BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINE ON THE TIME LIMIT OF EMAIL USE AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

The Workstream for Staff of the ICBC has been approached by members of staff to advise on electronic communication practices in the university. Internationally, the issue of the extensive use of work email and WhatsApp communication after hours has attracted the attention of legislators, thought leaders and academics alike. The sending of email after hours is already legislated and/or regulated in Germany, France, Italy and Philippines, as well as the City of New York. In these, and some other countries after-hours emails are regarded as working overtime, and as an infringement of "the right to disconnect" as endorsed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to ensure that employees switch off after a long day of work.

The introduction of online teaching and learning and remote working at the University has created a working environment that has overwhelmed many staff members, with many of them reporting that they are unable to cope with the increase in electronic communication and email traffic, particularly outside of conventional office hours. When working from home, employees have had to navigate more complex and multiple boundaries between work and home than ever before. The erosion of boundaries between work and life has increased substantially, thereby drastically altering the nature of social and family ecosystems, as well as the nature of work-life balance.

Research by academics at the University of Sussex in the UK, and Virginia Tech and Lehigh University in the USA reports the following impact of the extensive use of email and other electronic communication after hours and over weekends on employees:

- The wellbeing of employees is adversely affected when they are overloaded with emails day and night, and in particular when their personal and family time is interrupted by emails and WhatsApps on their laptops and other devices. The frequent micro-role transitions between work and non-work roles are counterproductive and have a detrimental impact on the personal and family relationships of employees, including posing a risk to their mental health.
- Employees feel obligated to respond to emails or WhatsApp messages from their supervisors, senior management, and students and this puts additional pressure on them.
- As part of university management's commitment to save the academic year and to provide the best possible student experience despite the inconvenience caused by emergency remote learning, academics and other staff members have spent more time answering and sending emails than ever before.

- It is a reality that many managers and senior professionals spend most of their days in meetings, leaving only early mornings or evenings for catching up on communication with colleagues or team members, hence the increase in electronic communication after hours.
- Some companies have reported an increase in productivity, happiness, performance, attendance and wellbeing after they stopped sending electronic communications after hours.
- Excessive late-night or weekend email or WhatsApp communication from management to staff should be discouraged and only be used in environments in which the context necessitates such communication and is agreed by the parties concerned.
- Being available electronically 24/7 creates an unhealthy "always on" culture which increases employee stress, is not conducive to the completion of productive work, and can contribute to burnout.
- Research has shown that the majority of clients do not have a problem with not receiving an immediate email or WhatsApp response after hours.

Thus, the Workstream for Staff recommends the adoption of the "right to disconnect" as an important employee wellbeing issue, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis period.

GUIDELINES ON THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT

- "Normal" office hours at the University are assumed to be 08h00 to 17h00, Monday to Friday. Individuals can legitimately expect to write, send, and receive emails and work-related WhatsApps during those times, unless they are on leave.
- Step 1: Before sending an email, decide whether an email is needed. This may seem obvious, but sometimes another channel of communication is more effective or appropriate. Sometimes a variety of information can be contained in a single weekly email update, for example, rather than in multiple dribbles of information.
- Step 2: Is the email urgent, critical, or a crisis request? (In this case, might a phone call not be more appropriate?) Regular, work-related, non-crisis emails should only be sent between 07h00 and 17h00. Employees are encouraged to make use of the facility on Microsoft Outlook which allows emails to be despatched at predetermined times. In environments in which a longer operational schedule is the norm, such as in the fields of medicine, security, and information technology, emergency situations may require the sending and responding to emails across a wider range of hours. These should be regarded as exceptions and not the norm at the university. Such emergency emails should be preceded by a phone call to the relevant employee or other stakeholder. The rest periods of these staff members who are not on shift should be respected, and only be interrupted in emergency situations such as a fire, crime, cybercrime, systems crash or accident.
- Collaboration and communication with international students and colleagues across different time zones might require communication or meetings outside of conventional office hours. In these cases, managers are encouraged to offer staff members time off in exchange for their involvement in meetings during the night with their colleagues in other time zones.
- When two or more colleagues are working together on a project outside of regular office hours at a time more convenient to both of them, they are welcome to use email or WhatsApp communication by mutual consent, provided that they do not involve parties that have not agreed to this special arrangement.
- Staff should not feel obliged to respond to e-mails received after hours, unless team members have agreed to this practice, given the context of their environment.
- Managers should encourage employees to schedule regular, daily down-time, where access to emails or work-related WhatsApp groups is suspended in favour of doing thoughtful, productive work, and making time for exercise, family, and relaxation.
- In addition to the issue of the timing of electronic communication, all other generally acceptable principles of net-etiquette should apply, and managers and employees are encouraged to use email and other forms of communication channels with discretion, good judgment and professionalism.

Notwithstanding the above guidelines, we do acknowledge that different environments may have different needs, and that people have different rhythms in their working days, in addition to juggling family and other commitments. Of course, there will be times when a staff member will have a need to receive an important or urgent email attachment after hours, but this should be the exception and not the norm. All parties should seek to reduce stress and discomfort, but leverage the greater flexibility offered by remote working and learning, while attempting to alleviate some of the disadvantages in the process such as work overload, intrusion of work into private time, and burnout. Hence, there is a need for a high level of flexibility, understanding, balance, respect, empathy and sensitivity when engaging with staff, students and other stakeholders via electronic communication.

Given the strengths of the SU values of respect and compassion, and the high level of trust and empathy among some teams and staff members, the Workstream for Staff feels that it is at this stage not necessary to consider policy options in this regard, hence the need for this best practice guideline as a practical alternative to policy intervention. Applying our SU values from a self-governance approach, provides a clear guideline and clarity for our behaviour and actions when using electronic communications in our work in a responsible or respectful way.

It is our hope that this best practice guideline provides you with another useful practical tool as part of our expanded employee wellbeing toolbox in response to the COVID-19 pandemic period. We suggest that you apply it during the last quarter of the academic year and provide us with feedback from your teams on whether it made a difference to your wellbeing. It is in this spirit that we further embed our strategic thrust of being an employer of choice when we purposefully and proactively enhance the wellbeing of all our employees, recognising that we can only connect and deliver our best after a good evening and night of sleep and disconnection.