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# Instant messaging blurs the line between work and personal life

Dr Shih-Chia Wu shares her study with her social sciences students in the field of corporate communication on the widespread phenomenon of using instant messaging apps for business purposes, and advises how employers and human resources practitioners can avoid tilting employees' work-life balance.

## 社交媒體模糊工作與生活界線

吳世家博士與企業傳播碩士生們分享其有關即時通訊軟件普遍用於商業用途的研究，並建議僱主和人力資源從業者如何避免妨礙員工工作息平衡。



**Smartphones** have become an indispensable part of our everyday life in modern society, and Hong Kong is no exception. The handy instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, WeChat and Skype are not only used for daily communication between friends and families, but also used at work.

With the prevalence of the instant messaging apps and mobile data, Dr Shih-chia Wu, from the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and her master's students in corporate communications, surveyed 254 Hong Kong workers born in the 1980s and 1990s in the form of online questionnaires, and concluded the boundaries between work and personal life were indeed increasingly blurred.

### 'Overtime' in disguise

The survey found that more than 80% of respondents said WhatsApp had overtaken their lives, while 40% felt their managers would evaluate their performance based on their WhatsApp responses. That said, workers admitted that using the app for work had improved efficiency, albeit their frustration on its effect on their personal lives.

Commenting on this, Amy Ho, director of human resources at Hyatt Regency Hong Kong, Sha Tin, pointed out that how employees communicate on WhatsApp reveals their work attitude to a certain extent, including how they work with others and approach things. Ho also advised employers to set up a clear job assessment protocol so employees understand exactly what is being assessed. It also helps minimise the impression of not responding to WhatsApp messages being treated as poor work behaviour.

### Establish multiple healthy communication practices to achieve a win-win situation

We observed the increasingly blurred lines between work and personal life, and hence, recommended human resources leaders developing guidelines for workplace instant messaging applications. In addition, leaders should further discuss how these messaging apps should be used and the company's stance

**智能手機**已經成為都市人日常生活的一部分，機不離手更成為港人生活常態。使用即時通訊軟件如WhatsApp、WeChat、Skype等，方便快捷，除了日常與親友溝通外，不少打工仔亦會用作公務溝通。

隨著即時通訊軟件及流動數據普及化，為了解打工仔於非辦公時間使用WhatsApp進行公務溝通的情況，香港中文大學新聞及傳播學院吳世家博士與企業傳播碩士生們透過網上問卷調查了254名香港八九十後打工仔，發現工作時間和私人時間的界線變得越來越模糊。

### 「隱性加班」問題嚴重 八成人指WhatsApp佔據私人生活

調查發現，超過八成受訪者認為WhatsApp已佔據其私人生活，更有四成受訪者認為上司會用WhatsApp評核其工作表現。不過，調查結果也顯示，打工仔認同使用WhatsApp處理公事能提升工作效率，同時也覺得會影響私人生活，蠶食私人時間。

對此，香港沙田凱悅酒店人力資源總監何淑雯認為，僱員使用WhatsApp的態度，某程度上可透視出其工作態度，包括待人接物及處事等。至於評核同事工作表現方面，僱主應設定明確的工作評核機制，讓僱員了解評核的內容，才不會使僱員產生不向上司WhatsApp會被「秋後算賬」的錯覺。

### WhatsApp非唯一溝通渠道 建立良性溝通才可達至雙贏

香港中文大學新聞傳播學院吳世家博士就現時工作與



Balancing act: Smartphones are a great way to communicate with workers, but employers need to make sure they don't impact employees' personal lives.  
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私人時間越加模糊的情況，建議人力資源領袖可制定即時通訊軟件使用指引，並就通訊軟件的使用方法與態度加強內部討論，以得到僱主僱員共識。

而打工仔需要學習如何更精明地掌握運用通訊軟件的時機、方法與態度，以達至良性溝通。吳世家亦指出，上司與下屬應該因應不同溝通目的和情況，妥善運用各種合適的渠道，包括會議、電郵、內聯網、即時通訊軟件等作內部溝通。

何淑雯也提出，在平衡僱員作息與提升工作效率之間，上司及下屬應以互相尊重為前題，上司亦應理解下屬未必可以即時回覆，如遇上司在非辦公時間透過WhatsApp要求處理公事，僱員可根據與上司訂立的協議及情況決定是否需要即時處理。

香港一間美國公關公司的人力資源部總監補充，僱主應明白僱員一般的工作時間不應多於12小時，任何多於12小時的工作時間會使僱員作息時間不足，導致生產力不升反跌。因此如非必要，一般都應先選擇以正規的公務通訊工具如電郵作溝通，以尊重和避免影響僱員的私人生活。

#### 六成打工仔願意部分公餘時間使用WhatsApp作公務溝通以換取彈性上班時間

八九十後打工仔注重工作生活平衡。調查也發現，超過六成受訪者表示願意用部分非辦公時間以WhatsApp進行公務溝通來換取彈性上班時間。

因應不同產業需求，僱主除可考慮推出彈性上班時間外，亦可考慮提供公司專用電話給需經常使用即時軟件作公務溝通的僱員，以區分私人及公司資料及訊息，以免讓打工仔對使用WhatsApp進行公務溝通產生負面感受。H

towards the apps, so a compromise between the employer and employees can be reached.

On the other hand, workers should learn when and how to use these apps to communicate effectively. Both employers and employees should use appropriate channels – conferences, emails, intranet, instant messaging software, etc. – for internal communication depending on communication purposes and situations.

Moreover, Ho said the balance between employees' off time and improving work efficiency should be on the basis of mutual respect. Human resources managers need to understand that employees may not be able to respond immediately. If the manager requests to handle work matters through WhatsApp during non-office hours, the employee may decide whether to work on it immediately based on the situation and their agreement.

The head of human resources from a US public relations firm in Hong Kong added that employers should understand that employees should not work for more than 12 hours in general. Any hours worked in excess of 12 will result in insufficient rest time for employees, leading to declined productivity.

Therefore, to respect and avoid affecting employees' private lives, formal business communication tools such as email should be the choice of work communication unless other tools are necessary.

#### WhatsApp during non-office hours in exchange for flexible working hours

Workers born in the 1980s and 1990s value work-life balance. Over 60% of respondents expressed their willingness to use WhatsApp for business purposes during non-office hours in exchange for flexible working hours.

Depending on the industry nature, employers may consider offering smartphones to employees who use instant messaging apps frequently for business communication. This will help employees separate company information from personal messages and elicit the negative feelings of using WhatsApp to handle work matters. H