

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 9 March 2024

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Will it bring relief to overworked staff – or spell economic doom?



- A “right to disconnect” and not read or respond to work-related communications is being recognised in more countries
- This brings mental health benefits for workers, but there are fears it could hurt productivity and competitiveness
- At its core, the debate has to do with beliefs about individual excellence and national survival; and mutual understanding and respect between employers and employees

He was in his second year on the job when he broke down, blacked out and woke up in the emergency department.

On that day in 2017, design visualiser Eric – who asked that his real name not be used – had skipped lunch to do more work. One moment he was feeling upset in office; the next, hospital doctors were telling him that he lacked sleep and had low blood sugar.

The diagnosis was chronic overwork. The prescription was two weeks away from his job.

It was not the first time Eric, who is in his early 40s, had been stretched beyond his limits.

Earlier that same year, his team was having dinner to celebrate the end of an intense month of projects when their manager called around 8pm, asking them to start work on a new assignment. The manager even drove to their dinner spot to take them back to office.

Eric's managers had problems saying no to projects and routinely took on more than the staff could handle within work hours. This meant regularly working 10- to 12-hour days for months on end. He had brought his concerns to the human resources department multiple times, to no avail.

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Eric said he would be “100 per cent” behind a “right to disconnect” law.

This refers to a worker’s right to disengage from work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or other messages, during non-work hours, as defined by the European Union.

It has lately come into public discussion with more countries enacting laws protecting the right to disconnect; and with our evolving understanding of the dynamics between work and mental well-being.

In Singapore, where no such law exists, discussions on it tend to draw opposing reactions. Having the right to disconnect is either a surefire way for the country’s economy to lose its edge, or much-needed help to stop work from creeping into every corner of our lives.

This can be hard to reconcile. But the questions raised in the process can be an opportunity to re-examine our relationships with our jobs, and to reach a more intentional agreement about what we expect of ourselves and each other at work.

WHAT DISCONNECTING LOOKS LIKE

The right to disconnect, sometimes called the right to switch off, emerged in response to technology allowing us to be online at all hours, making the boundaries between personal and professional time and space even more porous.

France was a pioneer in 2017 when it enshrined the right to disconnect in labour law. Companies there with more than 50 workers must negotiate with employees to determine the hours and conditions for sending or replying to electronic communications.

In February Australia became the latest to introduce a law, allowing workers to refuse to monitor, read or respond to work-related contact after hours. The worker’s refusal must not be “unreasonable”, taking into account the reason for the contact, the level of disruption to the worker as well as their compensation, job role and personal circumstances, including caregiving responsibilities.

Around these parts the right to disconnect is also recognised in Thailand, which wrote it into labour code amendments last year. The law specifies that remote workers can refuse communications with their employer after work hours or the completion of assigned work. The Philippines is also contemplating a law.

THE STATE OF WORK IN SINGAPORE

Post-pandemic, Singapore is in the midst of renegotiating its social compact around work-life balance.

New guidelines on flexible work arrangements will come into effect this year, though a right-to-disconnect law is not believed to be in the works.

Recent polls have found that Singapore professionals are most motivated to resign or change jobs for not just higher wages but better work-life balance.

Workers in Singapore worked an average of 44.1 paid hours a week in 2022, according to official labour statistics.

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But they reported themselves as working an average of 8.2 unpaid hours a week in a survey last year by ADP, a HR and payroll solutions provider. That put Singapore behind India (10.7 hours) but ahead of China and Australia.



In Singapore, the only stipulations around work hours are set out in the Employment Act, and these do not apply to professionals, managers and executives (PMEs), said lawyer Clarence Ding, who specialises in labour and employment law.

Instead, arrangements around PME's work hours are largely a matter of contract and depend on the terms of their employment, said the partner at Simmons & Simmons.

A typical line in an employment contract may read: "Your normal working hours are from 9am to 6pm from Mondays to Fridays with a one-hour lunch break. However, you will be required to work such hours as are necessary to properly discharge your duties and obligations, and you will have no entitlement to any overtime pay for such additional hours worked."

SINGAPORE'S OFFICIAL POSITION

Tripartite efforts - by Singapore employers, unions and the government - so far have encouraged rather than required employers to act in the space of disconnecting from work, even as they acknowledge the benefits of rest.

The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) pointed to a tripartite advisory on mental health, updated last November, which encourages employers to set an after-hours work communication policy.

Proper rest helps "reduce burnout and improve productivity" and work-life harmony is key to "well-being and optimal business performance", a spokesperson told CNA.

The Singapore National Employers Federation said having a policy on after-hours communications can help to set reasonable and clear expectations for workers.

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“Certainly, such instances can be minimised, such as when employees ensure the timely delivery of their work targets to avoid instances of important tasks escalating into critical and highly urgent stages,” the federation said.

“It is also important for fellow colleagues to respect co-workers’ established working hours and avoid routinely contacting them for work-related matters after working hours. At the end of the day, there needs to be understanding, mutual respect, and some amount of give and take.”

On its part, the Singapore government has said it will continue to “raise awareness of the importance of setting after-hours work communication policy while managing both employees’ and business needs”.

“At the same time, the tripartite partners are pushing for greater adoption of work-life harmony measures such as health and wellness programmes, and unrecorded time-off for personal and family matters,” Minister of State for Manpower Gan Siow Huang said in February.

IS IT PRACTICAL FOR BUSINESSES?

At the outset, it should be noted that different jobs have different room for allowing workers to disconnect after work hours.

Member of Parliament (MP) Melvin Yong, who is also NTUC’s assistant secretary-general, was one of the earliest to moot a right to disconnect in parliament in 2020. Last month, during a debate on mental health, he called for tripartite guidelines to establish what disconnecting could mean for different sectors and different job roles.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may find it more difficult. Notably, France’s right to disconnect does not apply to companies with under 50 workers, while Australia is giving companies with fewer than 15 workers an extra year before the law kicks in for them.

“For most SME bosses who run their own businesses, there is often little or no clear segregation of work and life,” said Mr Lee Swee Siong, vice-president of strategy and development in the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME) Council.

“As such it is likely they will send emails and queries at night and on weekends.”

Company size aside, some sectors present unique challenges. Take logistics: Mr Christopher Ong, managing director of DHL Express Singapore, said that as a 24/7 international service provider, workers may also have to go beyond official hours to tend to distressed customers or fix delivery issues.

This is even as the company does not encourage after-hours contact by supervisors.

Mr Ong stressed that any right to disconnect law should consider, especially for frontline and essential services, business continuity and manpower needs.

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WHAT ABOUT WORKERS?

A right-to-disconnect policy could also, ironically, be at odds with workplace flexibility, which has become the norm expected by many employees, said Ms Yvonne Teo, ADP's vice president of human resources for Asia Pacific.

Fixed start and end times would make it difficult for workers to log on at staggered hours.

Individuals who told CNA that they supported the right to disconnect also questioned whether a law would be practical or feasible, given the nature of their work.

For instance, Eric, the design visualiser, works with deadlines ranging from hours to days. Even with a right to disconnect law in place, overtime work would still be necessary to complete projects on schedule, he said.

For Michelle – who also asked not to use her real name – her work day as a teacher at an international school officially starts at 8am and ends at 4pm.

In reality, the 25-year-old arrives an hour in advance to prepare, works through lunch, sometimes has her first meal of the day around 4pm, and goes home to continue work. At night, students also contact her to ask for extensions or help with homework.

"It can feel like work is never done," she said.

RISK OF LOSING EDGE?

The right to disconnect was mentioned in Singapore's parliament as recently as in February, when Nominated MP Raj Joshua Thomas urged the government to be "very careful" about any policy steps.

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“Singapore’s sole resource is our human resource, upon which all our success has been built,” he said. “If our workforce weakens, our competitiveness and attractiveness as an economy weakens. And this threatens our continued ability to sustain our way of life.”

Labour lawyer Mr Ding said that employers could be forced to hire more employees to meet tight deadlines, leading to more inefficiencies and higher costs.

ADP’s Ms Teo echoed these views, saying that Singapore’s talent may become too expensive for foreign investors, endangering the country’s status as a regional hub.

These beliefs were not necessarily shared by experts on productivity and organisational behaviour.

“I feel that, depending on how it is implemented, the right to disconnect might actually increase productivity,” said Dr Ivan Png, a National University of Singapore fellow at Stanford University’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

“I think of it as similar to measures to enhance employees’ physical health. Healthier workers are more productive. Allowing workers to disconnect could enhance their mental health.”

Dr Png said the right to disconnect would also force managers to “channel and organise their thinking rather than shooting off text messages and emails to their subordinates every few minutes”.

He pointed to a measure introduced last year for maids in Singapore to have one rest day a month that cannot be compensated away.

“Their mandatory day off is like a disconnect,” said Dr Png. “How did that affect productivity at home?”

WHY WE WORK SO HARD

The right to disconnect also seems to clash with a more basic level of competition: Our beliefs and behaviours around individual performance at work, and the rewards we expect for doing more than others.

It’s up to employees to choose whether to respond immediately to after-hours communication, said Mr Lee, the vice president in the SME association.

“If they don’t, SME bosses should not penalise them. But if the employees do (despite not having to do so) then naturally, the bosses will perceive them as dedicated employees.

“I feel that whether there is a right to disconnect policy or not, such behaviour and corresponding perceptions will continue to play out,” he said.

How bosses and workers can better deal with extra hours

If you’re a supervisor needing your staff to put in longer hours for a project, what’s the best way to inform them?

Communication can make a difference. Positive psychology expert and speaker Yeo Sha-en, who founded well-being consultancy Happiness Scientist, gave CNA some tips:

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Take time to explain why this is needed of them

Express empathy, like acknowledging the sacrifice they are making and the opportunity cost to their personal time

Let them know there's an endpoint and that they're not expected to keep up the long hours forever (if that's true)

Show your appreciation, even just by saying thank you

Help them prioritise so they know where to start tackling the work

What if you're an employee who wants to turn down a work-related request because you have too much going on?

Ms Yeo suggests breaking the conversation down into three parts:

Acknowledge why your supervisor is making this request of you; and the likely impact on them, your colleagues and even the client if you say no

Express clearly what you need from your supervisor, and why you are saying no to the assignment

If possible, think of a solution or compromise that you can offer, such as doing what you can to work on parts of the project during official work hours

Collapse

In parliament, Mr Thomas also pointed out that there will be employees who choose to forgo their right to disconnect. They might then expect recognition or compensation, which could lead to tensions and disputes.

"An organisation must reward those that are more valuable to it, and that are more willing to do more than they have to," said the NMP. "Being in a global city, in a super-connected world, a contactable and responsive worker is invariably a more valuable worker."

Michelle, the English teacher, said her school actually advocates boundary-setting. Teachers are discouraged from sending emails past 5pm and setting up work email access on their phones. Once, a supervisor stepped in after she raised concerns about unsustainable demands by a student's parent.

Still, she feels that these are roles and duties "seen as expected of teachers", and that setting boundaries "can sometimes come at a cost to parents', students' and even bosses' perception of you".

And perhaps also our perception of ourselves.

Singapore workers are likely to take work performance as an indication of self-worth, according to Dr Tan Hwee Hoon, who teaches organisational behaviour and human resources at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

In a decade-long study called the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE), published in 2004, Singapore ranked the highest among over 60 countries on both performance and future orientation.

This refers to how much society encourages and rewards people for improvement and excellence, as well as how much people plan, invest in the future and delay gratification.

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Singapore also ranked highly on uncertainty avoidance.

“So we’re very much into being the best ... making sure nothing goes wrong,” said Dr Tan. Taken together, it’s no surprise that Singapore workers find it hard to disconnect from work, she added.

“We don’t say ‘this is work, this is life’. We sort of assume that what happens in work also happens in life, and vice versa.”



THE LINK TO THE SINGAPORE STORY

Singapore's political leadership has played and continues to play a “very big” part in inculcating these worldviews on work, according to Dr Tan.

The demands for individual excellence can be traced to the need for – and culture of – national survival which drove Singapore’s rapid transformation from third world to first.

Correspondingly, the fear that Singapore will slip in productivity and competitiveness if it adopts a right to disconnect can also be traced to our beliefs about personal excellence, according to the associate professor.

“I think it’s from a belief that we need to be controlled ... that we cannot think that we can be self-motivated,” she said.

During a parliamentary debate on mental health last month, MP Carrie Tan drew a similar link between Singapore’s national story and modern workplace stresses.

“The very narrative of our nation’s survival and success thus far has been fuelled by the notion of scarcity, which then fuels an endless culture of competition and sense of inadequacy,” she said.

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Quoting a popular National Day song, she added: "If you recall the lyrics, we are first called to 'stand up for Singapore' to do the best we can, only to be called a few lines later to also 'be prepared to give a little more'.

"I love this song, I love to sing it with pride. And increasingly, I recognise some irony. Are we perhaps the only country in the world where our best is still not enough?"

NOT BY LAW BUT BY AGREEMENT

At a fundamental level, the right to disconnect is about reaching a mutual understanding between employers and workers, said SMU's Dr Tan.

A law would be a "very blunt tool" and an easier way around difficult, protracted conversations that employers and workers likely need to have, in order to set joint expectations on work hours and deliverables.

And while people will comply with a law, that's not the same as committing to its intent.

The culture and values that make it difficult to disconnect from work are ingrained not just in individuals but also Singapore's institutions, and will take more time to change, said Dr Tan.

The onus for such change should not be placed solely on individuals. But it can be helpful for workers to know that they need to advocate and set boundaries, and how to do so.

Michelle, the teacher, noted that her school's efforts to implement a culture of disconnecting – even if unofficially – come in tandem with the majority of staff following suit.

In design visualiser Eric's experience, it takes courage, some risk-taking and a bit of luck.

After his office breakdown, he thought of quitting but was persuaded by an HR officer to hang on. He started saying no and speaking up more at work. This did not go down well, and at one point Eric thought he was at risk of losing his job.

But then the firm's management changed, and the culture at his workplace has "drastically" improved ever since.

Eric still works there. He has mostly been able to keep a routine of leaving work around 5.30pm to pick up his young son from school, have dinner together with his family, and put the kid to bed.

After that, he looks at work again, voluntarily, from about 9pm.

Eric now leads a small team of his own and is careful to be the kind of supervisor he would have wanted.

That means letting his team know in advance if they need to work late that day, and explaining why the task is so urgent that for those extra hours – they cannot disconnect.

Source: CNA/dv(jo)