

All work and no play made Buckingham Companies rethink its work/life balance. According to Cindy Koehler, CPM, Chief Operating Officer of Buckingham Management, the company's employees were extending their "already long days" late in the evening by catching up on email at home. "What seemed like a simple way to get ahead was actually reinforcing an added pressure for coworkers to respond to emails at all hours of the night," Koehler says. "This seemed to have a snowball effect, from top management on down."

Kristen Sanders, Director of Human Resources for Buckingham Companies, says she was literally connected at the hip to her email, checking it constantly at home, during the weekend and even on vacation. Sanders says when she was unable to sleep, she would answer emails at 3 a.m.

"The underlying pressure was internal versus external," Sanders says. "Buckingham's employees have a strong work ethic and if you don't stay caught up, you can easily get behind. When others would send email in the evening, they were not always expecting a response, but if you would see it, you would of course feel compelled to respond. This could, in turn, create dialogue and the email chain would continue."

In an effort to set a positive example and encourage a stronger work/life balance, Buckingham's management team decided to test an email "shut down" of its email server between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. for all corporate employees.

Koehler says many companies in Europe have implemented this practice with positive results, but Buckingham couldn't find a similar program in the United States.

Without a stateside example to follow, Koehler says the management team took several steps to prepare as best it could for the

change in its corporate culture, including a modification of its emergency plans and alternate means for clients to reach employees after hours, if needed.

"All of our clients have our personal cell phone numbers and are encouraged to call anytime, but most have not noticed any difference in communication since the shut down—if an emergency arises after 7 p.m., it usually warrants a phone call rather than an email anyway," Koehler says.

Case-by-case exceptions are made based on special projects and circumstances, such as working with individuals in different time zones, but for the most part, employees are expected to abide by the shutdown period.

"The spirit of the initiative is to work hard during your scheduled hours and then unplug," Koehler says.

Stop Checking Your Phone

Buckingham employees were initially skeptical, and some had a harder time adjusting than others.

"Initially I kept checking my phone—with no results!" she says. "It's like coming off of caffeine—it takes a couple of weeks to break habits. I may have taken a bit longer." However, Koehler says the snowball effect has reversed over time.

"We've adjusted to the email black-out period and, as a result, felt a much needed reprieve from that urge to constantly check our email," says Koehler, whose team re-evaluates the program weekly to ensure everything is going smoothly, recently pushing back the evening shutdown to 9 p.m.

"It has also increased face-to-face interaction among our corporate employees, which we could all use. Our top-performing employees are even more productive now."

Although Buckingham always looks at new technology to

Buckingham shuts down its email server each night to promote better work/life balance.

Pulling the



increase communication, productivity and efficiency, Koehler says in this case, her team looked in the opposite direction.

“Going ‘old-school’ and unplugging has given us a new level of focus and energy to accomplish our goals, and that’s not something you can put a price on,” she says.

The concept has merit, according to the article “Before You Hit Send, Read this,” in The Wall Street Journal. Research by the University of Glasgow and U.K.-based Modeuro Consulting revealed that a dependence on email not only disrupts productivity—it’s also contagious. If a company executive sends an excessive amount of emails, employees will follow suit.

“Before you know it, you’ll spark a ripple, a flurry of emails across the organization,” says Modeuro founder Andrew Killick, adding that most companies’ productivity would increase by 5 percent to 30 percent if they cut back on email.

Why? Because email is disruptive—a distraction from meaningful, cognitive work that decreases worker effectiveness, Killick explains in The Wall Street Journal.

While email can sometimes be a quick and convenient way to gauge interest or disseminate information, it’s often not the best tool for the job, Killick adds. According to The Wall Street Journal article, email is used correctly—to communicate across time zones or answer a specific question—just 20 percent of the time. The rest is junk, or merits a phone call or face-to-face conversation.

“We think we’re keeping people in the loop and we think we’re doing the right thing,” Killick says. “But we’re actu-

BY LAUREN BOSTON

Plug

Email is used correctly just 20 percent of the time. The rest is junk, or merits a phone call or face-to-face conversation.

“Unless there is an after-hours emergency (fire, flood or blood), things can wait until the following day.”

—Shelia Miller McDowell
Property Manager
Greystar

ally wasting enormous amounts of time.”

Time, Koehler says, that could be spent at home.

“It’s important to us that our employees enjoy some downtime—time with family, time to relax, time to have fun,” Koehler says. “Everyone needs to recharge their batteries once in a while.”

Sanders agrees. “I am more present and more attentive with my family and at home,” she says. “I always took my laptop home at night; these days, it stays at the office more often than not.”

Onsite, Online

Not everyone is down with a shutdown, though.

Memphis-based Jeremy Lawson, NALP, Leasing & Marketing Specialist for Fogelman Management Group, says his company has communities in three time zones. It’s not uncommon for him to receive an email at 8 p.m. when Fogelman’s Colorado properties are closing for the day.

“For me, a person who nearly lives in hotels, my travel schedule and workload make evenings a great time to follow up on emails,” Lawson says. “If I had to wait until morning to check and respond to emails, something urgent could get missed or delayed.”

Lawson says his department is spread throughout the country and uses email as its primary form of communication.

Without it, Lawson anticipates an increase in phone calls at night. He’d prefer an email.

For others, a shutdown is either unfeasible or unnecessary.

Koehler says Buckingham’s program only applies to corporate employees because onsite staff must have the ability to communicate with residents at all hours.

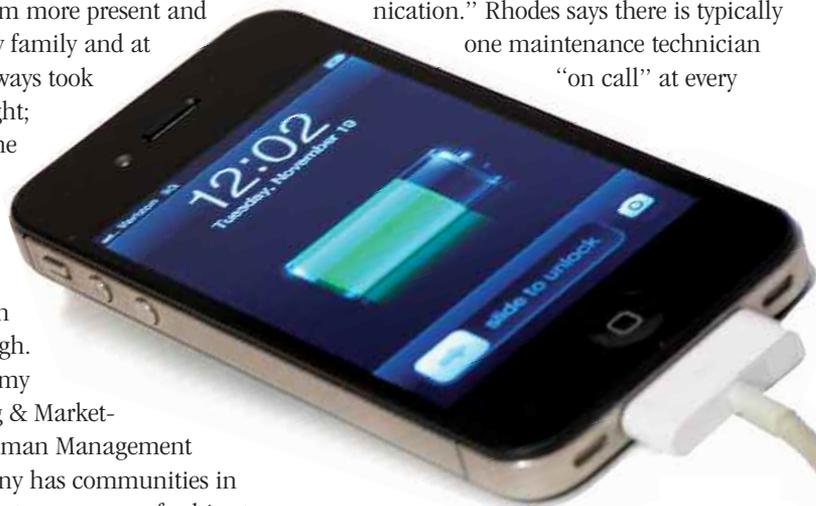
Koehler says her onsite employees understand the nature of their positions and have never asked to adopt a similar program.

Paul Rhodes, NAA’s National Maintenance and Safety Instructor, says the need—and pressure—to obsessively check work emails is non-existent in the maintenance field.

“Technology usage is generally

low, with some companies still using carbon paper to make copies of service requests,” he says.

“In general, written information that a maintenance technician needs to see is first emailed to his supervisor, who distributes it accordingly. By its very nature, the role that maintenance plays is reliant on verbal communication.” Rhodes says there is typically one maintenance technician “on call” at every



community who uses a shared work phone—typically a low-end model, such as a flip phone, that is easy to transport and can withstand wear and tear, but does not support email.

“While residents would love to email service requests directly to the maintenance staff, there needs to be a filter, such as a live-chat opportunity where someone can ask the resident questions and determine the severity of the problem before contacting maintenance. Direct email communication is problematic.”

However, Rhodes says this may change as more property operations are moving away from handwritten work orders and inspections, and toward smartphone maintenance apps and digital recordkeeping.

As this becomes more mainstream, Rhodes says email use among maintenance technicians likely will increase.

Shelia Miller McDowell, a Property Manager for Greystar, says she’d like to see a “shutdown” initiative industry-wide—“a real, attainable devotion to a work/life balance where it is acceptable to work hard and play hard without feeling like





“I am more present and more attentive with my family and at home. I always took my laptop home at night; these days, it stays at the office more often than not.”

—Kristen Sanders
Director of Human Resources, Buckingham Companies

the only way to get ahead or to be promotable is to be available and dedicated to work 24/7.

“This is going to have to start at the top with a SOP that work and life are equally important, and unless there is an after-hours emergency (fire, flood or blood), things can wait until the following day,” she says.

“The typical stereotype that people who ‘turn off’ after hours are not dedicated or focused has got to be squashed with real, reasonable expectations for after-hours needs.

“Companies need to really develop and stand behind what is acceptable for responses to messages according to their nature or urgency so that people don’t feel

like they have to respond right now or be thought of poorly.”

Miller McDowell says she checks her



4 Tips To Fight Digital Fatigue

According to “Four Ways to Fight Digital Burnout” in Associations Now, the following are tips to minimize Web fatigue.



Respect the weekend. You don’t need a yearlong sabbatical to recharge your digital batteries. A weekend will do. The productivity blog WorkAwesome calls this a “mini digital sabbatical” and offers five steps to prepare for one, including putting the date in your calendar and making a list of the offline activities you intend to do. When the time comes, unplug your modem, put away your laptop and turn off your smartphone. Turn on auto-reply and post a tweet letting followers know that you will be offline.



Change your tone. Instead of taking time away from the Internet, try a different approach. Replace sarcasm with sincerity, and you may find yourself feeling better about the time you spend online. A recent Time Magazine story suggests that this is the future of online interaction: “Bloggers have traditionally turned to sarcasm and snark to draw attention. But the success of sites like BuzzFeed and Upworthy, whose philosophies embrace the viral nature of upbeat stories, hints that the Web craves positivity.”



Take a break. When you start to feel the pressure and anxiety of working online, step away from the computer. Self-help blog Lifehacker advises to remove yourself from things that are associated with work, such as your laptop or smartphone. One of the easiest ways to do that is exercise. In FastCompany, HootSuite CEO Ryan Holmes says, “I take time out of each day to bike, do yoga or rock climb. It’s pretty impossible to check your iPhone in downward-dog or while scaling a rock face.”



Set consequences. Force yourself to ditch the smartphone during dinner or family time by making yourself accountable. One way is to start an Internet tariff. Atlantic Wire says this is like a swear jar—you drop money into a jar every time you check Facebook or email. Another way to enforce human interaction when dining is to play the phone—stacking game: At the start, everyone stacks their phones face down on the table and no one is allowed to pick them up. If anyone gives in, they pick up the tab.

Source: The full story can be found at <http://associationsnow.com/2013/08/four-ways-to-fight-digital-burnout>



“It’s important to us that our employees enjoy some down time; some time with family, time to relax, time to have fun.”

—Cindy Koehler, CPM
Chief Operating Officer, Buckingham Management

email at least every 20 minutes during the day and “way too often” at night. From home and on her phone she checks messages at least every hour—even in the middle of the night.

“An unspoken pressure to do so definitely exists,” she says. “Our RPMs are so loaded down with assets to oversee that they tend to spend hours at night ‘catching up’ on work, which includes an overload of emails to their employees. The never-ending cycle is that the RPMs are too busy the following day to address responses to the emails they sent overnight.

“Because of this, I catch myself spending time working from home so that I can help my RPM achieve her goals and deadlines, and end up more focused on work than my family and myself.

I have a strong desire to be ahead of the game to show that I am dedicated and on top of things, but the emails keep coming, no matter what time of the day or night.”

Although Miller McDowell acknowledges it will require a major shift in thinking—and business practices—to decrease the pressure to stay connected after-hours, she says doing so will significantly improve every aspect of life.

“It would be great not to log into my email in the morning and have 10 to 15 emails from my RPM awaiting me. It would also help me to focus at home and relax knowing that if I do have a message that there is no unspoken expectation that I respond immediately from home. As a former RPM, I would have welcomed this break in my daily operations as well. I would have been a much better person, mother, wife, daughter and RPM had I had the ability to just shut it off at the end of the day.”

Koehler says Buckingham’s corporate employees feel the same.

“We’ve given our employees permission to shut down,” says Koehler, who has noticed less email traffic since the program began. “We’re all respecting one another’s free time a little more, and thinking twice before reaching out after hours with a random thought that could just as soon wait until the morning. Everyone is breathing lighter.”

Lauren Boston is NAA’s Staff Writer. She can be reached at lauren@naabq.org or 703-797-0678.



How do you make the 2nd Happiest Job in America even better?

Online Certified Apartment Manager courses let you improve your skills and still have time to enjoy family and friends.

The CAM designation is the official stamp of approval, letting your employer know that you have acquired skills to analyze your community’s financial operations, accurately report property performance and execute marketing strategies. CAM: the single most important thing you can do to boost your career.

At only \$205 per course, the CAM designation is the single most important career investment you can make. (4 courses plus Research, Analysis and Evaluation).



Visit www.SingleMostImportantThing.com to get started today.