

The Right to Be Unreachable

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

BEFORE YOU READ

Talk with a partner. Should workers have a legal right not to answer messages outside working hours?

1. Match the words (1-6) with the definitions (A-F).

- | | | |
|---------------------|-------|---|
| 1. permeable | _____ | A. a measure that protects against harm |
| 2. reciprocity | _____ | B. uncertain and likely to change for the worse |
| 3. precarious | _____ | C. allowing something to pass through easily |
| 4. normative | _____ | D. a mutual exchange of benefits or duties |
| 5. safeguard | _____ | E. too large or unfair in relation to something else |
| 6. disproportionate | _____ | F. concerned with what is considered normal or acceptable |

2. Read the article. The bold words are the vocabulary from Activity 1.

1. A message from a manager after dinner may take only a minute to answer, yet it can alter the character of an evening. Digital communication has made the boundary between work and private life increasingly **permeable**. For some people this flexibility is welcome; for others it means that work is never fully absent.
2. Supporters of a right to disconnect argue that the issue is not individual rudeness but workplace expectations. An employee may know that an immediate reply is not formally required while still fearing the consequences of silence. This is particularly true in **precarious** employment, where workers may feel unable to refuse informal demands.
3. Opponents note that rigid rules may not suit every job. International teams, emergencies and flexible schedules can make occasional contact reasonable. They also point to **reciprocity**: a worker who is free to adjust hours during the day may sometimes be expected to respond outside a conventional timetable.
4. The debate is therefore partly **normative**. What should count as a normal expectation of availability? A policy can state that messages need not be answered, but its effect depends on whether managers model that behaviour. If senior staff continue to reward immediate replies, a written policy may provide little protection.
5. A useful **safeguard** may be to distinguish genuine urgency from routine convenience. Employers could set clear channels for emergencies, delay non-urgent messages automatically, and review whether contact falls **disproportionately** on junior staff. The goal is not isolation from colleagues; it is the ability to be unavailable without penalty.

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UNDERSTAND, DISCUSS AND WRITE

3. Comprehension. Answer in complete sentences. Use the article to help you.

1. Why can a brief after-hours message have a larger effect than its length suggests?

2. Why may precarious workers feel unable to ignore messages?

3. What argument do opponents make about reciprocity?

4. Why might a written policy be insufficient?

5. What safeguards does the article suggest?

4. Discuss. Talk in small groups. Give reasons and examples.

- What should count as a work emergency?
- Can flexibility exist without constant availability?
- Should a right to disconnect apply to self-employed people?
- How can managers make a policy meaningful in practice?

5. Homework: Write an opinion paragraph.

Write 220-260 words proposing a communication policy for a workplace or school. Define its benefits, exceptions and safeguards against unfair pressure.

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ANSWER KEY AND TEACHING NOTE

Vocabulary matching

1. permeable - C
2. reciprocity - D
3. precarious - B
4. normative - F
5. safeguard - A
6. disproportionate - E

Comprehension answers

1. Why can a brief after-hours message have a larger effect than its length suggests?

It can change the character of private time by making work feel continually present.

2. Why may precarious workers feel unable to ignore messages?

They may fear that refusing informal demands will have negative consequences for uncertain employment.

3. What argument do opponents make about reciprocity?

Flexible workers who can adjust their hours may sometimes reasonably be expected to respond outside a conventional schedule.

4. Why might a written policy be insufficient?

Its real effect depends on whether managers model it and whether immediate replies continue to be rewarded.

5. What safeguards does the article suggest?

Clear emergency channels, delayed non-urgent messages and review of whether contact burdens junior staff unfairly.

Teaching note

Compare vocabulary answers before reading. Help learners plan a communication policy: benefits, exceptions and safeguards. Accept accurate comprehension paraphrases and supported personal responses.