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The right to disconnect





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In this report, we map the situation in Norway regarding employees' right to disconnect. The 'right to disconnect' is linked to ongoing discussions about regulatory developments in the EU. It refers to an employee's right to disengage from work and avoid work-related electronic communication, such as emails or other messages, outside of normal working hours.

The issues addressed relate to four thematic areas:

- Mapping the extent of employees' contact with and connection to work outside normal working hours, and how this varies across different industries, occupations and positions, as well as by employees' gender, age and education level.
- Assessment of the positive and negative consequences for employees who find themselves being contacted and connected to work outside normal working hours, including expectations relating to availability and the impact on the work-life balance.
- Employers' expectations regarding employee availability outside normal working hours, and their practices for monitoring the extent of work performed outside normal working hours.
- Whether there are regulations in special agreements and/or company-level guidelines concerning the right to disconnect from work outside working hours. Which situations/types of contact are regulated (if any), and how the right to disconnect works in practice.

The report is based on multiple data sources, both quantitative and qualitative: a survey with responses from 4031 employees from the Gallup Panel, conducted by Verian; our own analyses of Statistics Norway's Living Conditions Survey on the Working Environment from 2022; a survey targeting management in private and public sector organisations with a total of 1200 respondents (600 from each sector), conducted through Norstat Omnibus for business; a desk study reviewing academic literature and regulations in law and collective agreements; qualitative interviews with representatives of the social partners at the union/industry level – a total of 11 interviews.

Detailed summaries of the findings are provided at the end of each of the empirical chapters (Chapters 4–7).

In a combined analysis, we highlight the following key findings:

The analysis identifies four main categories of employees' connection to work outside normal working hours, based on the combination of frequency of contact (frequent vs. infrequent) and expectations of availability (yes/no). This results in four groups, A–D.

Frequent contact (Categories A and B):

Approximately 18% of employees receive weekly work-related enquiries from colleagues, managers or external parties outside of working hours that require follow-up. These are evenly distributed between those who are expected to be available (Category A, approximately 10%) and those for whom there are no such expectations (Category B, approximately 8%).

- *Category A* is dominated by managers and employees in autonomous roles. Most spend at least two hours a week handling work-related enquiries outside of working hours, often without extra compensation. Expectations are rarely formalised, but are

communicated indirectly. Strain related to stress, reduced rest and blurred boundaries between work and leisure time are frequently reported. However, many feel that such enquiries facilitate planning and coordination, and can be beneficial for their careers.

- *Category B* is similar to *Category A* in terms of the type of enquiries, hours spent and compensation, but employees report that they are not expected to be available. For this category, job type has no significance. The strain on the work–life balance and health is also somewhat lower than in *Category A*, and fewer report career-related benefits.

Sporadic enquiries (Categories C and D):

A large majority (approximately 70%) rarely receive work-related enquiries outside normal working hours (*Category D*). These are primarily employees without managerial responsibilities or autonomous roles. Only a small minority report expectations of availability (*Category C*). However, more sporadic enquiries can also be perceived as burdensome, particularly for those who feel there is an expectation that they should be available to respond to them.

Effectiveness and need for regulation

There are different international approaches to regulating the right to disconnect from work outside normal working hours. Some European countries (including Belgium, France, Italy and Spain) have chosen to legislate this right, while others have incorporated it into agreements on remote working. A similar regulation would have limited relevance or effectiveness in Norway, as few employees work from home permanently.

The findings show that employees who frequently handle work-related enquiries outside working hours and are expected to respond (*Category A*) are typically managers and employees in autonomous roles. These groups are largely exempt from the provisions on working hours in the Working Environment Act. Many of them report stress, reduced work–life balance and working while ill, which indicates a need to address the ‘right to disconnect’ even for those currently exempt from the provisions on working hours.

The second group that frequently receives work-related enquiries outside of working hours and chooses to respond even though it is not expected, is a less clearly defined group (*Category B*). However, the majority in this group also tend to be either managers or in autonomous roles, or have access to flexitime that they manage themselves. They report fewer negative impacts, explaining their choice by noting that it facilitates planning and coordination, and that staying informed about developments at work during their time off is beneficial.

The survey reveals that formal workplace guidelines on availability outside of working hours are rare and that expectations regarding availability are often informal and poorly communicated. Since many enquiries outside working hours are from colleagues or external parties, it can be difficult for managers to keep track, and challenging to regulate.

Representatives from the parties at the union/industry level that we interviewed consider a national law to be impractical, partly because many employees value flexibility.

Instead, they emphasise the importance of local regulations and increased awareness about the negative consequences of employees not disconnecting from work outside working hours as key measures to reduce strain and reinforce the right to disconnect.

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