

French workers now have legal right not to be contacted after they leave the office

France is the only country in the world to have adopted a 35-hour working week and this is strictly enforced. So much so that, yesterday, an agreement was signed between bosses and unions representing more than a million white-collar employees that would strike the average British worker as an edict from Cloud Cuckoo Land.

It is a legally enforceable deal that means workers should not be contacted once they have left the office. It is as if the smartphone had never been invented. And the unions will from now on be measuring what they are neatly calling "digital working time".

How odd these ideas seem to us. Heaven only knows what the average British working week would be if digital hours were taken into consideration. No matter what time of the day or night, whatever we may be doing in our leisure hours, we are only a ping away from being back at a virtual desk. I rarely have dinner with anyone these days who isn't attached to their smartphone, waiting for a pause in the conversation so they can check their emails. Not good for digestion, not good for quality of life.

Here's the thing, too. French productivity levels outstrip those of Britain and Germany, and French satisfaction with their quality of life is above the OECD average. No wonder, we may say. We'd all like to take a couple of hours off for lunch, washed down with a nice glass of Côtes du Rhône, and then switch our phones off as soon as we leave work. It's just that our bosses won't let us.

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