



Gender



What Will Work-Life Balance Look Like After the Pandemic?

by Bobbi Thomason and Heather Williams

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As if being a working parent didn't already include enough moving pieces to manage, even toddlers are now having standing teleconferences. For the two of us, our daughters' virtual morning preschool meeting is one more item to be juggled as we attempt to work full-time from home without childcare. Our own conference calls are scheduled for naptime and occasionally interrupted by a request for potty. We attempt to wedge the rest of the workday into the early mornings and post-bedtime.

The Covid-19 crisis has shoved work and home lives under the same roof for many families like ours, and the struggle to manage it all is now visible to peers and bosses. As people postulate how the country may be forever changed by the pandemic, we can hope that one major shift will be a move away from the harmful assumption that a 24/7 work culture is working well for anyone.

For decades, scholars have described how organizations were built upon the implicit model of an “ideal worker”: one who is wholly devoted to their job and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, every year of their career. This was always an unrealistic archetype, one that presumed a full-time caretaker in the background. Yet today, over two-thirds of American families are headed by single parents or two working parents. With schools and daycares closed, work cannot continue as normal simply because working remotely is technologically possible.

Employees are disproportionately well-compensated for being ideal workers. “Time greedy” professions like finance, consulting, and law — where 80- or 100-hour weeks may be typical — compensate their workers per hour more than professions with a regular 40-hour week. Flexible-work arrangements come with severe penalties; many who leave the workforce for a period or shift to part-time never recover their professional standing or compensation. When individuals push back — asking for less travel or requesting part-time or flexible hours — their performance reviews suffer and they are less likely to be promoted, studies find. Simply asking for workplace flexibility engenders professional stigma.

The “ideal worker” expectation is particularly punitive for working mothers, who also typically put in more hours of caregiving work at home than their spouses. Furthermore, men are more likely to “fake it” and pass as ideal workers, while women make clear that they cannot

meet these expectations, including by negotiating flexible-work arrangements. Many organizations are not amenable to adjustments, leading to the perception that women are opting out of the workforce — although research suggests women are actually “pushed out.”

In our world of laptops, cellphones, and teleconferences, the intellectual and analytical tasks of “knowledge workers” can continue at home. But low-wage workers increasingly are subject to similar expectations of responsiveness, even as they have less job security and even less flexibility than higher paid workers. In the midst of this pandemic, store clerks, delivery drivers, and warehouse workers are now forced to be “ideal workers” too, risking exposure to the virus in public with little support for the families they leave to go to work.

There have been many calls for restructuring how work is done, including making more room for our families and questioning the real value of the eight-hour (or more) workday. Now is a time for companies to step back and reexamine which traditional ways of working exist because of convention, not necessity.

Executives and managers have the opportunity to choose quality work over quantity of work. They can value the creative ideas that emerge after a midday hike or meditation session, rather than putting in face time at the office. They can stop rewarding the faster response over the better response, or the longer workday over a more productive workday. They can rethink highly competitive career tracks where you make it or wash out — such as giving tenure-track scholars and partner-track lawyers the choice of a longer clock before their evaluation.

During this pandemic, employers are seeing that workers can’t function well without accommodation for their family responsibilities. Will that lesson last after the crisis is over? American families want greater

choices in determining how their work and their families fit together. Post-pandemic, can we create a system that fits real workers, not just idealized ones? If so, we have the opportunity to emerge from this crisis with both healthier employees *and* better performing organizations.

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