

## Guidance - Preventing an “Always On Culture”

### Introduction

This short guide aims to provide some practical advice and suggestions for managers to create and maintain an appropriate culture for integrating communication and work. This is important when teams are not working in the same location and have different work patterns and demands than before.

### Remote Working Patterns

Remote work, especially in a world affected by COVID-19, naturally leads to “flex time.” Staff with children might be getting the majority of their work done at night after the children are in bed. Others are starting their working day early and hoping to finish earlier. While others are starting late and working late. If everyone on your team is working different hours, you may be getting emails and messages at all hours of the day, night, or weekend — which can quickly create an always available, or “always-on” environment.

“Always-on” is not a sustainable work practice. It is important to ensure that does not become a standard practice as it can be hard to change once embedded. It increases pressure on staff and can create an unpleasant work environment. This is particularly important now that staff have shifted, largely unprepared, into an unfamiliar work environment.

### Practical Actions

As a manager you need to accommodate your staff’s needs while maintaining a positive team culture with due regard to your team’s work-life balance.

To do this managers need to embrace and encourage flexible hours while also defining clear “**communication hours**”, for example, **8.00am – 6.00pm**. Outside of those hours, staff should be encouraged to change their settings to “**Do Not Disturb**” and to use the “**Delay Delivery**” feature of Outlook so that messages only get delivered during communication hours.

If any correspondence must happen outside of the set communication hours, such as for urgent or time-sensitive issues, make them phone or text only. This way staff can comfortably close down all other communication channels like email and Teams.

This allows everyone on your team to work whenever is appropriate for them, but not feel like they have to work all the time to accommodate everyone else’s schedule. These challenging times don’t make downtime any less important. In fact, your team won’t handle the increased stress well without appropriate downtime.

### Achieving Success

It is important to tackle this issue head on, acknowledging the issue and emphasising the importance of downtime. This can be reinforced via regular and purposeful virtual team meetings which is good practice to keep everyone connected if your team is remote.

Agree with your team clear guidelines about which communication channels should be used and when. These rules should continue even after stay-at-home orders are lifted and staff return to campus. For example, email should never be used in the case of urgent or time-sensitive communication. This treats email as a “synchronous” communication channel and it

can never be that. No one is capable of monitoring every message in real time, and to attempt it is an exercise in futility and a sure path to stress, overload, and eventually, burnout.

If email is ever used to communicate urgent and time-sensitive communication, you will force your team to have to check every new message as it arrives, which is every few minutes for most people. This not only prevents downtime, but it also prevents your team from applying themselves to any of their important work in a thoughtful, undistracted way.

Provide guidelines for communication channels, see sample below:

<b>Communication Plan – Communication Hours 8am - 6pm</b>		
<b>Type of Communication</b>	<b>During Communication Hours</b>	<b>Outside Communication Hours</b>
Email	Routine requests, information sharing	Hold or use “Delay Delivery”
Teams	Project-related communication, socialising	Set to “Do Not Disturb”
Phone, video calls	Relationship-building, sensitive or complex topics	Time sensitive or urgent only
Text Message	Time-sensitive or urgent only	Time sensitive or urgent only

### **Lead by Example**

You should model the desired behaviour or else it will never work. Reward and encourage behaviours that support the plan accordingly. When leaders and managers don't follow an agreed work practice then it erodes the trust, and therefore the culture. It is important to address these issues early in a new remote working environment as failure to do so can have unintended consequences for the team and the organisation.