

Working off the clock

Level: Intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about unpaid overtime. In this lesson, students:

1. study an article on the problems associated with unpaid overtime and what can be done about it;
2. complete some statistics about overtime in the UK;
3. discuss their own working hours and company policy on overtime;
4. write a company-wide email on the topic of off-the-clock working.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 6/2017.

Warmer

Hold a short group discussion in which students reveal how many hours they work per week and how many (if any) of these are unpaid.

Note: Explain to students that they don't have to provide this information if it makes them feel uncomfortable in any way. Elicit or pre-teach how to respond to this kind of question, for example by saying 'I'd rather not say.'

Key words

Students find the key words in the article, then write them next to the definitions.

Key:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. demoralizing | 7. right |
| 2. backing | 8. effort |
| 3. voluntarily | 9. intervene |
| 4. public sector | 10. adopted |
| 5. peer pressure | 11. restricting |
| 6. job insecurity | 12. norms |

Numbers

In pairs, students complete the information using the numbers in the box. Check their answers and hold a short group discussion in which students say which of the figures surprised them and which didn't.

Key:

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1. 2.1 billion | 4. 1.6 million |
| 2. £6,301 | 5. 590,000 |
| 3. 13.1 hours | |

Expressions

Students underline the expressions in the article see to how they are used. (**Note:** The expressions are in the order that they appear in the article.) Then students match them with their meanings.

Key:

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. d | 6. a |
| 2. f | 7. g |
| 3. e | 8. j |
| 4. i | 9. b |
| 5. h | 10. c |

Understanding the article

Students use the expressions from the previous task to complete sentences containing information from the article.

Key:

- | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. makes good business sense | 6. take its toll |
| 2. raise awareness | 7. off-the-clock |
| 3. in this respect | 8. taken for granted |
| 4. in lieu | 9. set an example |
| 5. clocks off | 10. in terms of |

Discussion

Students discuss the questions related to the article.

An email to all employees

- a. Working in pairs, students read the advice, discuss each point and make notes about how they could be implemented in their company. For example, *Employees should not be allowed to access their work emails at the weekend.*

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b. Tell the students to imagine that they work in the HR department. They should plan and write an email to all the employees in the company informing them about the points, explaining and giving reasons why each one is important and offering suggestions as to how they could be implemented. Encourage students to use some of the key words and expressions from the previous tasks.

Related topics on onestopenglish

This set of news lessons looks into the Japanese government's optional scheme allowing employees to clock off early:

www.onestopenglish.com/skills/news-lessons/weekly-topical-news-lessons/2017-weekly-news-lesson-archive/30th-march-2017-japan-gives-its-workers-a-break-to-go-shopping/555878.article

This lesson highlights the metaphorical concept in English that time is money and asks students to examine their own work-life balance:

www.onestopenglish.com/skills/integrated-skills/life-skills/pdf/macmillan-life-skills-time-management-time-is-money-lesson-plan/553899.article

The following Business Spotlight lesson asks whether Americans work too many hours:

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/do-americans-work-too-much/551926.article

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In general, how many hours do you work per week? How many of these are unpaid?

2 Key words

Find words in the article that fit the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. making you lose confidence or hope _____ (para 2)
2. giving support to someone or something _____ (para 3)
3. because you choose to do it, rather than you have to do it _____
(para 3)
4. the industries and services, for example schools and hospitals, that are supported by tax money and controlled by the government of a country _____
(two words, para 3)
5. the influence that other people have on the way you behave _____
(two words, para 4)
6. the fear that your job is not safe and that you may lose it _____
(two words, para 4)
7. something that you are legally allowed to have _____
(para 5)
8. an attempt to do something that is difficult or that involves hard work _____
(para 6)
9. become involved in a situation in order to try to stop or change it _____
(para 8)
10. started using a particular idea, plan or method _____
(para 8)
11. keeping something within strict limits _____ (para 8)
12. things that are usual or expected _____ (para 9)

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These days, unpaid overtime hours are the norm in many companies. Why are employees prepared to work so many extra hours without getting paid for them and what can be done about it? JULIAN EARWAKER reports.

- 1 Michelle Hall starts her working day at 7am and should finish at 3pm. However, as sales manager in charge of a busy hotel team, she usually clocks off after 5pm, which means that every day, she works at least two hours of unpaid overtime. "The hospitality trade really takes its toll," she says, "with long working days dealing with the public day in, day out."
- 2 Teacher Megan Quinn works a minimum of 56 hours a week – with additional unpaid hours needed for marking and lesson preparation. "It's unmanageable for lots of new teachers coming into the profession in terms of what's expected of them," Quinn told the BBC. "It can be demoralizing and often teachers are exhausted." Studies show that many UK teachers work a 60-hour week, which is much longer than in other countries.
- 3 Regular unpaid overtime, or "off-the-clock working", is an increasing factor in the modern-day workplace. Back in 1968, the "I'm backing Britain" campaign saw employees working half an hour extra each day voluntarily to help improve the economy. Today, research by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) shows that more than 5.3 million UK workers each contribute an average 7.7 hours of unpaid hours every week. The worst occupations are teaching, finance, publishing and journalism, healthcare, transport and law. Public-sector employees are almost twice as likely to work unpaid overtime as those in the private sector.
- 4 So why do Michelle, Megan and so many other unpaid overtime workers do it? According to TotallyMoney.com, the most common reason is too much work. Other reasons include workplace culture and peer pressure, management demands, job insecurity and commitment to work.
- 5 The EU Working Time Directive (Working Time Regulations in the UK) limits working hours to 48 hours

a week – normally averaged over 17 weeks. Employees have to work overtime only if their contract says so. Instead of payment, workers can agree to take TOIL (time off in lieu) as arranged with their employer. However, there is no automatic right to pay or TOIL for employees contracted to work overtime. Unfortunately, contracts are often ignored by employers, who either expect or allow employees to work additional, unpaid hours as part of their normal working week.

"Few people mind putting in extra effort from time to time when it is needed," TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady told *The Independent*, "but it is too easy for extra time to be taken for granted and expected day in, day out."

So what can be done? The TUC suggests workers should talk to their manager or union representative. Employees need to stop bad habits such as clocking off and then continuing to work. Jon Burns, of the workforce management company Replicon, advises managers to take a serious look at the key issues involved in off-the-clock working. Why, for example, does an employee appear to have too much work? Can a manager change the employee's projects and duties to improve the situation?

With chief executives working the highest number of overtime hours, leadership clearly needs to come from the top. But should the government intervene? Both Germany and France have adopted new labour reforms aimed at restricting out-of-hours work and communications. Sweden is experimenting with six-hour working days.

"Unpaid overtime is weakly regulated in the UK compared to other countries, both in cultural and legal terms," says Paul Sellers of the TUC. He suggests three targets to aim at: first, to raise awareness and establish new norms for working life; second, to strengthen the Working Time Regulations; and finally, to adopt stronger legislation. He believes that Britain can learn much from Germany in this last respect, especially, by applying some of the overtime regulations now found in German employment law.

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10 While allowing unpaid overtime might appear to make good business sense, the statistics suggest otherwise. Alongside increasing off-the-clock hours, UK workers have some of the worst productivity in the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). “The best bosses understand that a long-hours culture doesn’t get good results,” comments the TUC’s Frances O’Grady. “So

we’re asking managers to set an example by leaving on time, too.”

That would probably please Michelle, Megan and other UK off-the-clock workers – but would it lessen their workload?

***JULIAN EARWAKER** is a freelance journalist, prison writer-in-residence and book author.*

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3 Numbers

Complete the information about unpaid overtime in the UK with the numbers in the box.

13.1 hours

1.6 million

£ 6,301

590,000

2.1 billion

UNPAID OVERTIME



- 1 _____ number of unpaid hours worked in the UK in 2016
- 2 _____ average annual cost of unpaid overtime per UK worker
- 3 _____ average unpaid hours worked each week by UK chief executives
- 4 _____ number of UK employees who exceed the EU Working Time Directive’s weekly limit (48 hours) because of unpaid overtime
- 5 _____ number of London employees who work more than 48 hours and average 11.9 hours’ unpaid overtime each week

Source: Trades Union Congress

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4 Expressions

a. **Underline these expressions in the article. Notice how they are used. Then match them to their meanings.**

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. clock off | a. expect something always to happen or exist in a particular way |
| 2. take its toll | b. be practical and good for a company and its employees |
| 3. in terms of | c. behave in a way that makes other people want to copy you |
| 4. off-the-clock | d. pass a special card through a piece of equipment to record that you are leaving work |
| 5. in lieu | e. used for saying which aspects of something you are talking about |
| 6. take something for granted | f. badly affect someone or something, especially in a gradual way |
| 7. raise awareness | g. increase knowledge or understanding of a subject, issue or situation |
| 8. in this respect | h. to replace extra time worked |
| 9. make good business sense | i. beyond the normal paid working hours |
| 10. set an example | j. in this aspect of something |

5 Understanding the article

Complete the information about the article using expressions from task 4.

- At first, it might seem that allowing employees to work extra hours without pay _____ but when we look closely, we can see this is not true.
- The Trades Union Congress in the UK wants to _____, establish new norms for working life in the UK and introduce stronger laws and rules.
- _____, the TUC believes that the UK can learn a lot from other countries where there are stricter rules about working hours.
- In the UK, employees have no automatic right to extra pay or time off _____ if their contract states that they are expected to work overtime hours.
- Michelle Hall says that she continues working even after she _____.
- Working long days can _____ and employees can become demoralized and exhausted.
- Regular unpaid overtime, or _____ working, has become a normal aspect of the modern-day workplace, with many companies even expecting this of their employees.
- Many employees don't mind working a few extra hours but unfortunately, in many companies, it is _____ that employees will stay longer than their contracts state.
- Managers could _____ for their employees by leaving on time.
- Teachers are expected to work extra hours without pay and, _____ what is expected of them, many find the extra hours unmanageable.

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6 Discussion

Talk about your working hours.

- When do you usually start and finish work?
- Do you have to clock on and off?
- Do you work shifts / have flexible working hours / have fixed contract hours?
- How often do you work overtime?
- Is the overtime paid or unpaid?
- Do you ever get time off in lieu for working extra or unsociable hours?
- Does your company limit the number of overtime hours employees can work each month?
- Why do you work overtime? For example, is it because you have deadlines? Or do you have to speak to people in different time zones? Is it because of peer pressure? Does your company expect it?

7 An email to all employees

a. Read the advice below. Discuss how these points could be implemented in your company.

HOW TO DEAL WITH OFF-THE-CLOCK WORKING



- 1 Set clear policies on working hours.
- 2 Provide training for managers and supervisors on working-hours laws.
- 3 Limit after-hours access to office technology.
- 4 Don't allow employees to work late. Make sure they stay clocked on while working.
- 5 Make sure that workers take breaks and lunches.

Source: Workplace Answers

b. You work in the HR department. Write an email to all the employees in your company. Inform them about these points, say why each one is important and give suggestions as to how they could be implemented. Try to include some of the key words from task 2 as well as some of the expressions from task 4.