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it's bad management that people resent.

BY JENNIFER J. DEAL

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YOUNG PROFS

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Not so long ago, the idea that an employee could connect anytime, anywhere, was seen as a revolution in work–life balance. You could get home in time for dinner or go on vacation even when a project was at a critical point. Your smartphone could turn wherever you were into your mobile office.

But now many believe this unlimited connectivity has gone too far. Studies have concluded that late-night smartphone use has an adverse effect on employee productivity and engagement. A growing number of companies, such as Volkswagen and Atos, have enacted email policies intended to mandate unplugging. An agreement in April 2014 between French employers and unions created an "obligation to disconnect" for contract workers to ensure that they don't burn out, and Germany is currently considering legislation that would ban communication from employers to their workers after hours.

But even though such policies are well meaning, and might help reduce some of the stress of being constantly connected, they don't address the root cause of the problem: wasted time from inattentive management. Sometimes the wasting of time is a side effect of job consolidation, typically after cost cutting. Other times it is the result of ingrained risk aversion and the perceived need to cross-check every decision.

This problem of wasted time emerged in a 2012 study, conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership, on the impact of smartphones in the workplace. My colleagues and I surveyed 483 executives, managers, and professionals at enterprises ranging from small companies to large multinationals. (Three-quarters of the participants were in the United States, and the rest were in 36 other countries.)

We found that although a majority of our participants were connected to work for 13.5 or more hours a day, five days a week, and for about five hours total on weekends, they didn't resent their smartphones. Instead, 60 percent said they appreciated the increased flexibility: Many explained they didn't mind the additional hours connected with work, if that meant their work time was flexible and they could better fulfill their personal obligations. What did they resent? Having to stay connected because of bad management practices that tied their hands, forcing them to spend business hours waiting instead of working.

When Time Isn't Money

"Do more with less" is a drumbeat in many organizations. In an effort to achieve cost savings, jobs are supersized. Employees find themselves doing the jobs of two or three people after someone leaves, whether by choice or through layoffs. Manage-

Illustration by David Suter

ment justifies such decisions by saying the overlap between the individual's original workload and the additional work he or she is being given will result in increased efficiency. Typically, however, it doesn't play out that way. The number of hours in a day hasn't changed, even though the number of job responsibilities has gone up.

Even the most hardworking employee, when overcommitted and overwhelmed, becomes a bottleneck. One survey respondent told us of an executive who was tasked with taking over the work of two peers who had left the organization. Although her work overlapped theirs, the change meant adding seven divisions to the three already under her control and resulted in a substantial slowdown for all of them. This situation caused her considerable stress. She worked all available hours to keep up, which negatively affected both her health and her family life. It also caused the executive to waste her employees' time. For example, she couldn't respond to her staff in a timely manner. Staff often had to redo work performed before she'd had a chance to weigh in, or work late and on weekends to meet deadlines that would have been easy to accomplish if more attention had been paid up front—but became a crisis because of the delays she caused.

An alarming 83 percent of our survey respondents reported that their time is wasted this way by managers or colleagues with too much on their plate. To avoid these bottlenecks, employees carve out time on their overworked coworker's calendar, because it's the only way to get their attention. And that ends up taking a bigger chunk out of everyone's day.

A second cause of wasted time—overly cautious review processes—is even more pernicious, because it is so prevalent. Many managers won't make a decision without substantial consultation with others. A full 90 percent of our respondents blamed their wasted time on too many people being involved in the decision-making processes. Some noted that they have to get approval from three people before being able to order supplies as trivial as a box of paper clips. When we asked managers who instituted these types of policies why they did so, they said it was because they were criticized if costs went up. It was safer for them personally to require their people to seek out multiple approvals.

In other words, these seemingly never-ending cycles of review and approval persist because they diffuse responsibility for decisions. If a dozen people make a decision together, then no one is solely responsible if failure results. And if everyone attended a meeting where a decision was made, no one can stonewall the decision or deny responsibility for it later. Of course, meetings called solely to gain this "buy-in" waste yet more of everyone's time.

Breaking the Cycle

In our survey, and in subsequent interviews, most of our respondents noted that they felt compelled to engage in self-protective, time-wasting activities, even when they knew it was suboptimal for their organization as a whole. They felt strongly that if they didn't protect themselves, their careers could suffer. Would they receive a poor performance review that would reduce their pay, bonus, or promotion potential? Would they lose power within the organization? Would they get fired? Although companies may claim to encourage work–life balance and thoughtful risk taking, people pay close attention to what happens in practice. When organizations reward people—whether through reputation, opportunities, or promotion—for saving money even if they waste time, employees orient their behavior accordingly.

But organizations can take actions that will start to change this mind-set. For example, company leaders could start counting time as carefully as they count money. Projects and organizational initiatives can have time budgets just as they do financial budgets, enabling organizations to track whether there are overruns. Many bad management practices would likely be changed if people were given incentives to avoid additional time costs, rather than just cash costs. A supersized role may seem to make sense. But when true time shortfalls are revealed through tracking—when you can demonstrate clearly on paper that leaving a position unfilled is damaging to both the employee who has to take on the work and the people who report to him or her—there's a justification for adding (or not reducing) head count that top leadership can understand. And consider those decision buy-in meetings: If time were tracked as an ex-

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pense, such practices would start to look costly.

Individual managers also play an important role. They are the ones who can provide their people with the authority necessary to make and implement decisions. They are also the ones who can make it acceptable to not respond at all hours if an issue truly isn't urgent, who can decide what constitutes a reasonable workday, and who can make the choice not to reward people for working endless hours. Over time, these managers attract the best talent, because they are the kind of people top talent wants to work for—the people who have their back and recognize what a real contribution is and isn't. Similarly, executives who adopt this style attract the best managers—and the benefits will flow throughout the organization. When people perceive less risk and are not overburdened, less time is squandered.

Smartphones are not the problem. But the endless connectivity they provide means that work time is no longer finite. In many organizations, the result is that managerial incentives to use employees' time effectively are at a new low. Yet by understanding what underpins people's behavior, companies can make deliberate decisions to reward practices that break the cycle of overwork and thus increase productivity. Change will come only when the people at the top look down and start insisting that others' time be treated like the scarce resource it is. ✚

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