

Stumbling over wireless internet – towards digital well-being for employees

Elfi Baillien (KU Leuven)

In recent decades, workplaces have undergone a significant digital transformation, marked by the widespread adoption of technologies like mobile devices, enterprise social networks, and productivity suites. These tools aim to enhance communication, collaboration, and overall productivity. The Covid-19 pandemic further accelerated the trend towards flexible, remote work arrangements, solidifying the "anyplace-anytime" work context.

However, alongside the benefits, concerns about the negative impacts of excessive digital use have emerged, including addiction, stress, and burnout. The paradoxical effects of digital technologies are evident in the i-paradox triad, which illustrates their diffuse impact on social connection, autonomy, and productivity. While digital tools enable swift communication, they can also lead to superficial social interactions and role conflicts. Similarly, while providing flexibility, they may contribute to overload and blurred work-life boundaries.

In response to these challenges, European countries have emphasized the employee's right to disconnect from digital devices outside of working hours. Digital disconnection, defined as a deliberate non-use of devices or platforms, may help reinforce boundaries between work and personal life. However, our research identified three types of digital disconnection employees adhere to when managing their digital technologies: disconnecting from work-related ICTs outside work, from private ICTs during work, and limiting the use of work-related ICTs during work. These strategies encompass technology-oriented and communication-oriented approaches, as well as time and task management strategies. Disconnection is thus not only a matter of what employees do after work but also during work.

Moreover, achieving digital well-being goes beyond mere disconnection. It requires finding a balance where the benefits of digital connectivity are maximized while minimizing potential harms, reaching a status of 'digital well-being'. Our research revealed that employees aim for such well-being by employing disconnection actions at certain times and in certain ways. This is based on external aspects - existing norms, workload, organizational aspects, and personal situation – and internal reasons - work ethics, self-discipline, implicit theories, habits, and digital skills. Digital well-being is then manifested in individual benefits (flexibility, efficiency, productivity) and social benefits (social cohesion and networking) while reducing individual harm (role interference, disrupted focus, mental and physical load) and reducing strain on interpersonal relationships.

Organizations play a vital role in promoting digital well-being by implementing policies that support disconnection, for example, by managing workload expectations and fostering a culture that values downtime. Training programs can help employees develop healthier ICT habits, while managers can lead by example and establish team-level agreements to address implicit beliefs about digital connectivity. It is essential to approach 'hard' disconnection policies cautiously, considering individual differences and respecting employees' autonomy. Instead, fostering an environment that encourages

healthy boundary management and recognizes individual choices is crucial for promoting digital well-being in the workplace.

By acknowledging the complexities of digital connectivity and implementing strategies that support both individual and organizational needs, companies can create a work environment where technology enhances productivity and well-being in equal measure.