

By JESSIE LIM

FOUR years ago, when I started university in France, I took three months to open my bank account. This was in part due to my faltering French, which made communication difficult. But it was also because my bank representative took days to reply.

She never replied on weekends – because French law protects her right to ignore work e-mails after office hours.

When I landed on French soil in August 2016, the El Khomri law – named after the labour minister at that time – providing French workers with the right to disconnect had just been enacted.

The law calls on companies to regulate the use of electronic devices for work and to respect their employees' personal and family time. There are no provisions on how companies should provide their employees with the right to disconnect, except that companies with more than 50 employees must devise a charter for this purpose.

In Singapore, the issue is being discussed now, at a time when the boundaries between home and work have blurred as many employees work from home amid the global pandemic.

On Oct 14, labour MP Melvin Yong said that a "Right to Disconnect" law would help employees have protected time to rest and recharge. He was speaking in Parliament during the debate on the Government's strategy to emerge stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic.

He also raised the need for work places to help employees facing burnout. Last week, a tripartite advisory on mental health was issued, spelling out guidelines for employers and resources for employees.

However, even if the right to disconnect is legislated, it may be harder for younger Singaporeans to unplug.

I regularly see young people on the MRT typing furiously on their laptops as they commute to and from work. An acquaintance posted a photo of herself replying to

# Struggling to 'disconnect'

Always-on Zoomers need to learn to switch off after work. It's easier than we think.



**Work-life balance:** While it may be harder for younger Singaporeans to unplug, it is worth the effort because the uninterrupted rest afforded to workers may boost their mental health while helping them avoid burnout, says the writer. — The Straits Times/Asia News Network

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work messages while climbing the stairs to her barre studio after office hours.

Another friend's colleague brought his work laptop when they went hiking one Saturday – in case he had to reply to e-mails.

Perhaps it is harder for my generation, the Zoomers – those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s – to disconnect from work, due to the proliferation of work channels in this day and age.

I am a Zoomer in another sense too: I use popular videoconferencing software Zoom – and also Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Alibaba's DingTalk – to talk to my bosses and interviewees.

The proliferation of these "work-related social media" channels creates pressure to maintain visibility across all these platforms, noted Prof Lim Sun Sun, who is head of humanities, arts and social sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Setting the right expectations on how responsive employees need to be on such platforms has to be done from the top.

Said Prof Lim: "Senior and middle management need to lead by example. For instance, you can send an e-mail on Sunday but make it clear that you don't expect an immediate response."

While a "Right to Disconnect" Bill has yet to be passed, I know small, incremental steps can be taken in this direction.

My editors at *The Straits Times* sometimes assign me stories before I start work, but they do add caveats in their e-mails, making it clear

that I need to work on them only when my shift starts.

For such assignments, I usually get notified over e-mail and not via the newsroom's Google Hangouts chat function, which is more intrusive.

But perhaps the willingness to disconnect must also come from within. As a breaking news reporter, I do admit that when I see a message or push notification for work, my first instinct is to snap into action.

Over time, I have learnt to distinguish between stories for immediate reporting and those which I have been tasked with in advance, because they require a longer lead time to complete.

It may be hard for digital natives to quit the habit of being connected. But it is worth the effort because the uninterrupted rest afforded to workers may boost their mental health while helping them avoid burnout.

Employers benefit too.

"The younger generation often place work-life balance high on their priority list when looking for a new employer, and having a well-rested, engaged and happy workforce benefits the organisation in many ways too," said Tricia Tan, human resources director (South-east Asia) at recruitment agency Robert Walters.

Of course any Right to Disconnect law has to make allowances for fields such as medicine, where delays can be a matter of life or death. Tan added that those in global or regional roles may also have to work around the clock, as they liaise with counterparts in different time zones.

Despite these challenges, maintaining the right to disconnect boils down to having "basic mutual respect" between employers and employees, with both parties understanding that "people have a life outside of work", she said.

As for me, one of my biggest work-related fears is that I will fall asleep on the job – after I finish writing my story, but before it is edited and cleared. I shudder at being labelled an irresponsible and lazy reporter.

However, I have been reassured by more than one colleague that if I am needed to check a story, they can simply call me. Maybe that is why my anxiety has subsided and I no longer hear the phantom beeps signalling I have unread messages, which I used to hear when I first joined the newsroom.

If it is possible to set boundaries for how and when to be contacted in the newsroom, where deadlines are on an hourly basis, it gives me hope that Singaporeans can learn to switch off from work when we have the opportunity to do so. — The Straits Times/ANN