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PRODUCTIVITY

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Most professionals approach time management the wrong way. People who fall behind at work are seen to be personally failing—just as people who give up on diet or exercise plans are seen to be lacking self-control or discipline. In response, countless time management experts focus on individual habits, much as self-help coaches do. They offer advice about such things as keeping better to-do lists, not checking e-mail incessantly, and not procrastinating. Of course, we could all do a better job managing our time. But in the modern workplace, with its emphasis on connectivity and collaboration, the real problem is not how individuals manage their own time. It's how we manage our collective time—how we work together to get the job done. Here is where the true opportunity for productivity gains lies.

Nearly a decade ago I began working with a team at the Boston Consulting Group to implement what may sound like a modest innovation: persuading each member to designate and spend one weeknight out of the office and completely unplugged from work. The intervention was aimed at improving quality of life in an industry that's notorious for long hours and a 24/7 culture. The early returns were positive; the initiative was expanded to four teams of consultants, and then to 10. The results, which I described in a 2009 HBR article, "Making Time Off Predictable—and Required," and in a 2012 book, *Sleeping with Your Smartphone,* were profound. Consultants on teams with mandatory time off had higher job satisfaction and a better work/life balance, and they felt they were learning more on the job. It's no surprise, then, that BCG has continued to expand the program: As of this spring, it has been implemented on thousands of teams in 77 offices in 40 countries.

During the five years since I first reported on this work, I have introduced similar time-based interventions at a range of companies—and I have come to appreciate the true power of those interventions. They put the ownership of how a team works into the hands of team members, who are empowered and incentivized to optimize their collective time. As a result, teams collaborate better. They streamline their work. They meet deadlines. They are more productive and efficient. Teams that set a goal of structured time off—and, crucially, meet regularly to discuss how they'll work together to ensure that every member takes it—have more open dialogue, engage in more experimentation and innovation, and ultimately function better.

Creating "Enhanced Productivity" Days

One of the insights driving this work is the realization that many teams stick to tried-and-true processes that, although familiar, are often inefficient. Even companies that create innovative products rarely innovate when it comes to process. This realization came to the fore when I studied three teams of software engineers working for the same company in different cultural contexts. The teams had the same assignments and produced the same amount of work, but they used very different methods. One, in Shenzen, had a hub-and-spokes org chart—a project manager maintained control and assigned the work. Another, in Bangalore, was self-managed and specialized, and it assigned work according to technical expertise. The third, in Budapest, had the strongest sense of being a team; its members were the most versatile and interchangeable.

Although, as noted, the end products were the same, the teams' varying approaches yielded different results. For example, the hub-and-spokes team worked fewer hours than the others, while the most versatile team had much greater flexibility and control over its schedule. The teams were completely unaware that their counterparts elsewhere in the world were managing their work differently. My research provided a vivid reminder that every task can be approached in a variety of ways and that any given team can often find far more efficient ways to get things done. This is the real power of team time management: Teams develop the ability to continually improve the way they coordinate their work, and frequently that yields new efficiencies.

The time-based interventions I use to catalyze team time management address three distinct (though sometimes overlapping) problems that frequently arise:

- *Some employees yearn for more control over their work time—the result of work that stretches across time zones, a 24/7 culture that evolved to meet rigid deadlines or demanding client expectations, or the always-on mentality that stems partly from technology enabling people to connect to work at any time. The structured-time-off goal in this case involves increasing predictability—typically, creating a time when workers know that they will be off the clock or establishing more-consistent workday hours.*

- *Teams that regularly work very long hours or that do so during peak periods often are not recognized for their extra efforts, and high turnover can result. These teams' members tend to greatly value some extra time off in return for their hard work. In this case, the structured-time-off goal is to designate periods of time off during the normal workweek.*

- *Some teams are plagued by interruptions—the nonstop distractions common in a cubicle culture with constant e-mailing, an excess of meetings, and so on. These teams' members crave focused time in order to eliminate the stress of unfinished tasks or the need to take work home. The structured-time-off goal in this case is quiet, uninterrupted time, including meeting-free time.*

Consider the situation at a midsize global pharmaceutical company I studied. Employees there generally kept predictable 9-to-5 or 9-to-6 hours at the office, but they were highly stressed. Many complained of an inability to get their jobs done at the office, which led them to take work home at night or on the weekend.

The Proof Is in the Productivity

More companies are using structured-time-off programs to change how teams work, and they are realizing significant gains. Some examples:

THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

THE PROGRAM
Predictability, Teaming, and Open Communication

THE RESULTS
Participants were

55%

likelier than others to report that their team does everything it can to be efficient and

74%

likelier than others to intend to stay at BCG for the long term.

A PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY

THE PROGRAM
Enhanced Productivity Days

THE RESULTS
Participants were

35%

likelier than before to report that their team tries to eliminate unnecessary work and

55%

likelier than before to report satisfaction with work/life balance.

A RETAILER

THE PROGRAM
Control of Our Lives

THE RESULTS
Participants were

38%

faster than before at compiling end-of-the-month financial reports and

25%

more engaged than before.

A TECHNICAL TEAM

THE PROGRAM
Predictable Work Days

THE RESULTS
Participants were

62%

likelier than before to report that their team does everything it can to be effective and

31%

likelier than before to report that their teammates help them with their work.

When I investigated, I found that the company was inundated with meetings. An overly collaborative culture in the division I was studying meant that too many employees were involved in every decision. Meetings were crowded with unnecessary people; employees were double booked; everyone's Outlook calendar was packed. The only time people could do their actual work was outside normal office hours.

The team I was studying at this organization rallied around a time-off goal of one meeting-free day a week, during which members worked from home. Conference calls and other virtual meetings were also banned during the designated day. These changes eliminated office interruptions and impromptu discussions and also saved commuting time. Team members called it their Enhanced Productivity Day, or EPD.

The program worked exceptionally well, not only because team members could use their EPD to get their real work done but also because it served as a forcing mechanism. To free up members' schedules, the team had to completely rethink its need for meetings, along with their duration, required attendance, and agendas. As a result, meetings became smaller, shorter, more focused, and less frequent. Here's how one employee described the change: "This initiative is not just about meetings or working from home—though I am usually more productive at home than I am in the office. It's a change of thinking—it's thinking about how we as a team operate." As the program spread to other teams, managers reported that the schedule change and meeting rethinks helped employees become more focused and do higher-quality work.

Building a Grassroots Movement

At a major international retail company I studied, an accounting team based in the United States typically worked very long hours at the end of each month to meet financial-reporting deadlines. Concerned about morale, the manager wanted to find a way to alleviate the pressure. The result was a program called Control of Our Lives, or COOL, which allowed workers to schedule one afternoon away from work during every two-week period.

Since the program began, employee engagement scores have risen sharply. Just as important, the team has cut the time spent compiling end-of-the-month reports from four days to two and a half days. "My team is now more productive, engaged, and collaborative than ever," the team manager says—and he reports that other managers have noticed the change. He explains, "A grassroots movement has created the buzz needed to get leadership buy-in to expand the program." Other teams in the U.S. as well as teams in Brazil and India have become enthusiastic about establishing COOL afternoons.

To help workers manage their time, we should stop telling individuals to change themselves and start empowering them to act together to change the way they work. Small steps can make a big difference. By rallying around a modest time-off goal, teams can develop a new capability: managing their time as a team. As a result, people can better manage their lives outside work while simultaneously accomplishing more at work. To put it another way, team time management can mitigate the problem of overworked and overstressed employees while making the organization better at doing its core work. For managers, that's a big win-win. ▽

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