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House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into Freedom of Expression Online

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A. Introduction

A.1. We study the role of technology in supporting people’s ability to focus while working, and to recover from work during time off – as well as its role in blurring boundaries between work and non-work periods.

A.2. As part of the eWorkLife Remote Work project, between 20th April 2020 and 30th March 2021, we surveyed 484 individuals who started working from home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We also conducted 25 follow-up interviews. This helped us to develop an in-depth understanding of how new remote workers use technology and how this affects the boundaries between their professional and personal lives, as well as their wellbeing.

A.3. We found that working from home, especially when combined with various lockdown restrictions, results in an increase in the use of technology outside of the normal contracted hours. While this allows people to work more flexibly, it also has the potential to erode the boundaries between work life and home life, leading to negative effects on people’s health and wellbeing and their ability to rest and enjoy time off from work. To protect UK workers from burnout, companies need to adopt digital etiquette policies that protect the work-life balance of their employees and make working remotely sustainable. Workers are unlikely to be successful in making these changes alone, without support from employers and policymakers. Therefore, we are responding to the Committee’s call for evidence and responding to the question ‘How can digital citizenship and etiquette be promoted among adults?’.

B. Executive summary

B.1. Working from home has made it harder for workers to separate their work and home lives, with many of them unable to disconnect from work communication.

B.2. Intrusion of work into the home environment has also had privacy implications for workers, resulting from digital communication.

B.3. Inability to have and enjoy time off can put workers’ health and productivity

at risk.

B.4. Policymakers need to insist that employers actively encourage workers to disconnect during time off, and make this feasible for workers, for example by providing work computers and phones.

B.5. Companies also need to be instructed to develop internal privacy policies that aim to protect workers' and their cohabitants' privacy as people work from home.

C. How can digital citizenship and etiquette be promoted among adults?

C.1. Enabling digital boundaries between workers' personal and professional lives.

Findings: The transition to working from home in the absence of a long-term remote work strategy made it hard for many people to set boundaries between their personal and professional lives. As a result, we found that workers felt tired, with several pointing to changes in sleep patterns, and observed an increase in sedentary behaviour. Common issues included:

- In the absence of clear guidance from employers, workers felt that they needed to be constantly available, responding to calls and messages immediately and at all times, including evenings and weekends.
- Some workers felt uncomfortable leaving their workstation during lunchtime, in case they received a message that needed attention.
- Without the boundaries between work and home created by going to the office and with many people receiving calls and checking emails on their personal devices, workers found it hard to decide when to stop work in the evening and as a result worked much longer days, which led to fatigue.

People who have transitioned to working remotely need support from their employers in creating new habits that will allow them to separate their personal lives from work lives. Employers need to help workers protect time during which they can rest, to help them prevent exhaustion and burnout.

Recommendations:

- As people continue working from home, policymakers should make it compulsory for employers to introduce strategies that help workers disconnect from work devices during time off. We have found that a major reason for staying constantly connected is the belief that being available at all times is expected by both employer and colleagues. One strategy to help with this would be to require employers to send an email reminder that encourages workers to take a full lunch break away from their computer.

- Companies should introduce policies around communication best practices that include avoiding sending messages outside of specific working hours or making explicit expectations regarding the timeliness of responses. Such policies should be tailored to the needs of each company.
- If possible, employers should provide staff with work devices or put policies in place that support boundary creation should employees use their personal devices for work. We believe that legislation to mandate the right to disconnect is appropriate – relevant laws have already been introduced in France and in Ireland.

C.2. The impact of working from home on workers' privacy and a need for an online etiquette around privacy issues.

Findings: We found that working from home has had an impact on many people's ability to protect their privacy. Work intruded into personal lives and personal space in different ways. Multiple workers felt some level of discomfort about their colleagues' ability to see into their living rooms. This could involve cohabitantes, as one respondent brought to our attention a situation where work colleagues saw their spouse and children and commented on their presence. Other participants felt that they had lost the distinction between office as a workspace and home as a private space.

As remote or hybrid work continues, companies need to take the issues of privacy more seriously and create internal policies that reflect best practice.

Recommendations:

- Policymakers should make it compulsory for companies to create internal privacy policies that define the privacy boundaries and protections afforded to home workers. This could include limiting work calls to certain hours, permitting audio-only calls where appropriate (with captioning provided where needed to support accessibility), and enabling workers to opt out of being video-recorded.
- Policymakers should also make it a legal obligation for employers to respect the basic privacy rights of workers. This should include being able to join an online work meeting by audio only (with workers being able to switch off their camera) and being able to object to being recorded without this having been agreed in advance.
- It will be important for the Government to fund research that explores how the privacy of workers can and should be protected in a remote working environment. This will be of particular importance for example for workers with children, who may inevitably end up being filmed and/or recorded on video during a remote work call, as children receive special protection under the British privacy laws. Such research will likely need to involve behavioural, computing and legal experts.

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