

There was a time when work was an orderly affair. It behaved. Work knew its place, and its place was Monday to Friday between nine and five. Then something odd happened. Work got all uppity. Work started to think outside the box. It started making demands. Cutting deals with the family, trading weekends for holidays in Bali.

The work monster broke free of its moorings for most of us about a decade ago, with the advent of the smartphone. The smartphone gave us weekend access to work emails. Initially it was a novelty, and quite flattering. *Nothing can wait until the morning, let alone until Monday. Only you have the power to keep this business moving... won't you read this one email and respond? Please?*

Who could deny such a request? But succumbing to a weekend email habit leads to the ramping up of demands. The work monster knows you will respond to a tantalising email tendril sent deep into the weekend heartland. "Give me the offcut minutes that are not spent efficiently and I will put them to better use," suggests the oh-so-persuasive voice of work.

The work monster is on the loose and right now is rummaging through your daily schedule looking for tasty minutes and spicy seconds to be consumed via your smartphone. Waiting for a cab? Check an email. Waiting in a supermarket queue? Check voicemail. At your kid's soccer match, the ball is up the other end; you get an email from your boss. Do you check or do you ignore? There is a politically correct response



BY BERNARD SALT

The time bomb in your pocket

to this real-life dilemma and there's another response that no one will ever admit to.

The invention of the smartphone was akin to a bomb being detonated against a dam wall. Work immediately flooded into all the nooks and crannies of everyday life, spilling and splashing and pushing things out of the way. But work is far too clever to package this spillage as a crude form of indentured labour. Weekend work

cunningly disguises itself, initially at least, as a harmless bit of email-watching. You're not a crazed workaholic sacrificing family time, you're a quirky voyeur forever on the lookout for corporate gremlins that, if left unchecked, might morph into Monday mayhem. And no one needs Monday mayhem. Weekend email monitoring allows you to predict and prevent such would-be bushfires.

But it's not all one-way traffic. Just as work has invaded the home, so has the home invaded work. Slow day at the office? Time to do some internet banking, to make a private phone call, to update social media platforms. The late 20th-century concept of work/life balance has been reimagined in the digital age as a work/life fusion in which you are always ready to engage in either activity.

Back when there was a division between work and home, workers disconnected; they clocked off on a Friday night and didn't think about work until Monday morning. Not so today. It raises the issue of how today's 20-somethings will fare by middle age, having worked for two decades without ever having fully disconnected from work. Or maybe we'll counter burnout with protocols making it politically incorrect or just plain rude to send an email and expect a response at the weekend.

Perhaps there'll be a duty of care imposed on employers to ensure workers disconnect from work pressures. That might not prevent the corporate gremlins starting weekend bushfires – but it sure would do wonders for the nation's long-term mental health.

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