

Health and Safety Programs

Disconnecting from Work

On this page

[What is meant by disconnecting from work?](#)

[How has technology contributed to the issue of disconnecting?](#)

[Why is it important to disconnect?](#)

[Are there laws in Canada about disconnecting from work?](#)

[What should be included in a workplace policy about disconnecting?](#)

[What steps can be taken to help individuals disconnect?](#)

What is meant by disconnecting from work?

Disconnecting from work refers to being able to stop doing paid work and not being obligated to respond to work requests outside of established hours. Some examples of disconnecting are:

- No contact between employers, managers, workers, or clients outside of established hours (e.g., phone calls, video calls, or emails)
- Not performing job duties outside of established hours

Canadian labour standards outline the employment conditions for hours of work, payment of wages, leaves, vacation, holidays, and more. However, most labour standards (also called employment standards) were developed when Canada was primarily an industrial society. Most people reported to their workplace for an 8-hour shift (or other regular shift pattern) and then returned home. Since the work could only be performed at the worksite, this pattern created a natural disconnection.

The Canadian business model has changed. Many employers have adopted diversified work practices to remain competitive and meet the demands of a global economy. There is now a trend to work remotely, away from a shared physical location.

How has technology contributed to the issue of disconnecting?

Remaining in contact with your workplace outside of a physical location or building is possible now due to information and communication technology (e.g., high-speed internet, wireless communication, cell phones, etc.). The ability to work anywhere and anytime with relative ease has caused the boundaries between being “at work” and “not at work” to blur. Before this technology was widely available, workplace communication occurred mostly at a common location during defined hours.

With more connectivity, workers may feel pressure to continue to work or be available after hours. This pressure may be heightened if they observe other workers or management conducting work during “off” hours (e.g., sending emails, particularly when expecting a response). Employers and supervisors may inadvertently reward this behaviour through promotions and bonuses. These rewards may unfairly disadvantage workers who are unable to remain connected.

Why is it important to disconnect?

Each person can be affected differently based on factors such as frequency and duration of work, the nature of the job, etc. Having uninterrupted personal time away from work stressors allows your body and mind the opportunity to relax and recover. An individual who does not sufficiently disconnect may experience any combination of the following:

- Poor [work/life balance](#)
- [Work-related musculoskeletal disorders](#), including the impacts of [psychosocial factors](#)
- Occupational injuries
- [Fatigue](#)
- [Burnout](#)
- Poor [mental health](#) effects such as [stress](#), depression, anxiety, etc.

An organization that does not allow their workers to disconnect sufficiently may experience more:

- Workplace incidents, workers’ compensation claims, and lost time
- Turnover
- Errors and quality decline
- Negative company reputation

The benefits of workers being able to disconnect may include:

- Happy, healthy, more productive staff
- Higher job satisfaction and staff retention

- Positive organization reputation
 - Reduced incident rates, lost time, and workers' compensation claims
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Are there laws in Canada about disconnecting from work?

In Canada, many workers do not specifically have a legislated right to disconnect. Ontario has “right to disconnect” legislation, with other jurisdictions considering their own.

Provincial, territorial, and federal governments have laws requiring employers to provide time off work unless the occupation is exempt (e.g., police officer) or extenuating circumstances exist. Some employment standard laws include protections for workers to have time off work on a per day and per week basis unless other arrangements have been made (e.g., minimum 8 hours off work per day and one period of 24 consecutive hours off work per week). Any additional time worked might need to be compensated as prescribed by law or according to a collective bargaining agreement.

Some jurisdictions specifically state that “on-call” or “standby” workers are not considered to be working. However, if the worker is called in, they are considered to be working and must be compensated for their time.

In other situations, hours and terms of work may be negotiated in contracts, such as collective agreements with unions.

What should be included in a workplace policy about disconnecting?

Organizations can encourage all employees to disconnect by establishing a policy that outlines when and how to disengage from work activities or communications. The disconnecting policy may stand alone or be included in a [comprehensive workplace health and safety policy](#).

Each workplace is unique, and policies should reflect the needs of that workplace. Common elements of a policy regarding disconnecting from work include:

- A clear definition of what is meant by disconnecting from work
- To whom the policy applies.
 - If needed, separate policies may be developed for different groups of employees (such as workers, emergency responders, management, or executives).
- Commitment by top management to support the policy
- How workers will be educated, trained, and kept informed about the policy and any changes

- A statement that no reprisals will occur when individuals follow the policy
- Statements regarding what work or work communication can or cannot occur outside of established hours
 - The work or work hours may vary, depending on negotiated terms (e.g., continuous versus [flexible](#) hours), the role of the individual, or the tasks required.
 - Set expectations for response times to non-essential e-mails sent after established hours. For example, it may not be necessary to reply to a client communication outside of established hours, but response to a defined type of emergency may be required.
 - Set expectations when work involves collaboration with others in different time zones.
- What messaging is required when an employee is considered 'away from work', such as an out-of-office notice
- Details regarding overtime, including any approval process and how it will be compensated
- Requirements from any labour or employment standards that apply (such as hours of work, eating periods, vacation pay, public holidays, etc.)
- If access to work devices or network servers will be restricted outside of established hours (e.g., removing or limiting access to the work virtual private network (VPN))
- If the software will be used to monitor device use, declare what will be monitored and when
- If work-only devices will be provided or required (e.g., use of a cellphone dedicated only to work needs)
- Actions that will be taken to help employees disconnect, and if there are consequences to not disconnecting
- Promoting taking earned time off (e.g., vacation leave, personal days, sick days, etc.)
- Information on how employees can participate and provide feedback
- Resources available to help, such as an Employee Assistance Program ([EAP](#))

When developing the policy:

- Include input from all employees, the health and safety committee or representative, and the union if present
- Conduct trials to determine if the established hours of work or the current policy and processes are adequate

- Adjust the program as needed based on evaluation, the needs of the workplace, and feedback from all employees
 - Continue to follow and include safe work procedures for other hazards, such as [ergonomics](#), [telework](#) arrangements, etc.
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What steps can be taken to help individuals disconnect?

The employer or management can:

- Lead by example
- Promote disconnecting at the end of work hours as part of the corporate culture
- Avoid rewarding employees who continue to work outside of their designated hours
- Provide separate devices for work activities (e.g., mobile phones)

Individuals can:

- Turn off or put away work devices outside of working hours, if possible
 - Avoid working extra hours. Discuss workload or agree on additional time with the employer or manager
 - Take earned breaks and use that time to focus on something other than work
 - Prioritize health and personal life outside of work
 - When working outside a corporate building, dedicate a space in the home reserved for work, if possible. When the workday is over, do not enter that space
 - Use the Employee Assistance Program ([EAP](#)) as needed and when available
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