



# 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

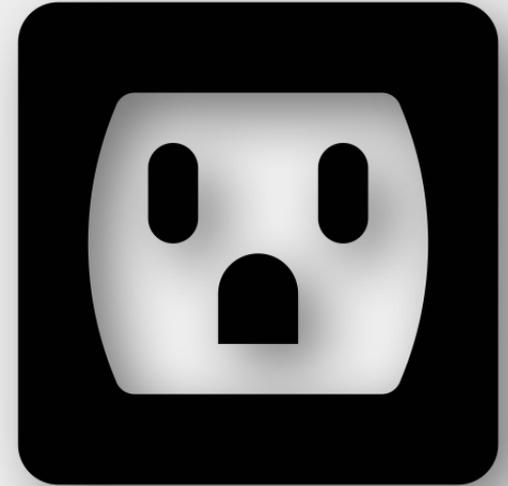


# The growing urge to pull the plug

**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



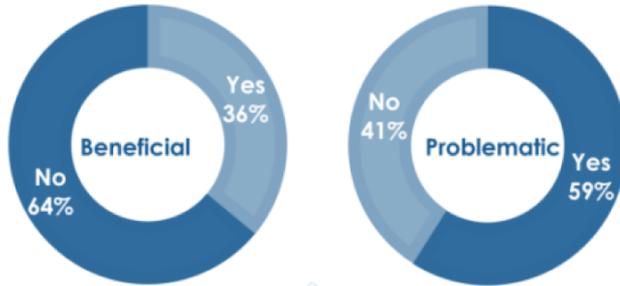
**Are policies a good  
solution for reducing  
workplace  
telepressure?**

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



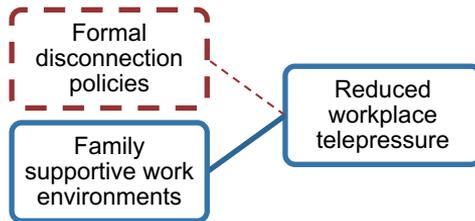
*Survey of U.S. employees across diverse occupations (N = 482)*



# The problem with disconnection policies

## Policies not linked to workplace telepressure

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



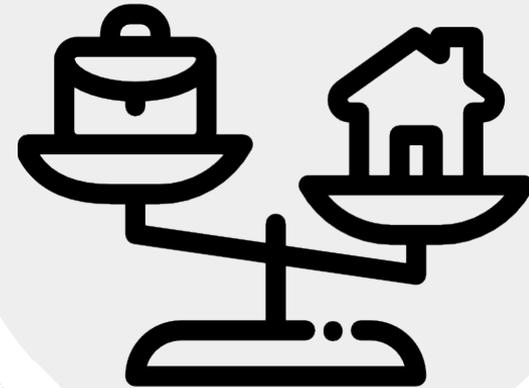
*Survey of U.S. employees across diverse occupations (N = 482)*

"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"

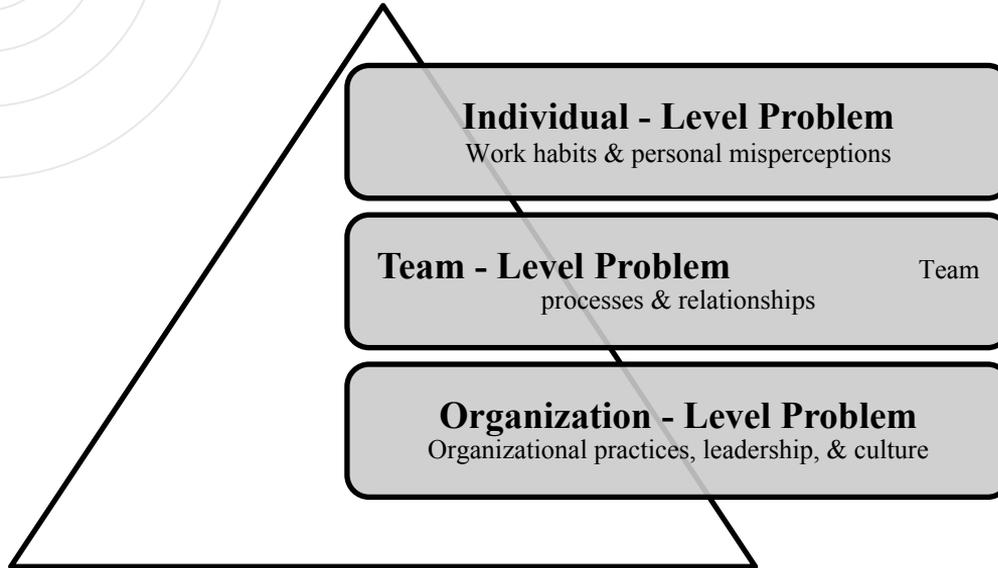
"Employees are given ample opportunity to perform both their job and their personal responsibilities well"



**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?

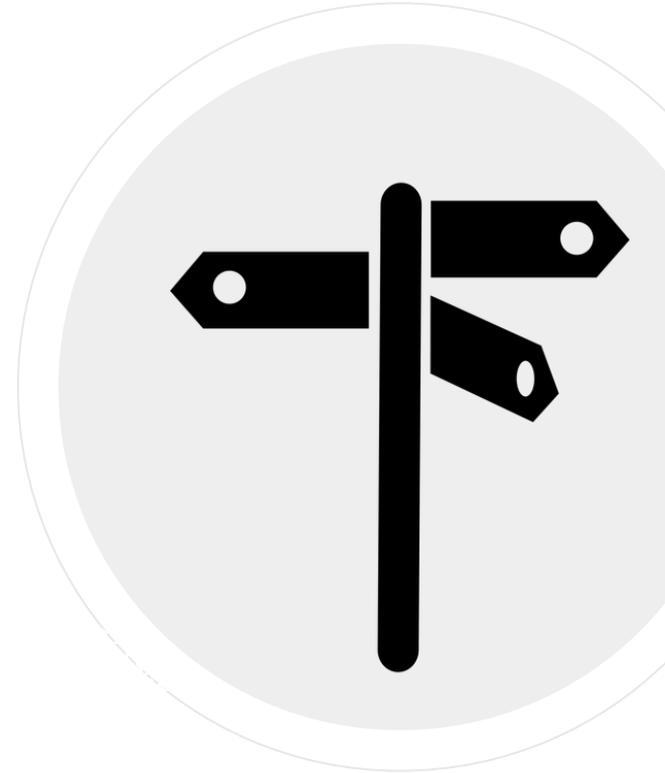
- Unpredictable schedules
- Dysfunctional work processes (bottlenecking)
- Miscommunication / medium misuse

## 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

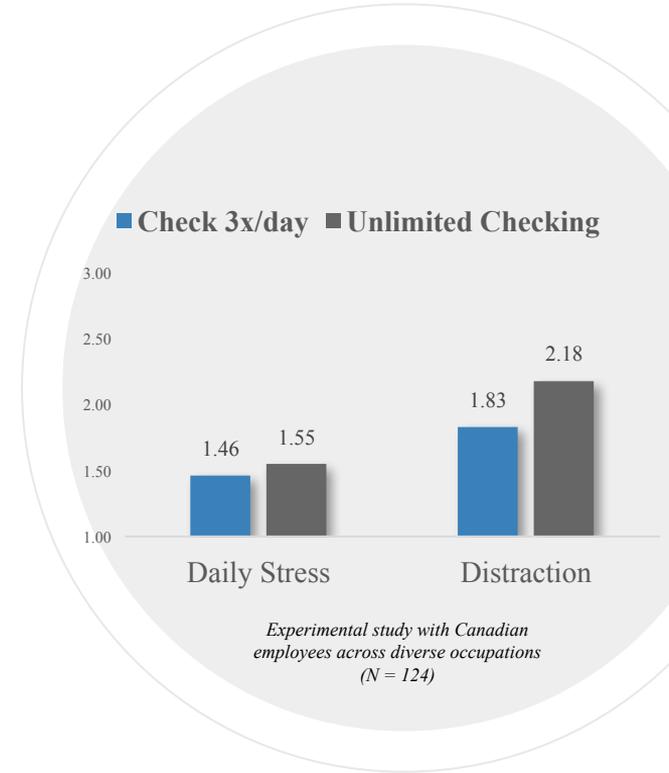
## Batch email checking and nix notifications

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

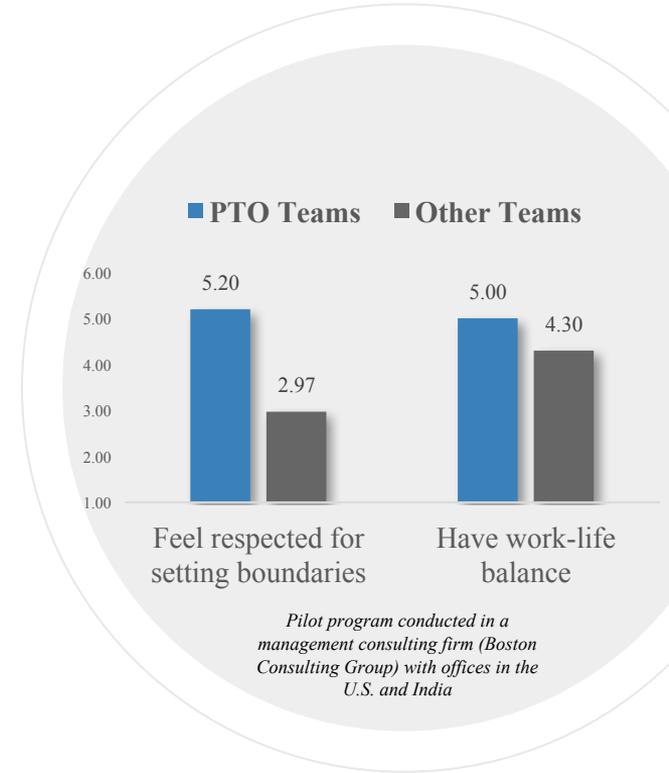
## Predictable time off (PTO)

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

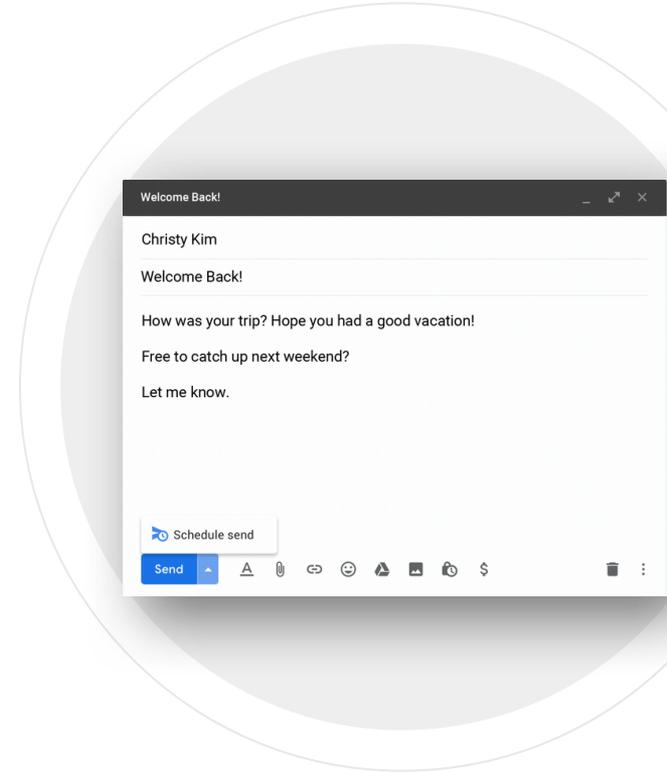
## The DELAYED scheduled send tool

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

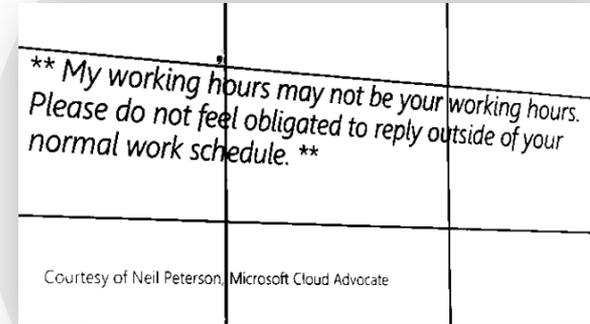
## The INFORMATIVE email signature

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



# Organizational solutions

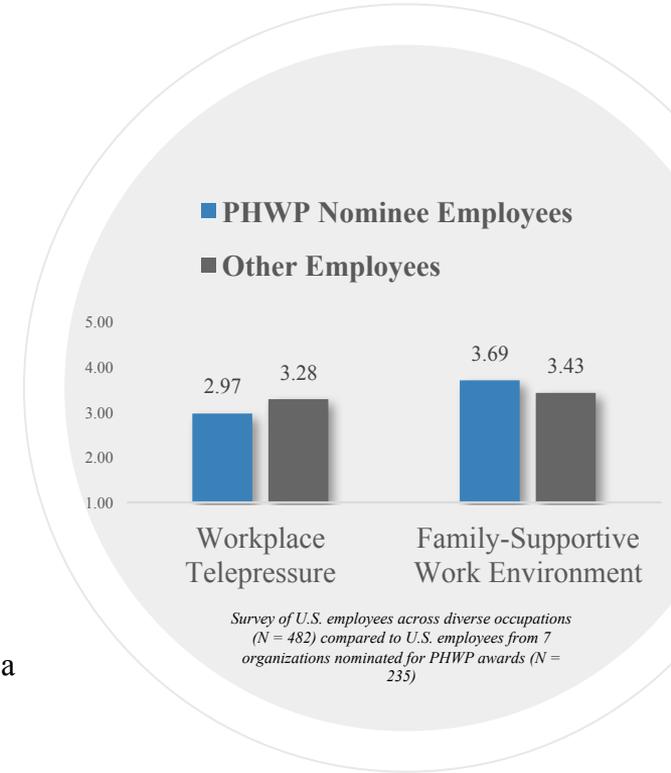
## Psychologically healthy workplace benefits

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...*

- Add me on LinkedIn  
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