

Boundary Blurring and Recovery Difficulty in After-Hours Work Messaging

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Abstract: After-hours work messaging has become a common part of everyday employment, yet its effects are not limited to the time spent reading or replying to messages. Work-related contact during evenings, weekends, and leave periods can weaken the boundary between work and private life and keep employees mentally connected to unfinished tasks. This paper examines how after-hours messaging creates recovery difficulty through response pressure, constant availability, repeated attention shifts, and the expectation that employees should remain reachable. It argues that even brief or unanswered messages may interfere with psychological detachment when employees continue to monitor their phones or anticipate further demands. The discussion also considers how job position, managerial practice, workload, and personal boundary preferences shape employees' experiences. Three cases are used to support the analysis: the Beijing "invisible overtime" case, the French *Rentokil Initial* case, and Volkswagen's restriction on after-hours email delivery. Together, they show that the problem involves actual work, the obligation to remain available, and the organizational design of communication systems. The paper maintains that effective boundary protection requires clearer response rules, limited expectations of availability, and greater organizational responsibility for protecting non-work time.

Keywords: after-hours work messaging; boundary blurring; psychological detachment; recovery difficulty; workplace availability; digital communication

1. Introduction

Work does not always end when employees leave the workplace. Emails, instant messages, project platforms, and workplace group chats allow communication to continue during evenings,

weekends, and holidays. A manager may ask about the next day's meeting, a colleague may request a file, or a client may expect a quick reply. Each message may take only a short time to handle, but repeated contact can occupy more of an employee's personal time than the visible task itself suggests.

The issue is not simply the number of messages sent after work. More important is the continuing connection to work that these messages create. Employees may feel the need to check their phones, reply quickly, or remain alert in case a request arrives. Formal working hours may have ended, yet work continues to influence attention and the use of private time.

This condition can be understood as boundary blurring. Work and personal life are rarely separated completely, and some employees value the freedom to manage tasks across different times and places. The problem begins when this flexibility becomes an informal expectation. If constant availability is treated as evidence of responsibility, employees may lose control over when they enter and leave the work role. Personal time then becomes open to interruption even when no formal overtime has been arranged.

Boundary blurring also affects recovery. Employees need periods in which work no longer directs their attention or emotional state. This temporary separation is often described as psychological detachment. After-hours messages can weaken it by bringing unfinished tasks, workplace relationships, or future demands back into mind. A short notification may require no immediate action but can still make it difficult for the employee to disengage from work.

Messaging-based work is harder to identify than traditional overtime. It is often fragmented, completed through personal devices, and mixed with ordinary private activities. Because each exchange appears minor, employers may view it as voluntary or insignificant. Employees, however, may feel that a response is necessary even when no direct order has been given. The difference between optional communication and expected availability is often shaped by workplace habits rather than written rules.

Several legal and organizational cases illustrate different parts of this problem. The Beijing “invisible overtime” case concerned regular work performed through messaging applications outside formal hours and showed that repeated digital

communication may constitute actual labor. The French *Rentokil Initial* case focused on the burden of remaining reachable even when no task was being performed at a particular moment. Volkswagen’s restriction on after-hours email delivery provides a different example, showing how an organization may limit contact through technical settings rather than leaving employees to protect their own boundaries.

This paper examines how after-hours work messaging weakens the boundary between work and personal life and makes recovery more difficult. It does not argue that all communication outside working hours should be prohibited. Some contact may be necessary in emergencies, shift work, international teams, or jobs with unusual schedules. The main concern is the routine use of after-hours messaging and the expectation that employees should remain available. The discussion considers how work communication enters personal time, how response pressure develops, why psychological recovery becomes difficult, and which personal and organizational conditions shape these effects. It also examines how clearer communication rules and greater organizational responsibility may protect non-work time without preventing necessary contact.

2. The Extension of Work Communication into Personal Time

The boundary between work and personal life was once supported by visible conditions. Employees worked in a particular place, followed a set schedule, and usually stopped handling tasks after leaving the workplace. This separation was never complete, especially for managers, professionals, and workers with emergency duties. Still, leaving the office normally marked a change in role (Ashforth et al., 2000). Mobile communication has weakened that signal. An employee may be physically at home while continuing to receive instructions, answer clients, correct documents, or follow updates in a workplace group chat.

After-hours messaging rarely enters private life as a clearly announced extension of the working day. It

usually appears through small requests. A supervisor asks whether a file has been updated. A colleague sends a question that seems easy to answer. A client leaves several messages in a group chat. Each act may take only a few minutes, so the intrusion appears minor. Yet a message can interrupt dinner, stop a conversation, or return the employee's attention to a problem that had already been left behind.

Messaging also divides personal time into short and uncertain periods. An employee checks a notification, searches for a document, sends a reply, and returns to a private activity. Another message may arrive later. The total time spent typing may be limited, but the evening is no longer fully available for rest. Work is scattered across the period rather than completed in one continuous session.

The use of the same device for work and private communication makes separation more difficult. Employees may open an application to speak with family or friends and see workplace groups, client messages, or notices from managers on the same screen. Muting a chat may reduce notifications, but it does not remove the messages from view. Turning off the phone may also cut the employee off from ordinary social contact. The worker is left to maintain a boundary inside a device that carries both roles.

Private locations can also become temporary workplaces. An employee may answer a customer from the living room or edit a document while travelling. These acts may be brief, but repeated use of personal spaces for work weakens the distinction between being at work and being off work. This is one reason messaging-based labor is difficult to assess through traditional ideas of overtime. There may be no separate workplace, no continuous period of work, and no direct order to remain at a desk.

The Beijing "invisible overtime" case shows why such activities cannot always be dismissed as casual communication. The employee, who worked in product operations, submitted records showing that she regularly communicated with clients and colleagues through WeChat and DingTalk during

evenings and rest days. The employer argued that answering occasional questions after work did not amount to overtime. The Beijing Third Intermediate People's Court distinguished temporary, minor exchanges from communication involving substantive labor. It found that part of the employee's after-hours activity was periodic, relatively fixed, and connected to the employer's management arrangements. The court treated this work as overtime and awarded RMB 30,000 in compensation (Zhang, 2024).

The value of the case lies in the way digital work was assessed. The court did not treat every message sent after working hours as overtime, but it also rejected the view that online communication was too informal to count as work. It considered the content, regularity, and managerial character of the activity. A brief social exchange with a colleague is different from handling clients, arranging duties, or dealing with operational problems. The application used to perform the task does not remove its work-related nature.

A legal finding of overtime, however, captures only part of the boundary problem. Courts normally require evidence of actual labor and some meaningful occupation of time. Boundary intrusion can occur before that threshold is reached. A short message may not support an overtime claim, but it can still break the sense that the working day has ended. An employee who reads an instruction at night may postpone the task until morning, yet the issue has already entered personal time.

Messaging records also provide an incomplete picture of digital labor. A chat history can show when an employee replied, but not how long it took to search for information, consider the response, or return attention to a private activity. Many short replies are not reported because recording several minutes of overtime seems impractical. When such contact becomes routine, employees may gradually reorganize their evenings around work without any formal change to working hours.

Not all after-hours communication is necessarily harmful. Some employees value the freedom to complete tasks at flexible times or prefer to settle a

minor issue before the next working day. The main question is whether they retain control over this arrangement. Chosen flexibility differs from a routine in which employees are expected to remain responsive. The same act of answering a message at home can reflect autonomy in one setting and pressure in another.

The extension of work into personal time usually develops through these small openings rather than through a complete transfer of office work into the home. Personal devices carry workplace conversations, private locations become temporary workspaces, and brief tasks enter periods still labelled as rest. Some activities may be recognised as overtime, as the Beijing case shows. Others remain below that legal threshold while still reducing employees' control over their own time.

3. Availability Expectations and Response Pressure

After-hours communication becomes more demanding when employees believe that messages should be noticed and answered quickly. This expectation may be written into a formal on-call arrangement, but it often develops through ordinary workplace conduct. Managers send messages late, colleagues reply within minutes, and silence in a group chat is visible. Employees learn what counts as an acceptable response by observing these repeated patterns.

Pressure is often strongest when the message gives no clear indication of urgency. A manager may write, "Please look at this," without saying whether the matter can wait until morning. The employee must then interpret the timing, the sender's intention, and the possible cost of delay. A clearly urgent message may be inconvenient, but it is easier to assess. An unclear request leaves the employee to decide whether an unstated deadline exists. This decision is shaped by hierarchy because the sender may influence work assignments, performance evaluations, or future opportunities.

Employees may still feel required to reply when managers say that an immediate answer is unnecessary. Formal permission to wait can be weakened by earlier experience. Workers notice

whether delayed replies are criticised and whether fast responders are treated as more reliable. A manager may also say that a task can wait until morning while continuing to send related questions during the evening. The words permit disconnection, but the wider pattern suggests that the conversation remains open.

Workplace group chats add another source of pressure. Members can see who has acknowledged an instruction, supplied information, or remained silent. Read receipts and online indicators make private decisions about availability visible to others. An employee who would normally leave a late message unanswered may feel uncomfortable when several colleagues have already replied. In this setting, a response does more than transmit information. It also shows attentiveness and confirms that the employee is still present.

Even short replies such as "received," "noted," or "I will handle it" can strengthen the expectation of availability. These messages contain little substantive content, yet they show that the employee is watching the conversation. Once acknowledgement becomes routine, silence may be read as absence or poor cooperation. The employee replies not because the task requires immediate action but because availability itself has become something to display.

This condition is closely related to workplace telepressure, which refers to a preoccupation with and urge to respond quickly to work-related electronic communication (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). Telepressure is not determined only by the number of messages received. One message from a senior manager may create more pressure than several routine messages from colleagues. The important issue is the meaning attached to response time and the consequences employees believe may follow from delay.

Research suggests that telepressure often affects recovery through behaviour. Employees who feel pressure to remain responsive are more likely to check smartphones, read work messages, and send replies during non-working time. These actions keep work active beyond formal hours and make

psychological detachment more difficult (Cambier et al., 2019). The feeling of pressure does not always produce the same outcome, but it becomes more harmful when it repeatedly turns into work-related phone use.

Checking can begin before any message arrives. Employees may unlock a phone to see whether something has been sent, reopen a workplace chat after noticing an increased message count, or look at email before going to sleep. Such behaviour may appear to be a personal habit. In workplaces where late requests are common and slow responses carry social or professional costs, however, checking is also a way of managing uncertainty.

This strategy rarely removes uncertainty for long. An empty inbox may reassure the employee, but it can also encourage another check later. A new message gives the employee something definite to handle while raising further questions. It may be unclear how much work is required, whether another request will follow, or whether colleagues are waiting for an answer. The phone becomes a tool for reducing uncertainty and a source of renewed concern.

Some employees answer immediately because they believe a quick reply will protect the rest of the evening. This may work when after-hours contact is rare. When quick replies become common, senders learn that the employee can usually be reached. A response that solves an immediate problem may strengthen the longer-term expectation of availability. A personal coping choice then becomes part of the workplace communication norm.

Managers do not always intend to create this pressure. A supervisor may send messages at night because that is a convenient time to review work or clear an inbox. The recipient, however, may not know whether the manager's sending time is also the expected response time. Without a clear rule, the employee must interpret each message separately. The burden does not disappear simply because the sender did not consciously demand an answer.

Scheduled delivery can reduce part of this ambiguity. A message prepared at night but delivered the next morning does not enter the

employee's evening. A late message followed by "no need to reply now" is less effective because the employee has already seen the task. The phrase may reduce immediate response pressure, but it does not prevent the message from drawing attention back to work.

The difference between active work and required availability can be seen in the French *Rentokil Initial* case. The employee, a branch director, was included in a procedure for handling emergency calls outside normal working hours. Branch directors' contact details were provided to the company receiving those calls, and they were expected to take suitable action when necessary. They were also required to keep their mobile phones switched on. The employer argued that this arrangement did not amount to formal on-call duty.

In July 2018, the French Court of Cassation rejected the employer's appeal. The employee was not required to remain at a fixed location or stay under the employer's immediate direction. Even so, he had to remain continuously reachable and ready to intervene. This continuing availability supported the finding that he had been placed on call. The underlying judgment awarded more than €60,000 in unpaid on-call compensation (Cour de cassation, Chambre sociale, 2018).

The case should not be read as meaning that every employee carrying a work phone is legally on call. Its relevance is more limited. It shows that readiness can restrict non-working time even when the employee is not actively carrying out a task. The burden cannot be measured only by counting completed calls or messages. A person who must remain reachable may still have to organise private time around the possibility of work.

A similar form of restriction can develop in ordinary workplaces without meeting the legal definition of on-call duty. Employees who expect instructions may keep their phones nearby during meals, avoid activities in which they cannot check messages, or hesitate to make plans that would make an immediate reply difficult. No message needs to arrive for the evening to be shaped by work. The

possibility of contact is enough to influence how the time is used.

This distinction is often missed when organizations assess after-hours work only through visible tasks. They may count how many messages were answered or how long a call lasted. Employees experience a wider period in which they must remain ready to respond. A short exchange can occur within an evening already organised around the need to be reachable. The measurable task is brief, but the surrounding restriction is not.

Hierarchy affects how safely employees can disconnect. Workers in secure positions may feel able to leave routine messages until the next morning. New employees, temporary workers, and those under performance review may be less willing to take that risk. They may also find it harder to judge which requests are genuinely urgent because they do not yet understand the workplace's unwritten rules. Replying to everything appears safer, but the pattern can quickly become expected. Job demands also shape availability pressure. Client-facing employees may worry about losing business, while project workers may fear delaying colleagues. Staff responsible for safety or system failures may need to respond to genuine emergencies. These concerns are not unreasonable. The problem appears when exceptional needs are used to justify routine contact. If ordinary requests are sent through the same channels as urgent matters, employees lose a reliable basis for deciding when they can disconnect.

Constant availability may also be presented as evidence of professional commitment. Employees who reply quickly are praised for being responsible, while the personal circumstances that make quick replies possible receive little attention. When one employee's preferred schedule becomes the informal standard for the group, flexibility turns into a test of dedication.

Employees may then begin comparing their response times. A reply sent within an hour appears slow when colleagues answer in five minutes. Managers do not need to order faster responses. The group gradually creates its own pace. What begins

as cooperation becomes a continuing display of readiness.

Personal preference does not remove this problem. Some employees prefer to integrate work and private life and do not mind answering messages at flexible times. The value of this arrangement still depends on control. Chosen integration differs from a system in which the organization decides when personal time will be opened to work. An employee may willingly complete a task at night but still resent having to monitor a phone throughout the evening.

Clear communication rules can reduce availability pressure, but written policies must match actual management practice. A statement that employees need not reply after hours has little value if immediate responses continue to receive praise or delayed replies attract criticism. Employees learn the real rule from what happens when someone waits until morning. They also notice whether urgent channels are reserved for matters that truly cannot wait.

Availability pressure develops in the space between an ordinary message and a direct instruction. It is sustained by uncertainty, hierarchy, visibility, and repeated habits. Employees may never be formally told to stay online, yet being offline can still feel unsafe. The *Rentokil Initial* case gives this burden a clear legal form because the employee's duty to remain reachable was part of an emergency procedure. In many workplaces, the expectation is less formal. It can still reshape personal time before any substantial task begins.

4. Boundary Blurring and Recovery Difficulties

Recovery does not begin automatically when formal working hours end. An employee may leave the workplace while remaining mentally involved in unfinished tasks, difficult conversations, deadlines, or possible requests. After-hours messaging strengthens this connection because it allows work to enter periods that would otherwise support rest. Psychological detachment is central to recovery. It refers to a temporary mental separation from work during non-working time (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Employees do not need to forget their jobs or avoid every work-related thought. Detachment means that work is no longer directing their attention and emotional state. They can take part in family life, leisure, or sleep without repeatedly returning to workplace concerns.

A message can interrupt this shift. It may require direct action, but even a message that can wait until morning may reactivate the work role. A notification about a meeting, an unfinished document, or a client problem reminds the employee that work remains open. Attention moves back to the task, and it may not return immediately after the phone is put down (Derks et al., 2014).

This mental remainder is easy to overlook. The visible interruption may last only a few minutes, while the employee continues to think about the issue. There may be uncertainty about how to reply, whether the sender will respond again, or what the message means for the following day. Returning to a private activity does not always mean that attention has fully returned.

The difficulty becomes greater when messages arrive at separate points during the evening. One continuous period of overtime has a clearer beginning and end. Several short exchanges can spread work across a much longer period. An employee may confirm a meeting, later send a document, and then receive comments on another task. The total time spent replying may be limited, but personal time is repeatedly reopened to work.

Recovery depends not only on the total amount of free time but also on its continuity. Employees need enough uninterrupted time for work-related activation to decline. A break between two messages may not function as genuine rest when another request is expected. The employee remains partly connected to the previous exchange and alert to what may happen next.

For this reason, the frequency and distribution of messages may matter as much as their duration. Ten minutes of communication spread across an evening can be more disruptive than ten minutes completed at one clear time. Each interruption requires the employee to identify the issue, judge its urgency,

decide whether to reply, and then return to the earlier activity. These repeated transitions place small but continuing demands on attention.

The effort-recovery perspective helps explain this problem. Work requires cognitive, emotional, and sometimes physical effort. Temporary strain is not necessarily harmful when employees have enough time to recover. Non-working periods allow the effects of work demands to decline (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). After-hours communication weakens this process when it continues the original task or recreates the same pressure after formal work has stopped.

A message about an unfinished assignment can restore deadline concerns. A client complaint can bring back emotional tension. A request for clarification may force the employee to recall details that had already been put aside. The person may be physically resting, but the mental processes used during work are active again.

Boundary blurring also changes how employees understand their personal time. Under a clearer boundary, the evening belongs to non-work life unless an unusual event occurs. Under a blurred boundary, personal time is available only until work claims part of it. Employees may choose activities according to whether they can be interrupted. They keep phones nearby, avoid situations in which responding would be difficult, or leave family plans flexible.

This can reduce the quality of leisure even when no message arrives. An employee may complete a personal activity while checking the phone several times. The time is formally free, but it is not fully separate from work. Leisure begins to resemble a waiting period in which the employee remains prepared for possible contact.

Anticipatory attention is important in this setting. Employees respond not only to actual messages but also to the possibility that one may arrive. When after-hours contact is common, a notification sound, an increase in the number of unread messages, or a long period without checking can create concern. The employee may wonder whether something important has been missed. Work remains

psychologically close without any direct instruction being issued.

Unclear urgency adds to the burden. When employees know that routine matters can wait until the next day, they have a clear basis for disconnecting. When urgent and ordinary messages are mixed together, each message must be assessed separately. The employee considers the sender, wording, timing, and recent workplace events. This repeated interpretation requires effort and makes recovery depend on accepting the risk of not checking.

Employees often try to reduce uncertainty by responding quickly. A brief answer may seem like the easiest way to close the issue and protect the rest of the evening. Yet a reply can restart the conversation. It may lead to another question, a request for a document, or a longer discussion. What appears to be a small act of control can open a new period of work.

Postponing the response does not always solve the problem. The employee may decide to reply the next morning but continue thinking about what should be said. An unread message, an unclear instruction, or a comment from a manager can remain mentally active. The employee may rehearse a response or worry about how the delay will be interpreted. No further work is completed, but psychological detachment remains incomplete.

Work-related rumination can develop from this condition. Rumination involves repeated thought about work problems when direct action is no longer possible or useful. After-hours messages can provide new material for these thoughts. A short comment may be interpreted as criticism. A project change may raise concern about future workload. A vague message may leave the employee uncertain about what will happen the next day.

Not every work-related thought is harmful. Employees may reflect on a successful task or develop a useful idea outside working hours. The more difficult form is repetitive thought that is hard to control and does not lead to a clear decision. Written messages can support this pattern because they often lack tone and context. Employees may

reread the same words and assign different meanings to them.

Messages received near bedtime create particular difficulty. The period before sleep is often the last opportunity for work-related activation to decline. A late message may delay bedtime if the employee chooses to complete the task. It may also affect sleep without producing a long period of visible work. A complaint, correction, or unexpected request can increase alertness and bring workplace emotions back into the night.

The use of one device for both work and personal communication makes this harder to avoid. Employees often keep their phones beside the bed for ordinary personal reasons. Work messages are then present in a setting closely connected with sleep. Silencing notifications may reduce interruptions, but some employees continue checking because late communication has become familiar.

Sleep effects may appear as later sleep, repeated waking, or less restful rest. Thoughts triggered by a message can remain after the screen is turned off. A task for the next morning may become larger in the employee's mind during the quiet hours of the night. Reduced sleep then leaves fewer resources for the next working day.

This can create a cycle. Poor recovery makes concentration and emotional control more difficult during normal working hours. Tasks take longer or remain unfinished, increasing the chance that work will continue into the evening. The next recovery period is interrupted again. Because each message appears minor, the pattern may not be recognised as a continuing source of strain.

Emotional recovery is affected as well. Messages carry workplace relationships into the home. A dismissive reply, an unexpected correction, or conflict in a group chat can change the employee's mood for the rest of the evening. Irritation or anxiety may continue after the exchange ends and affect interactions with people who were not involved in the work issue.

Family members may see the employee as physically present but mentally unavailable. A short

message can interrupt a meal, conversation, or shared plan. From the outside, the interruption may appear too small to explain the employee's distraction. The employee, however, may connect the message with workload, hierarchy, job security, or workplace reputation. Repeated interruptions can turn work communication into a source of tension within the household (Becker et al., 2021).

Weekends and annual leave are also affected when no reliable period remains free from contact. Employees may tolerate occasional weekday messages because they expect longer recovery later. When work also enters weekends and holidays, that expectation becomes weaker. A small request during leave may seem reasonable because the employee holds information that others need, but answering also confirms that absence does not fully suspend availability.

The accumulated pattern matters more than a single interruption. Most employees can deal with an occasional urgent message without serious difficulty. The problem arises when routine contact regularly opens recovery time to work and employees cannot predict when responsibility has ended. Repetition changes the meaning of non-working time.

Some employees adapt by lowering their expectations. They stop treating evenings as protected periods and accept interruption as a normal condition of employment. This adjustment may reduce complaints, but it does not necessarily mean that the problem has disappeared. It may show that employees have reorganised their private lives around work contact.

Personal coping methods can provide limited relief. Muting notifications, placing the phone in another room, or setting private response rules may reduce exposure. These measures are harder to maintain when workplace expectations remain unclear or when availability continues to be rewarded. The employee must then defend a boundary that the organization has not clearly accepted.

Recovery requires more than moments in which no message is being answered. Employees need a reasonable expectation that routine work will not

repeatedly return during personal time. Without that expectation, psychological detachment remains uncertain, leisure is fragmented, and recovery depends largely on the employee's ability to resist a communication pattern that keeps work continually within reach.

5. Factors Shaping Employees' Boundary Experiences

After-hours messaging does not affect every employee in the same way. The same message may be treated as a minor interruption by one person and as a serious demand by another. This difference is not simply a matter of personality. It is shaped by employees' boundary preferences, degree of control, job position, workload, family responsibilities, and the communication habits of the workplace.

Some employees prefer to keep work and private life separate. They are more comfortable when working hours, locations, and communication channels are clearly defined. Others accept more integration and may not object to answering a short message at night, especially if they can use working time more flexibly during the day. Neither preference is automatically better. The effect depends on whether the employee has chosen the arrangement or is required to accept it.

Control is therefore more important than preference alone. An employee may normally accept work-life integration but still dislike unpredictable contact. Another may prefer separation but accept occasional communication when the reason is clear. Boundary flexibility is less likely to cause strain when employees can decide when to read messages, whether a task can wait, and how lost personal time will be recovered.

Two employees may perform the same task at 9:00 p.m. but experience it differently. One may choose to answer and start work later the next morning. The other may feel unable to delay the reply and still be expected to follow the usual schedule. The visible activity is similar, but only the first employee has meaningful control over the movement of work into personal time.

Job position affects that control. Senior or highly valued employees may feel safe leaving routine messages until the next day. Junior staff, temporary workers, and employees in insecure positions may see rapid replies as a way to show commitment. Their concern is not always based on an explicit threat. It can arise from uncertainty about workplace expectations and the possible consequences of appearing unavailable.

New employees face a similar problem. They may not know which managers send non-urgent messages at night or which requests can safely wait. Answering everything appears to be the least risky approach. Once this pattern is established, changing it becomes difficult because colleagues and supervisors have already learned to expect a quick response.

Workload also shapes how an employee experiences after-hours contact. An occasional message may cause little difficulty when ordinary demands are manageable. The same message can feel heavier after a long working day or during a period of tight deadlines. It does not arrive as an isolated request but as another demand added to work that already feels unfinished.

When normal working hours are not enough to complete assigned tasks, after-hours messaging becomes part of a wider workload problem. Employees may continue working at night because deadlines leave no realistic alternative. The activity may look voluntary, especially when no manager directly orders overtime. In practice, the organization has shifted part of the workload into personal time.

The nature of the job also matters. Some roles involve safety incidents, system failures, shift coordination, or international clients. Employees in these positions may accept occasional after-hours contact because they understand why it is needed. A complete separation between work and personal time may not be realistic.

Difficulty arises when exceptional needs are not separated from ordinary work. If routine updates, delayed document requests, and genuine emergencies all arrive through the same channel,

employees must monitor everything. They cannot know in advance which message can wait. The burden of distinguishing urgency is transferred to the recipient.

Remote and hybrid work add another layer. Working from home can increase flexibility and remove commuting time, but it also weakens the visible end of the working day. There may be no journey away from the workplace, and the laptop or phone used during work remains nearby. Colleagues may also treat physical presence at home as evidence that the employee is available.

The home environment can either strengthen or weaken this boundary. Employees with a separate work area may be able to close the door and create a clear transition. Those working from a bedroom, dining table, or shared space have fewer physical signals that work has ended. After-hours messages then enter the same environment used for rest and family life.

Family and caregiving responsibilities shape the practical cost of interruption. An employee caring for children, older relatives, or another family member may have little freedom to respond at night. A short message can arrive during meals, homework, transport, or care routines. The task may take only a few minutes, but it competes with responsibilities that cannot easily be delayed.

Employees without the same duties may reply faster and unintentionally create a standard for others. Their availability is then interpreted as stronger commitment rather than as a result of different personal conditions. This comparison places employees with less flexible private responsibilities at a disadvantage.

Managerial behaviour and team norms influence all of these experiences. A late message creates less pressure when employees know that routine matters can wait. The same message becomes more intrusive when delayed replies are criticised or fast responders receive visible praise. Employees often trust these daily signals more than written policies. Teams also develop their own pace. In one group, employees may leave night-time messages unanswered without concern. In another, several

people reply immediately, making silence appear unusual. The meaning of after-hours communication is therefore shaped not only by the sender but also by the responses of colleagues.

These factors rarely operate alone. A separation preference may be easy to maintain in a secure job with manageable workload and supportive managers. It becomes harder in an insecure position where colleagues reply at all hours. An employee who normally accepts integration may also struggle when workload rises, family duties change, or remote work removes the transition out of the workday.

Boundary experience should not be reduced to personal resilience. Employees may mute notifications or set their own response rules, but their ability to maintain those limits depends on job security, workload, managerial conduct, and the consequences of being unavailable. Control over after-hours communication is partly personal, but it is also created by the way work is organised.

6. Rebuilding Boundaries in After-Hours Work Communication

The problems created by after-hours messaging cannot be solved only by asking employees to mute notifications or exercise greater self-control. These practices may reduce some interruptions, but they do not change the expectations behind the messages. When managers continue to contact employees at night and quick replies are treated as evidence of commitment, maintaining a boundary becomes the employee's responsibility alone. More stable protection requires changes in communication rules, managerial conduct, and the design of work systems.

This does not mean that all contact outside working hours should be prohibited. Some jobs involve system failures, safety incidents, urgent client matters, shift changes, or international work across time zones. In such settings, limited after-hours communication may be necessary. The main problem is not exceptional contact but the routine use of personal time for matters that could reasonably wait.

Organizations therefore need to distinguish genuine urgency from ordinary work. A serious technical failure or immediate safety risk may require prompt action. A meeting reminder, routine update, document revision, or request for general information usually does not. When these matters are sent through the same channels, employees must check every message in case one is important. The lack of distinction keeps them alert even when most messages do not need an immediate response.

Separate communication channels can make this distinction clearer. Routine work can remain in email or project platforms that employees are not expected to monitor after hours. Phone calls or another agreed channel may be reserved for emergencies. The effectiveness of this arrangement depends on restraint. If managers use the urgent channel for poorly planned or delayed tasks, employees soon learn that every form of communication may require attention.

Clear response expectations are equally important. Employees should know whether they are required to read, acknowledge, or act on messages outside their scheduled hours. These are not the same duty. Reading requires employees to monitor a device. Acknowledging a message shows that they remain available. Acting on it may involve a longer period of work.

For routine matters, the normal rule should be that no reading or response is required until the next working period. Employees should not need to send short replies such as "received" or "noted" merely to show that they are present. Silence after work should be treated as a normal condition of being off duty rather than as a lack of cooperation.

Written rules are useful only when management practice supports them. A workplace may state that employees are free to disconnect, but the message loses force if managers praise immediate replies or criticise those who wait until morning. Employees judge communication expectations through daily reactions. They notice what happens when someone does not answer at night and whether fast responders receive better opportunities.

Managers who prefer to work late can reduce pressure through scheduled delivery. A message written at midnight can be sent the next morning. This allows the manager to use a preferred schedule without bringing a new task into another employee's evening. Adding the phrase "no need to reply now" is less effective because the employee has already seen the message and may begin thinking about it.

Technical restrictions can provide stronger protection. Volkswagen introduced such an arrangement in Germany in 2011 for some employees using company BlackBerry devices. Work emails stopped being delivered shortly after the working day and resumed before the next shift (McMillan, 2011). Employees could still use their phones, but routine emails did not continue to enter their personal time.

The value of this policy was not simply that employees received fewer notifications. It shifted part of the responsibility for disconnection from the individual to the organization. Workers did not have to decide repeatedly whether to ignore each message or worry that colleagues were replying while they remained silent. The system created a visible stopping point for routine communication.

A fixed technical block will not suit every workplace. Employees with irregular schedules, international responsibilities, or formal on-call duties may need different arrangements. Some workers also prefer greater control over when they complete tasks. The Volkswagen case is useful not as a universal model but as evidence that communication systems can be designed to protect personal time rather than leaving all decisions to individual employees.

A more flexible approach may allow employees to set protected hours linked to their actual schedules. Routine messages sent during those periods can be delayed, while a separate channel remains available for genuine emergencies. This preserves some flexibility without requiring every employee to follow the sender's preferred working time.

Formal on-call work requires clearer treatment. Employees who are expected to remain reachable

should know when the duty begins and ends, what kinds of incidents require action, and how quickly they must respond. On-call responsibility should not remain an informal expectation attached to a managerial or professional role.

The *Rentokil Initial* case shows why this distinction matters (Cour de cassation, Chambre sociale, 2018). The employee's burden did not depend only on the number of calls received. He had to remain reachable and ready to intervene. When a job genuinely requires this level of availability, the arrangement should be recognised as part of the work rather than described vaguely as flexibility or responsibility. Compensation, time off, or other protection should reflect the restriction placed on personal time.

Communication rules will also have limited effect when workload is too high. An organization may discourage late messages while assigning deadlines that cannot be met during normal hours. Employees then continue working in the evening without being directly told to do so. The behaviour appears voluntary, but the volume and timing of work leave little practical choice.

Repeated night-time communication may indicate understaffing, unclear task allocation, poor coordination, or unrealistic deadlines. In such cases, delayed delivery and notification settings address only the surface of the problem. Employees may still open laptops after dinner or complete work privately so that the organization does not see how much time is required.

Managers should examine why after-hours contact occurs. A rare urgent request is different from a team that regularly needs evening work to meet ordinary deadlines. When the pattern is routine, the response should include workload adjustment, clearer responsibilities, or changes to scheduling rather than advice about personal time management.

Leave periods also require protection. Employees are often contacted during leave because they hold information that other people cannot find. A brief request may appear reasonable, but it shows that the handover was incomplete. Before leave begins,

teams should make necessary records accessible, assign substitute contacts, and identify unfinished issues. The absent employee should not remain the default source of information.

Boundary protection should still allow employees some control over how they arrange their work. Some people prefer to pause during the day for personal responsibilities and complete a task later. This kind of flexibility can be valuable. The problem begins when one person's chosen schedule creates an obligation for everyone else.

An employee who chooses to work at night should not assume that colleagues are also available. Managers and team members need to separate their own sending time from another person's response time. Scheduled delivery and clear status information can help maintain this difference.

Team norms are also important. Routine issues can be collected for the next working day instead of being sent one at a time throughout the evening. Group chats can be kept for matters that require shared attention, while ordinary updates remain in less intrusive channels. These practices reduce the

number of decisions employees must make about whether to reply.

The success of any boundary rule depends on whether employees can use it without disadvantage. A formal right not to respond has little value if promotion, task allocation, or informal reputation still depends on constant availability. Organizations need to judge commitment through the quality of work completed during agreed hours, not through the speed of late-night replies.

Rebuilding boundaries does not require a complete separation between work and personal life. Digital communication and flexible schedules make some overlap unavoidable and, at times, useful. The aim is to prevent routine availability from becoming an unlimited condition of employment. Employees should be able to recognise when contact is truly urgent, when a message can wait, and when the working day has actually ended. Without that clarity, recovery remains dependent on the individual employee's willingness and ability to resist a communication pattern created by the workplace.

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