medium misuse

Organization

Behavior present throughout most org members and leadership

Why?

- Culture prioritizes org outcomes over employee well-being
- Gap between stated policies and informal practices



Individual solutions

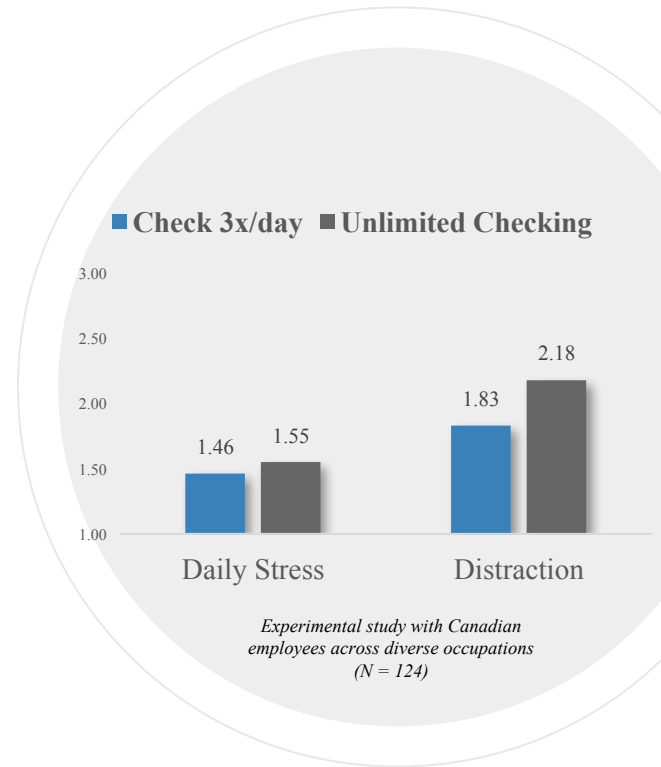
Batch email checking and nix notifications

Limiting email checking to 3x per work day and turning off notifications significantly lowered daily stress levels and reduced perceived distractions



Why it works – better self-regulation

Shifts email checking / responding to an intentional (rather than reactive) strategy, which helps with planning and prioritization



Team solutions

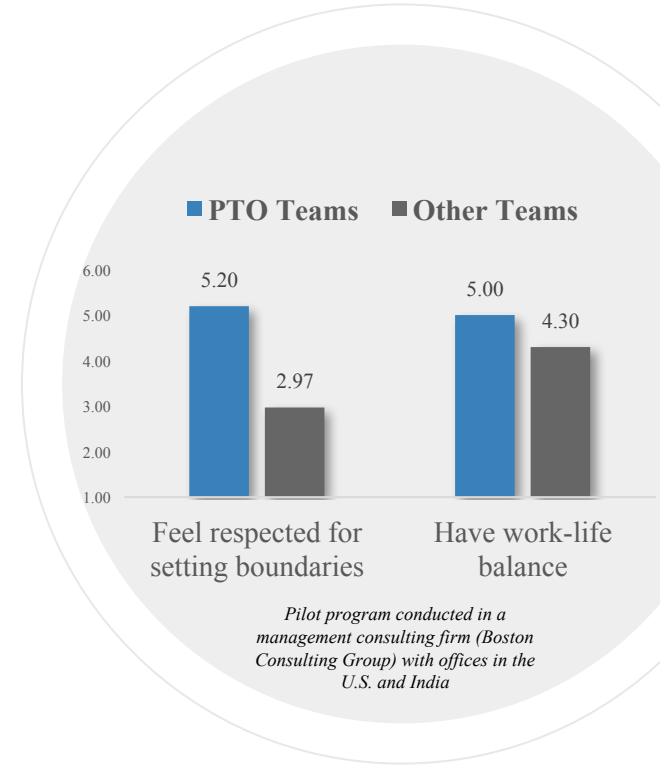
Predictable time off (PTO)

PTO teams were significantly more likely to report that they feel respected for setting boundaries and have better work-life balance than other teams



Why it works – clarifies expectations

Alters team-level expectations about what a good worker SHOULD do and what other people are ACTUALLY doing



Team solutions

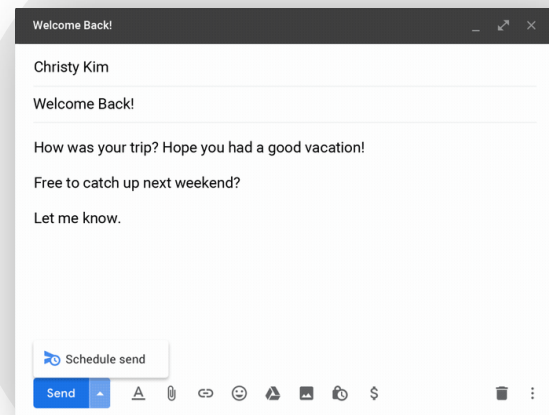
The DELAYED scheduled send tool

Employees working nontraditional hours can schedule emails to avoid others receiving communications during evenings or weekends



Why it should work – maintaining control

Allows individual workers control over their own responses to emails without prompting the urge for others to respond (telepressure) in the team



Team solutions

The EFFECTIVE vacation responder

Message re-directs people to information for urgent issues and communicates response expectations for non-urgent issues



Why it should work – maintaining relationships

Allows individual employees to feel less guilty about disconnecting because issues will be addressed while they are gone

I heard winter was coming, so I decided to go to [WARM PLACE]. I'll be sipping cocktails on the beach until mm/dd and will not be checking email. Stay warm!

Hate to break it to you, but I'm actually on vacation until mm/dd and will not be checking emails. I'm sure you probably don't want to hear this since you're working yourself, so here's a cat video to cheer you up. I'll be back from my trip on [DAY]. Enjoy your week!

BAD NEWS: I'm out of the office on vacation until mm/dd. I will be responding to all emails when I return.

GOOD NEWS: My colleague [NAME] has graciously offered to stay behind and cover my work. He/She is basically a superhero. If your request is urgent, you can contact him/her at [EMAIL].

Have a great week!

Source - [7 Examples of Out of Office Vacation Responder Messages](#)

Team solutions

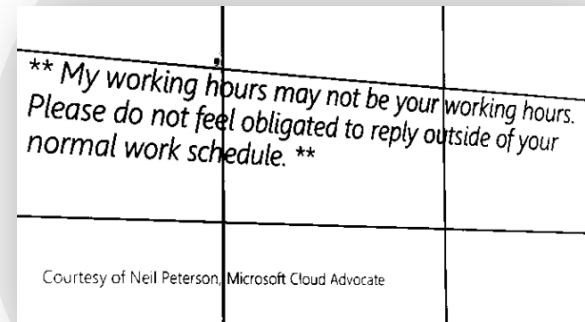
The INFORMATIVE email signature

Communicates information about when employees will typically read and respond to email or expectations about others' responses



Why it should work – communicating boundaries and predictability

Allows for regular / clear communication of response expectations so team members can anticipate and respect each others' schedule




See more email etiquette and expectations tips [at this link](#)

Organizational solutions

Promoting a psychologically health workplace

- Encouraging employee involvement
- Valuing work-life balance
- Opportunities for growth & development
- Promoting employee recognition
- Attention to health and safety concerns



Is Your Company a
Psychologically
Healthy Workplace?

Organizational solutions

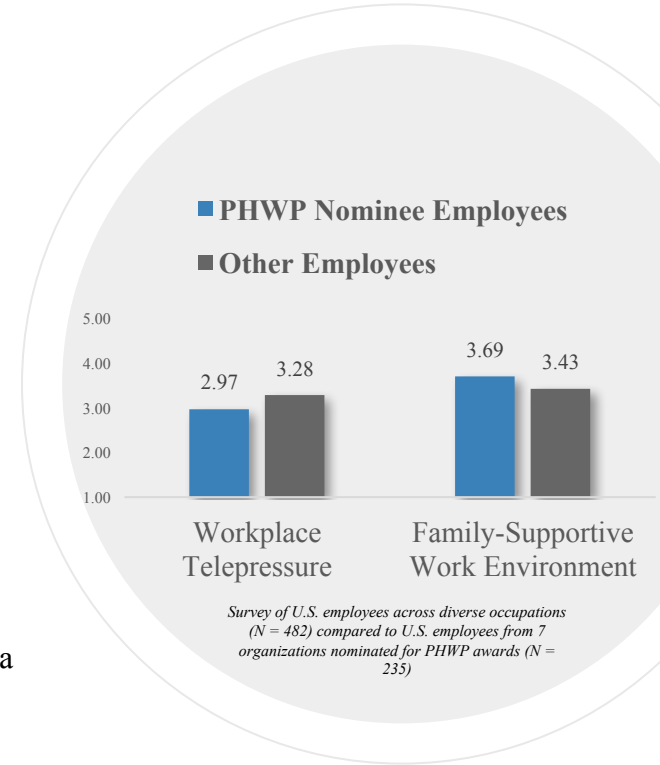
Psychologically healthy workplace benefits

Employees from organizations that were nominated for a PHWP award had significantly lower reports of workplace telepressure and higher reports of family-supportive work environments



Why it works – feeling supported

Employees interpret practices and supervisor behaviors as a way of showing the organization cares about their well-being (or not)



Summary – Escaping inbox captivity

Directly assess employee perceptions of inbox captivity

- Is there a connection = captivity assumption?
- Do people actually feel telepressure?
- Are there psychological costs?

Resist automatic adoption of disconnection policies

- Will the policy support or limit control?
- Will the policy actually reduce some well-being benefits?
- Will the policy be consistently enforced?

Diagnose & address actual source(s) of inbox captivity

- Individual-level training solutions?
- Team-level changes in work processes?
- Organization-level practice or cultural interventions?



Thank You!

To stay connected...

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