



## Should Canadian businesses consider a moratorium on e-mail?

MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

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Imagine a world in which you don't receive any work-related e-mail except during working hours. That's right: no beeps, bells or buzzes on your smartphone announcing the arrival of e-mail either overnight or during the weekend. None, nothing, nil, nada.

Impossible, you say? Well, it's happening, right now, at companies in Germany. At the auto giant Volkswagen, for example, the company's e-mail servers are programmed to stop delivering e-mail to employees' accounts 30 minutes after work, and to begin sending them again 30 minutes before the start of a new work day. As to e-mail on weekends? An absolute no-no! Volkswagen isn't the only corporation that subscribes to this philosophy; other major German organizations have implemented variations of this approach, all designed to ensure that their employees completely disengage from the workplace when the workday is done.

The premise behind these policies is quite straightforward – in order to be productive at work, people need to retreat, recharge and then return rejuvenated. And the rationale is that you can't do that if you never leave, both physically and mentally. Germans have a reputation for a strong work ethic and their intense focus on getting things done, one they come by honestly. But their legendary productivity exists exactly because they understand the value of taking time off for self-care; to turn off, and return renewed and refreshed after a distinct gap. So they do.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

Now much of this thinking is cultural, so ingrained into the German psyche that labour laws and government policies reflect this. For example, Germans have a different view of vacation than we tend to have here in Canada. In Germany, vacation time isn't considered a job-related perk or a luxury. It's a federally-mandated right, a necessary and fundamental aspect of life, required if people are to function at peak performance and productivity. Germans get a minimum of four weeks of paid vacation a year starting after six months of employment, and employers regularly grant more than the minimum required. And with very few exceptions, vacation time must be taken during the year and cannot be carried forward or paid out.

If you're German and sick, don't play the martyred hero and drag yourself into work. You won't be lauded. If anything, you'll likely be given a stern talking-to by your peers, and if that isn't enough, your manager will echo the same and probably send you home. The logic behind this is twofold. One, you can't be productive if you don't feel well. And two, your so-called sacrifice could actually make someone else sick, for which they definitely won't thank you. Again, this belief makes its way into the country's laws. Employers in Germany are legally obliged to pay employees full pay for sick leave, and should their illness continue longer, for up to six weeks.

Over all, Germans work fewer hours during the week than we do. Of the 35 countries that make up the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Germany has the lowest total work time with an average of 1,363 hours a worker annually. In contrast, Canada ranks 16th out of 35 with 1,703 hours a worker annually (OECD, 2016). That translates to about 6-1/2 hours a week worked less by Germans than Canadians.

Now some might say that the Germans are more productive because they can get things done in less time. Yet I would submit that they are no more productive than we are here in Canada. More likely, it's Parkinson's Law in action. The 20th-century British scholar Northcote Parkinson coined the adage that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Perhaps Germans get things done in a shorter period simply because they know it is the time they have available. And maybe we here in Canada do less in more for exactly the same reason.

Which brings us back to the alternate reality in which you don't receive any work-related e-mail except during working hours. What do you think would happen if such policies were implemented in Canadian workplaces? Would the world of work as we know implode and collapse? Or would it be a step in the right direction? Conceivably we may never really know the answer until we try it for ourselves.

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