

According to Cottle, how have communication technologies created more stress on employees? Cottle describes several "family friendly" organizational policies that may increase employee stress or disrupt families. What are the policies and their potential effects?

# Working 5 to 9: All Work and No Play Doesn't Just Make You Dull—It Can Also Drive You Crazy

**Michelle Cottle**

One enchanted evening last March, I found myself hurtling through the darkened sky in a Boeing 747, suspended 30,000 feet above the still-frozen midwest. I was on the red-eye, the only travel option that would permit me to make a late afternoon meeting in San Francisco and my morning appointment in Boston. The in-flight movie had played itself out, and I'd flipped through the stack of memos and journal articles in my shoulder bag. Now all I wanted to do was sleep.

But I could not drift off. My eyes were glued to one of those individual video screens airlines are now installing on the backs of passenger seats. In between invitations to play video games (for a nominal fee) or peruse the entertainment and sports news of the day, the screen kept flashing a warning at me: "You can't afford to be out of touch. Use the Airfone to contact your office or clients right now."

I was overcome with panic. Should I call the office and check my voice-mail? What if a crisis were erupting that very minute that I wouldn't know about until we landed in another two hours? What if my boss needed to reach me but

couldn't because I was busy dragging my carcass across the continent on a bit of company business?

What if, indeed.

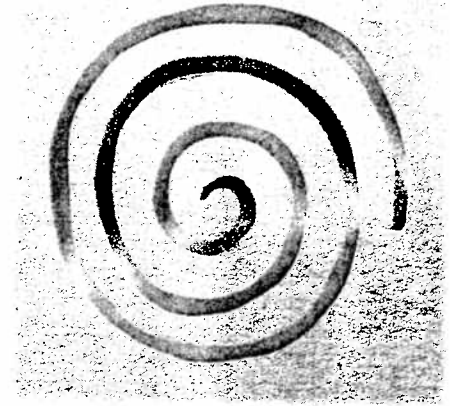
The American worker is doomed. Not only do we have to worry about downsizing and stagnant wages and increased productivity demands, we have become the target of a movement, led by shrewd entrepreneurs and by our own employers, to help us minimize the number of seconds we are not actively engaged in job-related activities. What's worse, their efforts are being aided by the unwitting victims themselves, pathologically ambitious worker bees who wear their beepers during sex and develop a nervous tic if they go more than 10 minutes without checking voice-mail.

The Airfone is a prime example of the key role technology plays in this absurd crusade. I don't care if you are the chairman of Philip Morris, chances are there is nothing going down with the Marlboro man that can't be put on hold until you've deplaned. But thanks to the wonders of modem telecommunications (and clever marketing), business travelers have been made to feel we're doing our companies a disservice by being out of touch for the duration of a domestic flight. God forbid we should

read a book, write our congressman, meditate, or fritter away our time with some other non-work-oriented pursuit for a few hours. As for travelers so career-crazed they get the shakes at the mere thought of missing a client call: You don't need an Airfone. You need a tranquilizer.

Back on terra firma the situation is even uglier, with faxes, cellular phones, and modems making it possible for us to work anytime, anyplace. No longer does leaving the office signal the end of the work day. People can now send us voice mail and e-mail at 8:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve. And since we can access these systems remotely, there's the constant pressure to respond promptly or have our work ethic questioned. Fortunately, also thanks to cell phones and beepers, a busy parent can easily set up a conference call from the middle of his third-grader's ballet recital. One well-adjusted executive at my old company even managed to conduct sales calls from her hospital bed just hours after delivering her first child. Now that's time well spent.

Recognizing that a workaholic culture might clash with the current hooplah over family values, computer and telecommunications companies have begun marketing their



products and services as "family friendly" conveniences that help employees balance work and personal obligations. Just recently GTE aired a commercial asking if you'd ever tucked your child into bed from 1,000 miles away. Presumably, viewers were supposed to send up a great cheer when the ad assured us that someday soon we'd be able to do just that thanks to video hookups on our home computers. What an ingenious breakthrough in work/child management: remote parenting. Just log on at night for a quick bedtime story, then log off for eight hours of restful, guiltless sleep. As for the kids, what six-year-old wouldn't want a parent that came with an on/off switch?

Already these inspirational child-rearing techniques are gaining popularity. *U.S. News & World Report* recently ran a heart-warming piece about the rise of "virtual parents," who, while working late at the office or away on business, correct their children's homework by fax, oversee their dating life by phone, and keep track of their whereabouts by beeper. Forget all that messy personal interaction. Here's a system in which everyone prospers: Companies don't need to fret about employees being distracted by nonwork issues. Parents don't have to feel guilty about not being there for their kids. And children get to have that great latchkey-kid freedom, but with the security that, if they hear a strange noise outside or feel the urge to begin a life of crime because of parental neglect, they can just beep Mom or Dad for a little electronic emotional support. With any luck, in another five or six years we'll have successfully eliminated the need for all physical contact whatsoever with our offspring—maybe even our spouses. Forget Windows 97; Bill Gates should perfect the cyberhug.

### Kill Them with Kindness

Still, it would be too easy to blame technology for our inability to disengage from work. Many of the developments blurring the line between our professional and private lives are decidedly low-tech. Among the hottest is the new breed of employment benefits thoughtfully designed to help stressed-out workers "balance" their personal lives right out of existence:

- Since 1987, the Washington, D.C.-based Arnold & Porter law firm has run an emergency back-up child care center that operates at night and on weekends, for use solely when parents are working overtime. The firm estimates that this family-friendly center clears the way for an additional \$800,000 in billable hours a year.
- The Principal Financial Group in Des Moines, Iowa, has established an onsite "lactation center" where new mothers can go to express breast milk. According to a Principal spokesperson, this helps speed women's return to work following childbirth. It's essential not to let newborns get too accustomed to parental affection, lest they develop a sense of entitlement.
- At the Milwaukee headquarters of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance, employees can enjoy free lunch in the company cafeteria—the company having calculated the money and time lost by people leaving the premises to eat.

Quick to spot a profitable trend, the market has come up with an offering that makes it even easier for companies to provide time-saving benefits: corporate concierge service. Typically managed by an outside contractor, a company's concierge can handle employees' every need—from standing in line at the DMV to retrieving clean dress socks from someone's home (or delivering expressed breast milk).

Now, granted, we'd all love to have someone fluff and fold our underwear and cook dinner for us every night, but these perks aren't about achieving balance so much as about making it easier, and more acceptable, for people to work non-stop. After all, if your company provides after-hours daycare, it suddenly becomes much more reasonable for an employer to expect you to work overtime. And if one phone call to the office concierge can take care of your automotive, grocery, and home-furnishing needs, as well as organize your four-year-old's birthday party, why would you ever need to leave your desk? As one systems analyst whose firm offers such benefits told the *Indianapolis Star*, "I can con-

centrate on my work and do a good job without having to worry about my personal obligations."

Companies insist (and may even believe) that their goal is not to chain workers to their desks, but the reality is that these programs are being provided within the framework of a business culture that still equates job commitment with hours spent at the office. Even with benefits like flex-time and paternity leave now available in many companies, the unspoken rule remains: He who stays the latest gets the promotion—or at least doesn't get canned. Notes Boston University researcher Laura Nash, "Companies seem willing to do anything for people—except for the employee who says, 'I just want to go home at 5:00 p.m. and have dinner with my family.' That's unheard of."

Employees know this, and the uncertain job market makes them wary of testing employers' humanity. All those media stories about the GM engineer "let go" after 15 years and the UCLA grad forced to shovel fries at Jack-in-the-Box have made people too afraid to leave their desks. We are convinced that, were we to sneak out of the office before 9:00 p.m., we'd find a hungrier, "more dedicated" employee entrenched in our cubicle by morning.

### Noses to the Grindstone

So if most people are going to work all night regardless of who's cooking dinner, what's wrong with at least providing them the conveniences?

For starters, these arrangements allow both employers and employees to avoid confronting the true costs involved in achieving a real balance of work and personal demands. We have a desperate desire to believe that what works is the same as what's good. For example, reports show that more and more companies are providing sick/emergency child care. This magnanimous effort to save parents the hassle of scrambling for a sitter when junior is too contagious to be around other children has led to much back-slapping and self-congratulations throughout Corporate America. Well, this is super news, because four out of five pediatricians surveyed say the best possible treatment for a sick toddler

is to be handed off to a bunch of strangers as quickly as possible so as not to interrupt Mommy and Daddy's work day.

Quick reality check: Complicated problems rarely have simple solutions. In reality, hiring someone to videotape your child's Little League game does not make working all weekend okay. Similarly, while paying someone to fetch employees' dry cleaning is a nice gesture, it does not counterbalance the increased productivity demands feeding their anxieties and driving them to put in such long hours. In a 1996 Gallup poll, one quarter of employees surveyed said they feel "stressed out" at work every single day. While great news for the makers of Maalox, this bodes ill for our society's overall mental health.

Americans claim they are ready for a change. A 1994 Gallup poll showed that approximately one third of those surveyed would take a 20 percent pay cut in exchange for fewer work hours for them or their spouse. But it will take more than a few office errand boys to effect the required

change. At this point, most Americans don't need any help in ob-  
sessing over work. By and large, we're a culture that has taken the Protestant work ethic one step too far, gauging people's worth by their professional (and financial) status. Even as we bemoan our chaotic schedules, we're suspicious of those who aren't on the fast track. Twenty-somethings who don't come flying out of college ready to beg, borrow or commit investor fraud to make company VP within five years are labeled "slackers" and expected to move to Seattle and serve up espressos at Starbucks.

No one is looking to undermine America's global competitiveness. We simply need to accept that the law of diminishing returns applies to workloads, and we need to start formulating workplace policy based on that understanding. But don't look for Uncle Sam to lead the way: Executing a bold move in exactly the wrong direction, the IRS ruled in December that companies can now give employees the option to, instead of taking their allotted vacation days,

have a percentage of their vacation pay placed into tax-deferred 401k retirement accounts. (Just think of what a nice funeral that fund will provide for when you drop dead from exhaustion at age 45.)

Reform-minded employers may have to take the first step, making better use of part-time work arrangements, and setting limits on the hours people work and the vacation days they must take. Otherwise, we'll continue to learn the hard way about the ugly results of all work and no play. My former employer certainly did: Just a few weeks into my job, I discovered that the woman who'd previously held my position had been wheeled away on a stretcher one afternoon after a small "stress attack" she'd had in front of the elevators.

Needless to say, no one there pushed me to work weekends.



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book.**