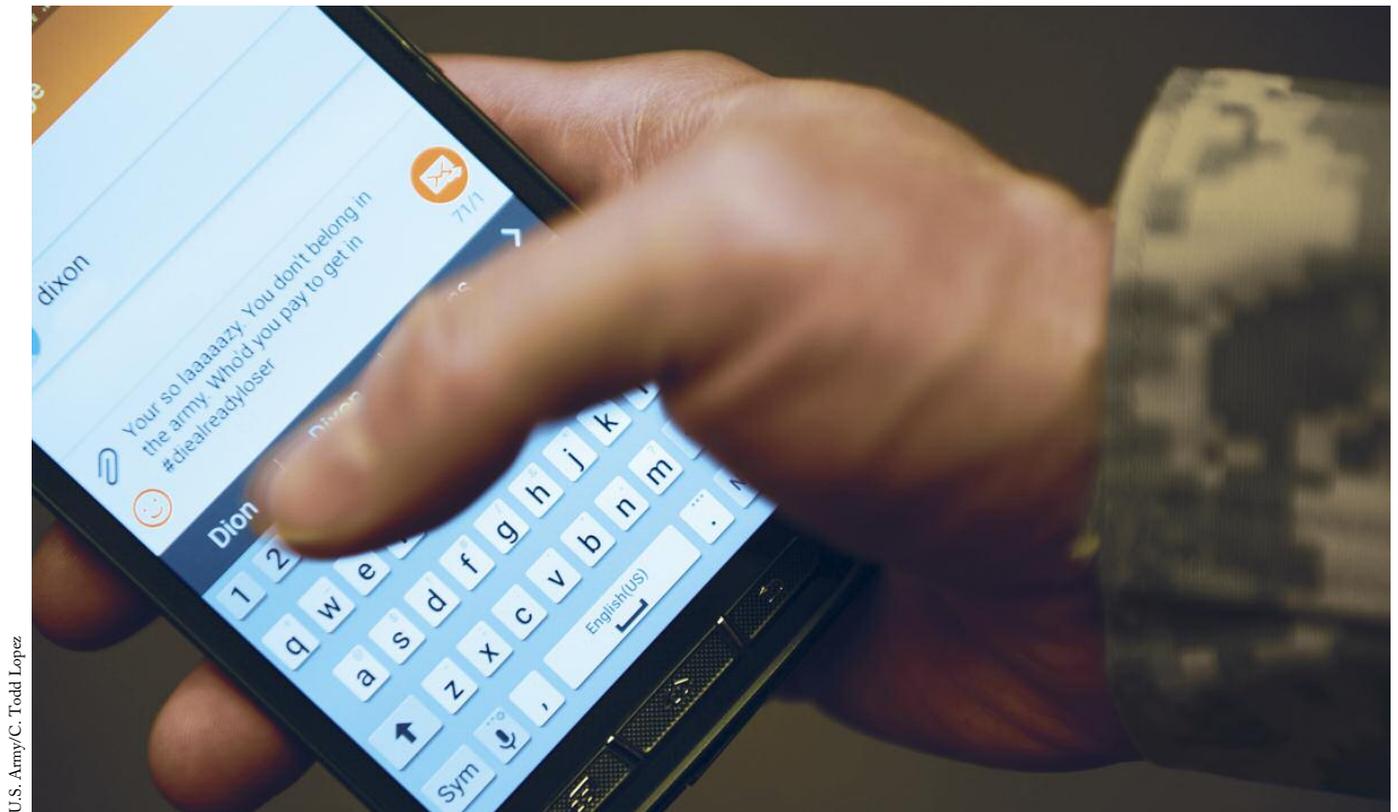


# Going Off-Duty Doesn't



U.S. Army/C. Todd Lopez

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**T**he communications revolution—smartphones, the internet, social media and other technologies—has brought profound changes to every work environment. Nowhere is this truer than in the U.S. military. Constant access to work communications, coupled with intrusions on what once was considered off-duty hours, are blurring the lines between professional and personal time.

Consequently, many military members feel like they are always on duty. Recent studies have shown that this constant on-duty life may impact morale, perceptions of the military, and the physical health of military professionals.

As technology connects us to one another more and more, there is also a growing concern about individual privacy. Ubiquitous media technology with its images and text—sometimes hastily written and emotional—have diminished the boundaries of what is private and what is not. And what others know about us and our opinions can present a quandary for employers. Furthermore, what is “out there” is out there forever.

Can a line be drawn between one’s off-the-job persona and one’s on-the-job persona? The answer is pretty clear for those in uniform: No.

## Serious Implications

The implications for the military are serious. Henry Mintzberg, in his seminal 1973 book *The Nature of Managerial*

*Work*, discusses the roles of all managers, regardless of profession or industry. These roles include the interpersonal and the informational. Managers are the face of their organization, and increasingly so as they move up the hierarchy. Under Mintzberg’s schema, the notion that the one’s off-the-job persona is one’s own business becomes increasingly tenuous.

Human resources management practice has historically maintained that off-the-job behavior has no bearing on maintaining one’s employment, unless there is a nexus between the employee’s job and the off-the-job behavior. If an employee’s off-the-job behavior can affect the employer’s reputation or impede the employee’s ability to do his or her job, then the distinction between the two behaviors is, in fact, not distinct. If other employees no longer want to work with someone because of his or her off-the-job behavior, that too may cause a manager to take action.

In an October 2014 panel discussion, then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno gave clear guidance for soldiers: “The professional ethic is not a 9-to-5 ethic. It’s a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week ethic.”

He continued, “Our profession is one that requires you to understand that everything you do reflects on your profession, reflects on who you are, reflects on those who rely on you to do very difficult missions.”

The Army’s written policies and doctrine are clear on the

# Protect Online Behavior

topic of the 24/7 life of the soldier. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1: The Army Profession notes that those in the profession of arms have a unique duty to perform: to “provide the security—the common defense—which a society cannot provide for itself but without which the society cannot survive.” By taking a solemn oath of service, soldiers voluntarily incur an obligation to live the Army Ethic and accept that being a soldier “is far more than a job; it is a calling—a way of life.”

## Continued Blurring of Time

The expectations of conduct for soldiers have always been high. This is not new. What is new, and of concern, is the continued blurring of personal with professional time and space. Despite the 24/7 rules of military service, there has always been some separation between the professional and personal. Whether it was at social gatherings or behind closed doors with family and friends, there was a tacit understanding of what constituted a soldier’s personal life.

Information technologies have essentially ended any separation between a soldier’s professional and personal time. Rules about involvement in the political process used to be straightforward: Don’t wear your uniform to a political event, and don’t make assertions on behalf of the government. Social media has blurred those lines, because our Facebook profiles usually informally identify us as soldiers even if we post a message while wearing pajamas.

In the past, soldiers—especially those in leadership roles—who were not deployed and not at work were on off-duty status. Today, that is not true. Most soldiers have smartphones that tether them to the work environment. Soldiers are now only a text, call or email away from professional space.

It is not only the technology-aided injection of professional obligations into personal time that is an issue. Also of concern is the redefining of the personal environment. With the expansion of social media, a soldier’s personal space includes a considerable amount of time spent on social media forums such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

As Odierno noted, there is no separate life online; soldiers are held to the Army Ethic 24/7. This includes possible punishment for comments made on social media. Even if you believe you are connecting only with family and friends, the communication is not private. An off-duty officer is still professionally accountable if he or she appears on Instagram engaged in behavior that may not be illegal but is at odds with the 24/7 ethic of the soldier.

## Health, Readiness at Stake

It is not just reputation, promotion or disciplinary actions that are at stake. This 24/7 world may very well be impacting health and degrading readiness. A recent article in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* examined “extended work availability,” or the ability to be productive at nearly any time and in nearly any place. When leisure time no longer is really leisure

time, we feel the impact subjectively and also physiologically in the form of elevated cortisol levels, a product of increased stress. Further, a European Union study of working at home found that it is harmful to our health when we use leisure time to accomplish work activities.

Another study looked at work-related smartphone use and found that employees who are issued smartphones lose the ability to “psychologically detach,” which in turn has been associated with increased “work-related exhaustion.”

Interestingly, it might not be just the extra work that impacts our health. A 2012 article in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* suggests that merely being available for work produces added stress, even if employers never actually contact employees during their “leisure time.” Just knowing that we could be asked to perform work is stressful, even if that request never comes. Similarly, an article in *Academy of Management Review* says workers’ choices are between segmenting, or keeping roles discrete, and integrating, or blurring, their various roles.

From a productivity standpoint, integrating might be best in the short term, but being available 24/7 comes at a cost to health.

## Countering Negative Impacts

There are steps that both individuals and institutions can take rather than wait for the negative impacts of technology-enabled 24/7 life to grow. Institutional measures include a more prominent education program about the meaning of commitment to a professional ethic, the dangers of online or off-duty personas not in accordance with the professional ethic, and the health risks of not detaching from the work environment.

A growing body of evidence indicates that technology can impact the health and well-being of any user. There is a greater tendency to post material that, but for the expanded use of technology and connectedness, would never have been made public, much less shared with the world in a few seconds. This can result in a degradation of force readiness, a reduction in unit discipline and cohesion, and a concomitant diminishment of the public’s significant trust in the Army to fight and win our nation’s wars.

Technology presents unique challenges for the profession, and the Army must respond to them. We must leverage new technologies to increase productivity with an eye toward readiness and morale. It is time for the Army to come to grips with this new world, and promulgate relevant policies for the betterment of the profession. ★

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