

Perpetual Workforce Prompts Pay, Burnout Consequences

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



It is 10 p.m. Do you know where your Smartphone is?

If you are like an increasing number of American workers, it is ringing or buzzing on the stand next to your bed or barcalounger.

The combination of technological advances and the pressures of a struggling economy to get maximum productivity from workers is creating a 24/7 workforce; that is, a workforce that is “perpetually” working.

When their shifts end, many workers remain at their bosses’ beck and call – responding to emails and fielding cell phone calls, no matter where they are, or what time of day. The lines between working and not working are blurring. For some workers, those lines have disappeared, altogether.

Last month, lawmakers in Brazil sent a warning shot heard around the globe. They passed a law declaring workers who are sent company emails after work hours must be paid overtime.

The Brazilian law follows closely on the heels of German carmaker Volkswagen’s December move to turn off employees’ access to the company’s email after hours to give workers “real” time off. Hourly workers now are allowed to receive e-mails during work hours, and starting a half-hour before work begins and until a half-hour after shifts end. The rest of the day, workers are in “blackout mode.”

These are not isolated concerns of legislators and company officials in foreign nations. They reflect a looming potential legal problem in the U.S., as well.

Lawsuits already have been filed targeting a U.S. telecommunication company that issued Smartphones to its workers and expressed the expectation that workers quickly respond to calls, text messages and e-mails from supervisors and customers. A similar lawsuit has been filed alleging a real estate company required a maintenance supervisor to carry a Smartphone and respond to after-hours complaint calls.

Some fed-up workers now are demanding to be paid for their “overtime” hours. An employer’s responsibility for paying overtime can depend on several factors. At the top of the list is the distinction between “exempt” (often salaried managers) and “non-exempt” (hourly workers).

Even when workers aren’t making demands for overtime pay, both the workers and their companies may be “paying” in another way – from “burn out.” Workers addicted to their electronic devices, or who have been lashed to these devices by their bosses, may become fatigued and unproductive.

The 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Project study noted workers now are more likely to check their email outside of normal working hours. Fifty percent of employed email users said they checked their work-related email on the weekends – 22 percent of those workers said they checked their email

accounts “often.” Thirty-four percent of employed email users said they at least occasionally check their email while on vacation – 11 percent said they do so “often.”

Twenty percent of the employees surveyed said they were required to check their work-related emails when they were not at work. The percentage jumped to 50 percent for employees who had “mobile devices,” such as Smartphones.

Fittingly, the study’s title was “Networked workers: Most workers use the Internet or email at their jobs, but they say these technologies are a mixed blessing for them.”

Whether it is through legislation, as seen in Brazil, or court rulings, the possibility exists that email or cell phone contact with off-work hourly employees may be viewed as “work” that requires compensation.

Wise employers would take some steps now to head off intervention by lawmakers and legal action. Workers, too, can take steps to reduce the interruptions to their “personal” time.

EMPLOYERS

- **Create a written policy.** When and under what circumstances will workers be called or sent emails to which they must respond after they leave work? The circumstances should be limited. A written policy will bring focus to an after-hours practice that may have just evolved and expanded unconsciously.
- **Communicate the policy.** Tell employees when and how they will be contacted after work, and how they will be compensated. Require supervisors and employees to keep logs documenting after-hour contacts. Regularly audit the logs and be sure to pay non-exempt employees accordingly.
- **Exercise self-control.** Require all managers and supervisors to ask themselves first: Can the email or cell phone call wait until the employee’s next shift, or when the employee comes back from vacation? Act “thoughtfully,” rather than “compulsively.” Encourage supervisors who work after hours to schedule emails for delivery during an employee’s normal working hours only, or to specify in the email’s subject line: Response is not needed until the next business day.
- **Arrange backup staffing.** Critical tasks and decision should not be left in the hands of a single “valued” employee.

WORKERS

- **Disconnect.** Often email and cell phone “checking” is addictive behavior. Turn off your home computer and cell phone when possible. Schedule “BFD’s” (Blackberry-free days) as a friend of mine calls them. Let messages go to voicemail. If you are constantly checking and responding, you are conveying the “message” that you do not mind being contacted by your boss or colleagues after hours.
- **Speak up for yourself.** As appropriate for your position, discuss this situation with your boss and colleagues. If necessary, politely let them know you “have a life” after work by sharing details of some of your activities – vacationing with the family; coaching soccer; taking classes; attending church. They’ll get the idea that you aren’t available 24/7.
- **Discuss expectations.** If your boss or colleagues are increasingly calling you after hours for information, decisions, etc., arrange a meeting to discuss expectations. Can assignments during the work day be rearranged? Should your work hours be adjusted to make you available for

consultation during a “normal shift?” Systemic problems should be identified and addressed. Depending on your position, chronic after-hour calls are inefficient bandages, not solutions.

Who doesn't give thanks to the genius of the late Steve Jobs and others for creating the devices that make our lives better? Employers need to be aware that overtime issues and/or burn-out are real issues that need attention. And we all need to remember it's our choice to be the masters of, rather than slaves to these gadgets.

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