

《At home, switching off from work》

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A light glow emits from the other side of the bed. I look to see my wife's head silhouetted against a smartphone screen. The clock reads 2:30 am. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm just replying to messages from my colleagues," she replies, clacking away on the tiny keyboard on her screen. She says it like it will only take a minute, but I know she'll still be there in an hour.

This happens all too often, and it's why I've ended up doing something I never thought I'd do – agree with the French.

Our Gallic cousins introduced new legislation in May that bans companies from sending work-related emails to employees after 6 pm. This is part of controversial revisions to the country's labor laws, which for years have set a maximum 35-hour working week.

With the emergence of smartphones and other mobile devices, we're constantly connected. However, for some people, it has become increasingly hard to switch off, figuratively and literally.

In my experience, emails are not the problem; it's instant-messaging apps like WeChat and WhatsApp that are the bigger nuisance. For chatting with family and friends for free, especially those overseas, they are a godsend. But the habit in China is to add virtually everyone you meet on WeChat, including your boss and colleagues that you wouldn't otherwise fraternize with away from work.

Before mobile devices gave us 24-hour access, if someone remembered late at night or on the weekend that they needed to talk to a co-worker about something, they'd make a note to ask them next time at the office; if it was urgent, they'd pick up the phone and call. Now, people just fire off an instant message and expect an equally speedy response.

Often, the work-related inquiries I find my wife replying to in the dead of night are ones that could easily wait until morning. But such is her personality that she feels compelled to respond straight away (strange considering that I regularly have to ask her something three times before she answers).

Of course, I can't stop her colleagues sending after-hours messages via email or WeChat, nor can I order her to ignore them. But there must be a cut-off point, and employees need to protect against their work taking over their private lives.

Studies show that work-related stress is on the increase worldwide. In China, a poll by a recruitment company in 2011 found that 70 percent of 5,000 workers complained of heavy pressure. Another by the Chinese Medical Doctors' Association warned that 60 percent of white-collar workers are at risk of stress-related illnesses.

In explaining why France has revised the law, Benoit Hamon, a former education minister, told the BBC: “Employees physically leave the office, but they do not leave their work. They remain attached by a kind of electronic leash, like a dog. The texts, the messages, the emails – they colonize the life of the individual to the point where he or she eventually breaks down.”

Bravo and bon chance.

