

## Right to Disconnect

### Purpose

The Municipality of Middlesex Centre understands that due to work-related pressures, the current landscape of work, or an employee's work environment or location, employees may feel obligated or choose to continue to perform their job duties outside their normal working hours. Work-related pressure and the inability to disconnect from the job can lead to stress and deterioration of mental health and overall well-being. This policy has been established to support employee wellness, minimize excessive sources of stress, and ensure that employees have the right to disconnect from work outside their regularly scheduled hours.

Under the Employment Standards Act, 2000, a written Right to Disconnect Policy is required for employers that employ 25 or more employees.

### Scope

This policy applies to all employees of the Municipality of Middlesex Centre.

### Roles & Responsibilities

**All employees**, regardless of their position, are responsible for understanding the intent of this policy and following the guidelines it contains.

**All employees in a supervisory role** are responsible for working with their team to establish work practices that support the Right to Disconnect Policy.

**Senior Leadership (CAO and directors)** are responsible for enforcing this policy, and for mediating any conflicts that may arise between staff and supervisors.

**Customer Service Response:** It should be noted this policy does not over-ride our commitment to our strategic priority of Responsive Municipal Government. We will continue to provide excellent customer service to ratepayers and respond in appropriate timelines notwithstanding the implementation of this policy. All customer service requests will be assessed on urgency and responded to during regular working hours unless it is deemed necessary to respond outside of working hours based on the severity of the issue.

## **Policy & Procedure**

### **Context**

Time outside of working hours is meant for employees to recharge and spend time as they wish and should not be used to complete work-related tasks; however, there may be a lack of separation between home and work that makes it difficult for employees to truly disconnect. Because work is more accessible, employees may end up continuing to work even after their workday is done. Using personal time to work can make an employee feel as though they are “always on” or obligated to continue working or respond to communication.

Employees who do not fully disconnect from their work at the end of the day may experience stress and other mental health issues. Stress and poor mental health are associated with many of the leading causes of disease and disability, can lead to burnout, negatively affect performance, mood, and attendance, and personal and professional relationships.

Employee health and well-being are priorities while working and away from work. The Municipality of Middlesex Centre is committed to increasing overall employee health and wellness and providing employees with a better work-life balance.

### **The Right to Disconnect**

Employees have the right to disconnect from their job and any work-related tasks or communication outside of working hours<sup>1</sup> without fear of reprisal.

Employees are encouraged to set clear boundaries between work and their personal lives.

The right to disconnect means that employees:

- Can and should stop performing their job duties and work-related tasks when they are not expected to work;
- Are not routinely required to take work home to complete outside of regular working hours;
- Are not expected or required to respond to work-related communication outside their regular working hours, while on break, or during any paid or unpaid time off;
- Should take and use all their scheduled breaks and time off entitlements for non-work-related activities; and

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<sup>1</sup> Working hours refers to an employee’s scheduled shift(s), which may fall outside of municipal office hours. Please consult the Hours of Work Policy for further details.

- Will not face repercussion or be penalized for not communicating or continuing to work outside of their regular working hours.

Employees must also be respectful of others' right to disconnect and should not expect their co-workers to respond, communicate, or complete work when not working.

## **Workload and Productivity**

The Municipality of Middlesex Centre understands that employees may want or need to work outside their normal hours to meet a time-sensitive deadline, to attend to an urgent matter, or due to unforeseen circumstances; however, employees should not regularly or frequently work outside their scheduled hours to complete or catch up on work.

Employees who cannot manage their workload during their regularly scheduled hours should meet with their manager to evaluate the current workload, priorities, and due dates.

Managers will work with employees to come up with best practices to ensure:

- The current workload does not result in the employee working excess hours or contribute to additional stress and burnout;
- Normal job duties can be completed during working hours; and
- Employees can remain productive and meet company goals and objectives.

Working additional hours does not always equate to higher productivity. Employees can maximize their productivity during their workday by using time management tactics, such as:

- Blocking off periods in their schedule and calendar to complete specific tasks or address communication;
- Working with their manager to organize work in order of priority or importance while setting realistic deadlines;
- Breaking down projects and tasks into manageable chunks;
- Minimizing interruptions by setting their online status notification to “busy” or “do not disturb;”
- Trying to have at least one dedicated workday per week without meetings (where possible); and
- Setting goals to work continuously for a specified period before taking a break or responding to communication.

## **Communication**

### ***Sending & Responding to Messages***

As a seven-day-a-week operation, Middlesex Centre staff work a variety of shifts that may or may not overlap with co-workers and supervisors. As such, employees may receive messages (including emails, voicemails, texts, etc.) when they are not working.

Employees are not expected to respond to any company communication when not at work, except for unforeseen circumstances, such as an emergency. Employees who do not reply to work-related communications outside normal working hours will not face negative repercussions to their employment.

Employees should, as much as possible, avoid sending emails, messages (through their phone or other communication and messaging apps), or calling other employees or clients outside their regularly scheduled working hours, during breaks, or during an employee's time off, such as their regular day off or vacation time.

Further, if employees do send communications to others who are not at work, they should not expect a response until the other employees' next scheduled shift. The exception is if the matter is of an urgent nature or in an emergency, where there may be times where either the manager and/or employee may need to connect.

Employees and supervisors should set communication boundaries by:

- Setting clear expectations for email response time;
- Logging off computer programs/systems at end of working day;
- Scheduling any breaks or time-off in a shared calendar;
- Setting email and voicemail status to "away," "out of office," "do not disturb," or "offline" when not working, on vacation or a schedule day off;
- Determining work protocols for positions to be "back-stopped" during vacations and time away from work; and,
- Establishing clear methods for contacting staff after hours should an emergency arise.

### ***On-Call Communications***

Some positions have on-call responsibilities as part of their job requirements. These protocols are set on a department-specific basis. If a staff member is designated as being "on-call" they are considered to be working and therefore this policy does not apply.

### ***Urgent Communications – Emergencies***

From time-to-time urgent matters may arise that require immediate action outside of normal working hours. In these cases, it is incumbent upon the sender to ensure the message is received

by those required to act. If employees are “disconnected” then it is not reasonable to expect them to respond to an urgent email, etc. A phone call, text etc. (as determined by each department) may be required to ensure receipt of the message.

### ***Avoiding Unnecessary Messages***

Avoiding unnecessary messages, particularly by email, will not only support this policy, but will increase efficiency overall. Some actions include:

- Avoiding unnecessary cc’s when sending emails;
- Avoiding reply-all unless the response truly needs to go to everyone on the original message;
- Making use of key-words in subject lines, such as “Urgent” or “Review Require by…” or “For Information Only” and
- Avoiding using work email for unrelated communication, such as newsletters, coupons, or personal correspondence.

### **Breaks, Time Off and Vacations**

Breaks are provided in accordance with employment standards and are intended to provide employees with time to recharge and enable them to resume their regular work productively.

Employees should take any scheduled or company-provided breaks during their shift. Employees should take time away from their work and refrain from responding or sending communication during breaks.

Further, when away from work for scheduled time off / vacation, employees should refrain from responding or sending communication.

### **Mental Health Support**

The Municipality of Middlesex Centre recognizes that the workplace plays a significant role in managing and supporting mental health and understands that deterioration of mental health and wellness can be triggered by excess pressures at work or at home and result in lowered work performance and harm to one’s physical and mental condition.

The Municipality of Middlesex Centre will support mental health by:

- Minimizing work-related sources of stress;
- Addressing internal factors that contribute to burnout;
- Regularly assessing workload, productivity, and expectations;
- Promoting work–life balance;

- Helping employees recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health issues;
- Having an open-door policy for communication and ensure employees are comfortable talking to their manager about mental health concerns;
- Treating mental health with the same level of importance as physical health and safety; and
- Providing employees with the assistance and access to resources they need to support their mental health (such as employee assistance programs, accommodations, etc.).

### **Policy Acknowledgement**

This policy will be provided to employees within 30 calendar days of:

- the policy being prepared, or
- the policy being changed (if an existing policy is changed).

This policy will also be provided to any new employees within 30 calendar days of the new employee being hired.

Every employee will review and acknowledge this policy and have an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the content herein.

### **Compliance**

The CAO enforces this policy and related standards. Anyone who has reason to suspect a deliberate and/or significant violation of this policy is encouraged to promptly report it to their department director and the CAO.

Staff in violation of this policy may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination.

### **Policy Review**

This policy will be reviewed once every four (4) years, or as necessary.