



The Flexibility Paradox

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Just when you thought it was safe to relax ... How 24/7 work expectations are eating away at employees.



At Ryan LLC, a Dallas-based tax preparation company, employees were expected to put in 50-hour workweeks as well as frequent weekend time. And they couldn't schedule work for when it was convenient for them: If an employee put in 16 hours on a Thursday and six on Friday, for example, he still had to use hours from his paid-time-off bank to make up for not having worked a full day on Friday, says Delta Emerson, SHRM-SCP, the company's president of global shared services.

Face time was king, and performance evaluations were weighted heavily toward the number of hours people worked. The company's leaders were proud of their work ethic and believed their 2,100 employees were doing what was best for their clients.

That is, until 2008, when a rising young star marched into the CEO's office and handed him her resignation. "I love this place, but it is not conducive to having a life," Emerson recalls the worker saying. CEO G. Brint Ryan asked her to reconsider, and she agreed to stay on one condition: that he make Ryan a place where people enjoyed their jobs and could have a life outside the office.

Shortly thereafter, the company overhauled its work environment. Employees are now rewarded based on results rather than hours worked, and there's a new emphasis on collaboration and flexibility, including the freedom for employees to work when and where they want.

Since making the change, the company has boosted its worker retention rates and realized gains in efficiency, Emerson says—not to mention that it repeatedly shows up on "best places to work" lists, a distinction it hadn't bothered to seek before 2008.

It wasn't an easy transition, despite the company's commitment. Employees found it hard, as the CEO puts it, to "un-Velcro" their behinds from their chairs. "You have to go through the process of 'de-guiltying' working from home, working on the road, working at times that are convenient for you," he explains. "And it does take time for people to adjust to that."

Clearly, Ryan—the company and the man—underwent a sea change. In retrospect, the CEO views the company's previous employee handbook as "something out of the Stone Age." Actually, it was probably a lot closer to something out of post-World War II America, when most households were made up of a sole breadwinner devoted to work and a caretaker who looked after home and children. It is an era in which many 21st century employers find themselves stuck, experts say, even as the world around them has radically changed.

Indeed, last year *The New York Times* published a scathing front-page exposé describing a punishing work environment at Amazon. And cultural critics such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, author of [Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family](#) (Random House, 2015), have pointed out that workers across the socioeconomic spectrum are routinely putting in 12- to 16-hour days that leave them little time to care for others, much less themselves.

Yet at the same time, some companies are taking unprecedented steps to extend parental leave and to offer remote working options, flextime and even unlimited vacation. In the past year alone, Netflix, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook have rolled out generous paid-parental-leave policies, and many smaller employers are following suit. Meanwhile, legislators in Washington, D.C., are debating a proposal to make the city the first jurisdiction in the country to require employers to pay for 16 weeks of parental leave for nearly all employees.

So what's the real story? Are companies driving workers into the ground or entering a new age of enlightenment? Are they selling themselves as being flexible, only to reward those who make work their entire lives?

The truth is that, in our complex modern world, finding the right equilibrium between work and personal time is not as easy as it sounds—for company leaders or their employees.

An Epidemic of Stress

One thing is clear: Employees are frazzled. For every company that offers discretionary time off or generous leave, there is a study or story of epically stressed workers. Employees in the U.S. now spend more time working per week than they have in decades—an average of 47 hours, according to a 2014 Gallup poll, which adds almost an extra workday to each workweek. Half of all full-time workers polled said they typically put in more than 40 hours a week, and nearly 4 in 10 toil for at least 50. U.S. employees also work for more hours each week, on average, than people in other developed nations.

All that stress takes a huge toll. A [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) (NIOSH) report from 2014 reveals some daunting numbers: 40 percent of Americans say their job is “very or extremely stressful,” and 29 percent are “quite a bit or extremely stressed at work.” Additionally, three-fourths believe that workers today have more on-the-job stress than people did a generation ago.

Constant stress increases the risk of ailments ranging from mood and sleep disorders to cardiovascular disease to musculoskeletal problems, according to NIOSH. It also affects the bottom line: According to the [World Health Organization](#), stress is costing U.S. businesses \$300 billion each year due to absenteeism, turnover, disabilities and reduced productivity.

The ‘New Normal’

In some cases, workers are having a hard time trusting that management really wants them to have a life outside their jobs, experts say. In others, people feel overloaded with home obligations and can't turn that tension off at work. Many also feel haunted by the memory of the Great Recession—a time when people counted themselves lucky to be employed at all—and thus remain in a “new normal” state of overwork in order to prove that they are indispensable.

That's not just paranoid thinking. Thanks to globalization, many jobs could go to a lower-paid person abroad at any time. And in today's so-called sharing economy, someone, somewhere, is always awake and ready to engage on a work project. Finally, technology has become a double-edged

sword, slicing away at workers' private time and creating the expectation that they will always be available.

"It's the old 'CrackBerry' thing," says Jason Carney, HR director at Indianapolis-based [WorkSmart Systems Inc.](#), a professional employer organization. "It's way too easy to be playing Candy Crush, and you see your e-mail icon and you get sucked in. And the next thing you know, you're on your e-mail, working."

Indeed, the impact of new devices that enable constant connection is considerable. "You have to examine it: Why are people still tired? Why is this happening? There is a sense that people are always 'on' these days," says Leela Srinivasan, chief marketing officer at [Lever](#), a San Francisco-based talent acquisition firm. "With more communication channels, the lines between the personal and the professional begin to blur. It really is hard for people to switch off and get away." Even giving workers the latitude to decide how much time to take off and when doesn't alleviate the stress.

Actually, "it creates anxiety," Srinivasan adds. "Employees are worried about how much time is too much."

That's the problem with "take-all-the-time-you-want" vacation policies: Employees are unsure what the expectation is and thus skittish about taking advantage of them at all, says Nannina Angioni, an employment lawyer and founding partner of the Southern California-based firm [Kaedian LLP](#).

"You see companies with unlimited vacation, and employees are not taking it. They just don't," Angioni says. "Sometimes, a flexible work environment can lead to a more stressful work environment." Even if employers are sincere in giving workers options for balancing work and personal time, employees may feel pressure from the rest of their team to log long hours, she adds.

And while it's tempting to think that technologies maximize efficiency by allowing people to take care of personal business while squeezing in calls and texts to keep up with professional demands, research indicates that multitasking is neither effective nor efficient; the human brain is not wired to focus on numerous things at one time.

Beth Monaghan, CEO and co-founder of Boston-based PR agency [InkHouse](#), came to that realization a few years ago while at the playground with her daughter. As her little girl came down the slide and beamed at her, Monaghan realized that she had almost missed out on the experience because she was reading an e-mail. "I had this moment, thinking, 'I'm not at the park, but I'm not doing my job, either,'" she recalls.

So she decided to put down the phone and stop worrying about work when she was with her family. "A funny thing happened when I did that," Monaghan recalls. "I actually got better at my job. I had better ideas because I wasn't staring at my e-mails 24 hours a day."

But it can be hard to translate that realization into office reality, she notes. After all, "what boss is going to tell a hardworking employee to stop working?"

The New 'New Normal'?

In fact, that is precisely what employers must do, HR managers say. Making speeches at staff meetings about work/life balance isn't enough. Nor is offering workers amorphous "flexibility" and then leaving it up to them to decide how much time they will take for vacation or what hours they will spend at the office vs. working from home.

Instead, HR must now be as vigilant about making sure people are taking time off as they once were about enforcing that people put in enough hours. “That’s the trick,” says **Kim Shepherd**, CEO of Irvine, Calif.-based recruitment firm [Decision Toolbox](#). “If you hire a [Type A] player and give them the latitude to design their own workday, they will create stress.” That’s why HR and managers must help rein people in. “It means putting some of the burden on yourself,” she adds.

Technology: Lifesaver or Life-Killer?

Smartphones, e-mail, FaceTime and other technology can free up employees by allowing them to work from home or finish tasks after hours so they can tend to personal matters during the day. But these technologies can also cause people to feel they must be available constantly. HR managers and corporate executives offer suggestions for drawing the line between work and personal time:

- Consider banning e-mail from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. so that employees won’t feel pressure to work all the time. If managers must craft e-mails during off-hours, ask them to delay sending the messages until normal work time.
- Advise employees (with management setting the example) to turn off online messaging tools such as Slack when they are not at work, and make e-mail accessible after hours only on a computer so people won’t be tempted to whip out their phones during dinner to check for messages.
- Give workers a digital dashboard that delineates their vacation and allows them to block group messages during that time.
- Use time-trackers to monitor vacation time, and have conversations to encourage those who never take off to use their time.
- Finally, don’t forget that all those fancy smartphones and tablets share the same invaluable feature: the off switch.

Because stressed-out workers are ultimately not as effective on the job, companies should hammer out a strategy—with specifics—for helping people relax. It might include the following steps:

Establish a clear standard—and stick to it. Make sure workers know that “flexibility” doesn’t include having to work during their paid time off. At Decision Toolbox, the mantra about checking e-mail on vacation is “If you’re wired, you’re fired,” **Shepherd says**. Results and productivity are what matter—and a company won’t achieve either if it doesn’t allow people to take breaks.

Set an example at the top. Leaders and managers should be taking their time off, too, without apologizing or engaging in the behavior they are discouraging in others. They should also avoid sending e-mails at 1 a.m., for example, or on weekends. If they must write e-mails during the weekend, they should put them in a “drafts” folder and send the messages first thing Monday morning. “As CEO of the company, if I send you an e-mail at 10 p.m., even if I tell you not to respond, you’re going to want to respond,” Monaghan says. So don’t even make it an option.

Make vacation an expectation. Monitor vacation allocations and insist that workers account for a lack of time off. “When you do your annual reviews, ask, ‘What did you do to help yourself have more balance this year, to help co-workers have more balance this year?’ ” Carney says.

At [Net Conversion](#), an Orlando, Fla.-based digital marketing firm, an employee who had taken just one vacation day in a year was told at her annual review that she must take more time off in the coming year, according to company co-founder Ryan Fitzgerald.

Offer incentives. One of Srinivasan’s clients started offering stipends so workers could take their families on a trip. Her own company is considering offering cash bonuses to employees who take at least 10 days off a year.

Let employees help find solutions. For example, at Ryan, the tax preparation company, receptionists came up with a new system to replace onsite, all-day work: a call center, staffed in shifts by the best workers, whereby clients could get through from opening hours on the East Coast to closing hours on the West Coast. The company trimmed staff this way, and employees were happy with the flexibility, according to the CEO.

Talk about it. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with workers about the best ways to achieve productivity and personal happiness. At [Aflac](#), there are organized gatherings at which workers discuss exactly that, says Brenda Mullins, vice president of human resources and chief people officer at the Columbus, Ga.-based insurance firm. Executives share their own challenges. One leader said she puts her cellphone in a bowl when she gets home to mark the end of the workday.

“When they hear our executives say ... ‘this is what I do to balance my family life,’ that’s when I think they really get it,” Mullins says.

The company follows up by offering services at its Career Success Center, where workers are paired with mentors who advise them on everything from career paths to work/life balance. “If you take care of the employees, employees will take care of the business,” Mullins says, quoting company CEO Dan Amos.

Be flexible about flexibility. While having a specific plan is a good idea, leave room for adaptation and know that flexibility means different things to different people, experts say. While older generations might crave a definitive break from work—such as coming home, dropping the briefcase and forgetting about the office until the next day—Millennial employees often want a more fluid arrangement.

That’s why many Millennials prefer the term “work/life integration” to “work/life balance.” Their ideal scenario might include doing late-night work but also taking part in yoga or community service in the afternoon.

“I call it ‘triple-bottom-line thinking,’ ” Monaghan says, referring to “people, planet and profit”—three aspects of life that tend to be intermingled for younger workers. “My generation [Generation X] has work, personal life and charitable life, and they never intersect,” she says. “With Millennials, everything is part of their whole lives.” The challenge for employers is to ensure that work isn’t too dominant.

“There has to be a lot of ways [of working] that can be accommodated, taking into account both the employer and the employee,” says Parker McKenna, SHRM-SCP, chief HR officer of the Springfield, Mo., public school system. “You can’t just reprimand people who e-mail after 5 p.m., or you may disengage part of your workforce.”

However people choose to define flexibility, making sure workers tend to their own well-being and that of their families is good business for everyone. At the end of the day, the best advice you can give to today's workforce may not be "work harder" but rather "get a life."