

# Always available



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Recently I had an interaction with an author who, after forgetting a deadline, said they'd work over the weekend to complete the agreed article. While that was completely their decision, I gently reminded them the weekend is for relaxing – it is short enough as it is. They took the reminder in good spirits, but this interaction got me thinking.

Since the pandemic and the true integration of flexible working hours and working from home – discussed in this issue – I wonder whether our boundaries between home and work have become somewhat blurred. Within my circles, an increasing number of people are working early and finishing late, thus eroding time away to rest and recharge. I am beginning to lose count of the number of email signatures that write something along the lines of 'I work all hours please don't feel like you have to reply'. I am also growing acutely aware that some friends have discussed an anxiety of not responding to emails immediately, their theory being they'd rather take care of that email there and then rather than leave until tomorrow. We've all done it.

This practise of always being available is commendable, but how sustainable is this? Is it a true choice, or the constructs of the new social norm in the post-pandemic world we live in? Do these longer days correlate with an uptick in wine consumption? The easy accessibility and open-all-hours approach of email means we can find ourselves swamped with messages, with market research from Europe estimating that the average office worker receives over 125 emails daily.<sup>1</sup> Those numbers were pre-pandemic – the mind boggles as to what that figure could be now.

When you have a packed schedule, the prospect of also tackling an inbox of dozens of unread messages can feel insurmountable. It can be even more disheartening when you respond to one email only to see two new messages take its place. In 2018, research of over 500 European individuals found that receiving more emails was associated with higher work stress, reduced work commitment and more negative emotions.<sup>2</sup>

This trio sounds familiar to a dental professional, right?

Dentistry is a stressful enough profession without such added pressures. In this issue, Richard Jones and Janine Brooks delve into anxiety that dentists face, and the consequences if left to fester.<sup>3</sup> While not tackling email and digital anxiety in these forms, they are manifestations of anxiety. The pandemic changed much about

the world and society we live in, and the principle of working all hours and always being available is one such facet. Pre 2020 we'd commute four or five days a week, and for me, train and tube meant checking emails either side of the office wasn't possible. For others, the drive in would mean the same. A large number of us do not have this anymore, and we've replaced it with work.

I say this not because I've recently been on holiday without access to work emails and contacts, but I feel there is a growing necessity to re-establish those boundaries. We all need time to recharge, and if there's been a particularly tough or upsetting patient, that need ratchets up. There is so much that's good about dentistry and the dental profession; always being available perhaps isn't necessarily one of them. ♦

## References

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2. Stich J-F, Tarafdar M, Stacey P and Cooper C. E-mail load, workload stress and desired e-mail load: a cybernetic approach. *Information Technology and People* 2019; **32**: 430-452.
3. Jones R and Brooks J. The health of the dental professional part 2: Managing anxiety. *BDJ In Pract* 2024; **37**: 166-167.

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