Zombie Workforce: 70% of UK workers are struggling to 'switch off' from work

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70% of UK professionals are struggling to 'switch off' from work, an issue which is leaving many unable to relax and even lose sleep over.

With the Government's plans to double down on professionals' 'right to switch off' deferred to their Next Steps to Make Work Pay document, new research from global talent solutions firm Robert Walters highlights that professionals are regularly finding their personal time interrupted by work-related emails, tasks or calls.

Lucy Bisset, Director of Robert Walters North comments: "Not being able to fully 'switch off' from work can result in a variety of negative side effects for professionals. From diminished concentration and motivation to their productivity and engagement levels dropping off.

"All professionals should feel able to relax and unwind outside of work – without the concern of having to pick up work-related tasks."

Professionals losing sleep

According to the Robert Walters poll, 29% of professionals state that not being able to log-off properly from work has directly resulted in them losing sleep – whilst a quarter cite being unable to relax or reset themselves for the next day.

A further 35% of professionals have struggled with increased stress or anxiety because of this.

Lucy comments: "Missing out on hours of sleep, being unable to fully relax as well as experiencing

increased stress or anxiety can pose a huge threat to professional's ability to work, even carrying out regular tasks and activities. Not to mention, maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance."

Symptoms of an 'always available' culture

A key trigger of not being able to switch-off from work is the mounting pressure on professionals to be 'always available' – with 67% of workers across all professional services industries stating that this pressure has increased over the past 12 months.

76% admit to checking-in on work-related emails or calls when not in the office and a further fifth stating that their employer 'frequently' contacts them outside of office hours.

Lucy comments: "Over recent years the boom of workplace tech like Teams and Slack has meant that teams can be more easily tracked and contacted by their managers, whilst the rise of hybrid/remote working has caused professionals to literally bring work home with them.

"An 'always online' workplace culture contributes to the blurring of lines between office hours and personal time as well as an increasingly unrealistic expectation for greater availability. This is something that if left unchecked can rapidly lead to increased cases of burnout across workforces."

Industry variation

Indeed, according to further research from Robert Walters' [Benefits Guide](link), 86% of UK companies have hybrid-working options, while a further 55% have the option of flexible working hours.

However, there is some variation between industries – for example, professionals working in financial services (93%) and technology (87%) are more likely to have hybrid-working options than engineering professionals (64%).

Whilst professionals in general management are 19% more likely to have flexible working hours than those in tax, legal and compliance (65% vs. 46%).

Lucy comments: "Professionals in traditionally on-site roles often have a clear boundary between work and personal life – being able to 'clock off' when they finish for the day.

"Something which becomes more blurred for those working from home. With many professionals who have a hybrid-working schedule literally bringing work home with them 2-3 days out of the week."

What is the antidote?

When asked about what employers could do to help them to switch off, two-fifths of professionals suggested 'setting realistic deadlines' and over a quarter (27%) said putting a limit on out-of-office contact.

Other strategies mentioned were boosting wellbeing incentives (16%) and encouraging regular breaks throughout the working day (16%).

Lucy comments: "Employers who verge on creating a 'zombie workforce' put employee productivity, engagement and satisfaction levels on the line. This could also directly lead to a rise in cases of

absenteeism throughout their organisation.

"This issue must be addressed head on, by establishing a solid foundation of achievable deadlines, manageable workloads along with clear boundaries between work and personal time – for both those working from the office and at home. Once this groundwork is set, additional improvements like enhanced wellbeing incentives can be introduced."