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Enforced leisure has benefits

A typical reaction to try to alleviate the adverse effects of long-hours working is to try various diets and gym workouts to achieve improved sleep and more energy, in addition to better e-mail management.

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The unstoppable spread of the 24/7 work-attendance ethic has been explored — and deplored — in endless reports that agree on the harmful stress that is the result of working long hours, with too little time away from the office desk and the company, in order to spend time with the family and on essential leisure.

A typical reaction to try to alleviate the adverse effects of long-hours working is to try various diets and gym workouts to achieve improved sleep and more energy, in addition to better e-mail management. I know of one organisation that has even set aside an office for Buddhist chanting, as a way of diffusing stress.

Clearly all these commentators still regard 24/7 as a necessary evil that needs to be worked around. This is a glaring case of tunnel vision that is maintaining the myth that any team that is not open for business 24/7 will automatically lose market-share to a next-door team that does.

Well, one highly prestigious team has formally questioned this logic, and delivered some startling results that may radically change our view of Time

Harvard Business School conducted a ground-breaking experiment in which a consulting group's team was literally forbidden to work, take calls or check its e-mail for certain specific periods. This was not flexible hours working, this was a programme of enforced leisure called "Predictable Time Off".

It was quite a gamble. But the Harvard researchers could demonstrate that 94 per cent of top professionals said they put in 50 or more hours a week, not counting another 20 or more hours monitoring their Blackberry, and that they answered virtually every call within the hour. Some experiment was clearly called-for.

Fortunately, in the first stage of the operation, the consulting group's client had already asked the consultants to think outside the box — to think the unthinkable, if necessary.

Yet it was actually the consultants, not the client, who initially resisted the extraordinary conditions of the test. The experiment entailed taking one day off in mid-week, thereby reducing work attendance to 80 per cent of the norm. The effect of this was to upset the "current rhythm" — in other words the deeply unnatural 24/7.

It was on this primary issue that the exercise cast the most revealing light. For it showed the disastrous long-term effect of 24/7 working on actual performance. While appearing to sharpen the concentration and induce deeper engagement and involvement, 24/7 actually sets up an attitude of mechanical responsiveness and failure to question assumptions. They called this "bad intensity".

Connected with this was the erosion of private dignity and control over one's life. Without realising it, the consultants found they had forgotten what it felt like to be "off the air", and free to forget the client's problems for a few blessed hours. With heartfelt relish, they re-discovered the satisfactions of family life and leisure, away from the shadow of 24/7. The beneficial effects this would have on work-life balance and general physical and mental well-being suddenly became very obvious.

Another benefit was the effect on teamwork. During the mandatory day off, responsibilities would have to be formally handed over to someone else. This meant sharing information and thereby encouraging a better overview of challenges and projects as a whole.

And although impossible to quantify, this radical questioning of the 24/7 treadmill led to a more questioning attitude about Time Management altogether — a new keenness to discuss ways to work smarter instead of just working longer.

Time: Key points

- The 24/7 work-attendance habit is viewed as unavoidable
- 24/7 induces a harmful degree of focus called 'bad intensity'
- Enforcing leisure encourages healthy, questioning attitudes

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