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Time

It's About Time

Jenna Goudreau, 03.10.10, 05:10 PM EST

We need to refocus workplaces on quality of work rather than quantity of time put in. And let's do it before 6 p.m., please; I've got a date with my exercise bike.



Jenna Goudreau

Michael Bechara, CPA and managing director of Granite Consulting Group, an internal audit and financial management firm, has seen some "heartbreaking" sights in the late-night hours at his company. Employees struggling to put in long hours and meet family demands sometimes set up makeshift beds for children beside their desks. Other times, he overhears parents saying good night to the little ones by phone as the clock inches toward 9 p.m., spreadsheets flashing from their computer screens.

"Corporate accounting and finance departments tend to be magnets for people who associate long hours with hard work," Bechara laments. "Staff members see their value as being able to grind away, but it's fairly destructive."

I've recently been mulling over this perception of time as a measure of hard work, and Bechara's description only confirmed my worst fears of what's happening in offices across the country. A 2008 study published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, "Long Work Hours," found that Americans are increasingly working longer hours, and among developed nations, the U.S. has the second largest percentage (77%) of people working 40 hours or more a week and the largest percentage of workers who prefer to work longer hours.

Are hours worked really today's defining measure of productivity? I sought out the guidance of New York University management and organization professor Matt Statler, who basically says yes: "In spite of periodic attempts to call the Protestant work ethic into question, it continues to be a dominant influence on organizational culture in the U.S."

The pressure, then, to work longer hours weighs down most workers who don't want to be discredited for taking off at even a normal time. But they're not getting any more work done by staying later. The "Long Work Hours" study found that time spent working is unrelated to job performance. Plus, studies show that increasing hours can actually decrease productivity by causing mental strain, job stress, distraction and errors.

I called up Christiane Spitzmueller, professor of organizational psychology at the University of Houston, to ask if companies really wanted long hours from employees. She says that organizations do value workers who put in long hours more--even though they don't

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perform better--because it's an easy and visible measure. There is a statistical relationship, Spitzmueller says, between working longer hours, making more money and getting more promotions.

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While this paradigm seems to be a misallocation of resources on the part of businesses (not to mention a bad omen for the psyches of American workers), the phenomenon unevenly impacts women. Women continue to be the primary caretakers of children, and for them--and many working dads, too--long hours simply aren't an option. They are either pushed into lower-paying part-time schedules or fall victim to the "less committed" label when they dart to soccer practice at 5:15.

According to the research group Catalyst, 60% of part-time workers are women. Even among full-time employees, women over 20 work on average 2.5 hours less per week than men over 20, reports the 2009 Current Population Survey. This may explain why women are less valued in the workplace and continue to earn only about 80% as much as men, but it doesn't reflect how *hard* they're working or the *quality* of that work. And isn't that what companies are really after?

In her research for the new book, *Happiness At Work*, chief of performance consultancy i-Opener, Jessica Pryce-Jones, found that women reported working about four hours less per week than men. She also found that women were 7% more on task while at work, meaning they worked about 16 extra days a year in terms of productivity.

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