Work and Life

A Behavioral Approach to Solving Work-Life Conflict

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About ideas42

At ideas42 we believe that a deep understanding of human behavior and why people make the decisions they do will help us improve millions of lives. We use insights from behavioral science to create innovative solutions to tough problems in health, economic mobility, education, criminal justice, consumer finance, energy efficiency and international development. We're a nonprofit that has a wide range of partnerships with governments, foundations, NGOs and corporations. Our impact is global with more than 80 active projects in the United States and in more than 25 other countries around the world.

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Executive Summary

ideas42, a behavioral design and innovation lab, has begun to uncover the factors that create work-life conflict and to design solutions to bring balance to the U.S. knowledge worker. Knowledge workers today find work and life conflicting in uncomfortable ways: constant e-mails during off-hours, days full of endless meetings, and an inability to disconnect for restful vacations. By combining lessons from the behavioral sciences with on-the-ground research, we discovered how interactions between features of human decision-making and the structures of work create these work-life conflicts.

This report explores the particular contexts that induce work-life conflict and explains how three features of work (flexibility, autonomy, and collaboration) actually have unintended negative consequences for knowledge workers. These features of work are often considered positive innovations for knowledge workers, and are even actively encouraged as solutions. While they are an improvement over old models of working, they often promote several specific instances of work-life conflict. We find that a behavioral approach can also be used to design solutions to these challenges, and we provide design ideas that organizations could fashion into specific solutions to address work-life conflict.

Introduction

The Puzzle of Work-Life Conflict

We should be working less. The real output per person in the U.S. economy has tripled in the past 70 years,[1] and economist John Maynard Keynes once predicted a future in which we would all work 15-hour weeks.[2]

But instead of capitalizing on economic growth and reducing work hours to Keynes' 15-hour week, the average American family put in 11 more hours of work per week in 2006 than they did in the late 1970s.[3] Work-related stress seems to be on the rise, and many professionals feel like the pace of the world has somehow sped up. With an increasingly global corporate culture and technological innovations that allow us to stay connected to work during every waking moment, our time and attention are further stretched by the demands of work and life.

There are several potential explanations for these phenomena. Economists have suggested that in industries that are increasingly "winner-take-all," there are strong incentives for firms to recruit top performers and require them to be "online" 24/7.[4] Others have suggested that it's simply a product of

A note on terminology

Throughout this report, we employ the term "work-life conflict" to describe a phenomenon that has many other names: "work-life balance," "work-family conflict," "work-life fit," and others. We choose to use "work-life conflict" both because it is a relatively common term in the field and because it describes the problem ("conflict") rather than an ideal state ("work-life balance"). Largely, we agree with MIT professor Lotte Bailyn, who writes, "'Work-life' is not a term I like—as if work were not a part of life. But this seems to be the current language to describe the field, and it is not easy to think of a pleasing alternative."[7]

American culture. After all, American workers worked more on average than workers in Japan, Canada, Germany, and 18 other OECD countries in 2015.[5] Or perhaps we should understand it as an individual choice: those who want to burn themselves out on work are free to do so.

But no matter the cause underlying the increasing burden of work, it has dramatic impacts on our well-being. In a meta-analysis of 228 studies examining the effects of workplace stressors on health outcomes, researchers found that high job demands raise the odds of having a physician-diagnosed illness by 35% and that long work hours increase mortality by almost 20%.[6] The health implications and financial implications of excessive work stress are severe: more than 120,000 deaths and 5-8% of annual healthcare costs are associated with the way that work is conducted.[7] Beginning in April 2016, ideas42 began to examine the problem of work-life conflict through a behavioral science lens.

A specific first focus: knowledge workers

In order to start to understand causes of work-life conflict and change work practices to address it, ideas42 worked with three organizations that are interested in reducing work-life conflict for their employees. All three are grant-making foundations (one of which is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation itself). At each of these sites, we examined the physical office space, reviewed employee handbooks and (in some cases) administrative data, and interviewed dozens of employees. Though each site was different, the findings below generalize across all three. For that reason, when we attribute quotes to workers, we do not indicate at which site they were employed.

Grant-making philanthropies are different from other sectors of the labor market in important ways. They are able to provide their staff with compensation sufficient for at least a middle-class lifestyle, and most of their employees can be defined as "knowledge workers," whose jobs primarily concern the acquisition, synthesis, and generation of information.[8] These staff are known as "exempt workers" because under Section 13(a)(1) of the Fair Labor Standards Act, they are exempt from regulations requiring that they receive extra compensation for overtime work.[9] These sites also employ non-exempt staff, but this report focuses on those who are exempt from overtime pay.

Other types of organizations and occupations will have different work-life conflict issues. Small start-ups often require that many workers spend a substantial part of their day preparing for product launch. An owner-operated firm results in high risk (and high stress) for the owner. Many businesses that hire workers for retail or other service positions have inflexible hours that make it difficult for employees to take time off or inconsistently-scheduled hours that make it difficult for workers to plan ahead. Although many of the behavioral findings from this work may apply to other contexts, these different organizational structures are not directly covered within this report. Instead, this report represents a first step in using behavioral approaches to examine work-life conflict among knowledge workers, and we believe that future work can employ this model to understand work-life stressors in other types of industries and services.

What we mean when we say 'work-life conflict'

The term 'work-life conflict' specifically refers to instances in which workers find that their work obligations and non-work obligations must be fulfilled within the same period of time. Frequently, work obligations 'win' the conflict, and the resulting neglect of one's personal life creates stress and frustration. Experiencing conflicts like these on occasion may not impact overall well-being. It's when such conflicts recur, intersect, and go unresolved that workers start to experience burnout. Below is a list of 'example behaviors' that illustrate work-life conflict. The list is not comprehensive, but it provides a useful starting point for understanding work-life conflict.

Example Behaviors

- Working longer hours than desired for extended days, weeks, and months.
- Logging more hours than needed in order to achieve organizational goals.
- Working during times that weren't planned work.
- Skipping personal commitments to fulfill work obligations.
- Failing to use allotted paid time off (PTO).
- Underutilizing available parental leave.
- Not taking advantage of available flexible work arrangements.
- Getting less sleep than desired because of work obligations.
- Working while sick.
- Work travel creating "non-productive work time," taking time from productive work and other commitments.
- Spending non-productive "face time" in the office.
- Taking vacation days but spending those days connected to work.
- Having non-work time interrupted by work communications.
- Responding too quickly to work communications during non-work time.

These problems are often collapsed together into the general category of "work-life conflict," but it's important to recognize that they are distinct problems that may have distinct solutions. Companies that solve one problem may fail to solve others, or even worsen them. For example, a company that succeeds in encouraging employees to make use of its generous leave policy may inadvertently force other workers to work late evenings to cover their co-workers' absences. More importantly, we need to account for the different ways that each of these problems are embedded in the individual decisions employees make, as well as the organization's overall structure. A repeated

daily decision, such as when to leave work at the end of the day, will have different features than a decision that is made less often, such as when to schedule a vacation. In order to be able to identify and solve these challenges, we need to understand them as individual issues.

Why now?

The work-life conflict that exists today derives directly from an economy built on an unequal division of labor and compensation. Heather Boushey describes the gendered aspect of this earlier time in her book *Finding Time: The Economics of Work-Life Conflict:*

> ***"American businesses used to have a silent partner. This partner never showed up at a board meeting or made a demand but was integral to profitability. This partner was the American Wife. She made sure the American worker showed up for work well-rested (he didn't have to wake up at 3 AM to feed the baby or comfort a child after a nightmare), in clean clothes (that he neither laundered nor stacked neatly in the closet), with a lunch box packed to the brim with cold-cut sandwiches, coffee, and a home-baked cookie."***[10]

From 1948 to 2015, due in part to the woman's equality movement and in part to stagnating wages, the role of women in the labor force changed dramatically, including the growth of the proportion of women in the labor force from 28.6% to 46.8%.[11,12,13] As the economy could no longer rightly assume one (male) worker in "work" and another, unpaid (female) worker in "life", work-life conflict evolved into new forms of more distinct and discrete clashes of work and life for both men and women.

Alongside massive shifts in the makeup of the workforce, work itself has changed in the years since Keynes made his prediction. Communication technologies like laptop computing, smartphones, and cloud-based file storage have all made it much easier for employees to work at various hours and locations. And there are 60 million knowledge workers in the labor force today, who don't necessarily leave work in the office when they leave for the day.[14] Even without communication technologies, they're thinking about work when they go home.

As the workforce and work itself changed, work-life conflict began to rise. Research demonstrated that "time-based conflict between work and life" was linked to job dissatisfaction, work and family distress, and health complaints.[15] In the search for solutions to work-life conflict, going back to the "old way" of work is out of the question. The United States can no more sustain an economy without women who were previously shut out of the workforce than undo all the technological innovation that enables people to work more (which also has many benefits). Instead, solutions will be found by looking forward. Yet reliable solutions to the "new normal" of work-life conflict have proved elusive in the years since it became a prominent issue.

Using behavioral science to design a new approach

Fortunately, we have a framework for understanding how changing contexts affect people's decisions and actions. **Behavioral science** is the study of how people make decisions and act within a complex and textured world. It draws from decades of research in the social sciences to create a more realistic framework for understanding real people. For instance, the standard approach to predicting human behavior suggests that they consider all available information, weigh the pros and cons of each option, make the best choice, and then act on it. The behavioral approach, however, reveals a different reality. Humans do, in fact, make decisions with imperfect information, and they do not always choose what's best for themselves. Additionally, seemingly small and inconsequential details undermine people's intentions to act. Behavioral science has been used across a variety of fields to realign policies, programs, and products with how people really behave, improving outcomes for millions worldwide.

Insights from behavioral science can be used to find a new way of working: a system that respects autonomy and individual choice and that helps people deliberatively choose when it is appropriate to work. The behavioral approach has already been successful in the fields of higher education, consumer finance, criminal justice, and many others. More specifically, behavioral science interventions have increased savings among low-income workers,[16] reduced academic violations among minority college students,[17] and promoted energy conservation among households.[18] Government bodies have also started to adopt behavioral science strategies. In September 2015, former President Obama signed an executive order that created the White House Social and Behavioral Sciences team, tasked with the responsibility of applying insights from behavioral science to improve the operations and delivery of service by the federal government. The team increased retirement security for service members, boosted college enrollment among low-income students, and improved access to health insurance.[19] In this report, we use behavioral science to describe and explain the existence of work-life conflict and then examine how behaviorally-informed solutions can be adapted to address work-life conflict.

Why New Ways of Working Aren't Solving Work-Life Conflict *(and could be making it worse)*

Initially, worker-friendly policies promised change, and technological advances in communications promised more flexibility for scheduling and completing work. But people find themselves more harried than ever. What happened?

Employers and employees nationwide have adopted a number of strategies to improve harmony between work and life. As a result of these efforts, three principles of the modern workforce now exist that were inspired by the changing needs of workers and employers. That the items on the list below don't alleviate work-life conflict (and could make it worse) may be surprising. But a behavioral approach often reveals truths that appear counterintuitive. In this case, the advances that promised to give workers more ability to control how and when they work have had unanticipated effects because, at least in part, they did not account for the cognitive biases that affect how people make decisions:

Flexibility—Giving workers control of their schedules was supposed to ease work-life conflict by helping people fit work into the rest of their lives. But due to consistent errors of self-prediction (caused by human tendencies like **the planning fallacy** and **errors in affective forecasting**) and **network effects** that are forfeited when schedules drift across the day, flexibility has created the worst of both worlds for work-life conflict: the inefficiencies associated with requiring people to work from the same place at the same time plus the inefficiencies associated with allowing any individual employee to control their own schedule.

Collaboration—In theory, being able to collaborate across an entire organization should help the best ideas and practices diffuse quickly and easily. But as anyone who has attended a full day of one-hour meetings knows, collaboration can also mean a crushing burden of requests for a worker's time that gets in the way of doing "real work." **Egocentrism, asymmetric cost structures** for requesting and providing input, and **risk aversion** are leading causes of these challenges.

Autonomy—Being invested in work should be a fulfilling part of the job. But the invisible influence of **social norms,** the contrast between **self-assessments** and performance evaluations, and the ubiquity of people's **identity as a worker** can make that autonomy go into overdrive. People are driven to achieve to the point that it makes them unhappy, or they are given so much latitude over their work that they are overwhelmed about where and how to progress.

In theory, these principles are positive innovations. Workers should have the ability to control their schedules, care about their work, and share ideas with colleagues in other departments. But this theory disregards a simple but crucial reality: giving people more flexibility, autonomy, and collaboration also gives them more choices, and the increased number of choices people must make means that there are more opportunities for their decisions to be flawed in predictable ways. These principles hold merit, but to be effective at reducing work-life conflict they must account for the cognitive burden introduced by having a greater number of choices. Currently, the modern American workplace fails to treat its workers' time and attention as scarce resources.

Flexibility: Making the worst of a good situation

The days when workers had to show up to the office to get their work done are long gone. Laptops, smartphones, and networked servers enable professional workers to work outside of the office. In response, many organizations have shifted to a flexible work model. Across the three sites we looked at, these policies were relatively similar, with some variation among specific features. There are generally accepted "in-office" hours (usually somewhere between 8AM and 6PM), but if workers need to attend to a personal

matter, they can leave the office during those hours with the understanding that the time will be made up elsewhere—an early morning, a late night, or a weekend. When work spills over at the end of the normal workday, workers have a number of options: stay late, finish up at home, or show up early the next day. They generally have the flexibility to work from home one day or two days per week, either by default or with the approval of a supervisor. This model can be thought of as "tight" flexibility: employees can control their own schedule within a set of organizationally defined boundaries. It is worth reiterating that the model of "tight" flexibility applies to exempt employees only; non-exempt employees track their hours carefully and face distinct time boundaries for work.

This new model sounds like excellent news. Workers are well-positioned to understand how best to complete their own work, so added flexibility should allow them to be more efficient. But our research suggests that the current model of "tight" flexibility may actually bring out the worst of both worlds: the outdated model of people needing to work from the same place and at the same time as their coworkers *plus* the coordination challenges that often ensue when people control their own schedules.

Where "tight" flexibility fails

One reason why the model of "tight" flexibility can cause problems is it tends to fuel inefficient time allocation, both from individuals and organizations. Simply the *option* of choosing how to allocate work across a 24-hour day as opposed to an 8-hour day allows more room for error. There is evidence to suggest, for example, that under telecommuting policies, people work more hours overall.[20] These allocation failures are related to two sets of problems: features of individual human psychology related to self-prediction and the network effects that emerge when workers collaborate.

Why we're bad at predicting our own future

People are quite bad at predicting their own futures, and often fail to anticipate how long tasks will take to complete. This phenomenon is known as **the planning fallacy.** One study asked a group of college students to estimate the amount of time it would take to complete their senior thesis under three different possible scenarios: the best-case scenario (in which everything goes right for the students' research), the likely scenario (what students actually thought would happen), and the worst-case scenario (in which everything goes wrong). At the end of the semester, the research team measured how long it actually took students to complete their theses. On average, students finished about 7 days after they said they would—in the worst possible scenario.[21] Workers, too, may face challenges in accurately estimating exactly how long their to-do list will take them to complete each day.

People also make errors in **affective forecasting**—they underestimate how much emotional and physical states will affect their future decisions. In one study, smokers drastically underestimated how much they would be willing to pay for a cigarette when imagining a future scenario in which they were presented with a lit cigarette. Instead, when asked this question in the presence of a lit cigarette—a context activating the emotional and cognitive state associated with nicotine cravings—smokers were much more accurate. These findings suggest that the error does not come from a general inability to predict one's future behaviors, but instead stems from a failure to accurately estimate the impact

of craving the cigarette.[22] When workers are predicting how productive they will be in a future period, they similarly may be unlikely to incorporate the effects of their future cognitive or emotional state on their productivity.

A thought experiment

Imagine an alternate universe, much like our own except for one important distinction: The workday is 24 hours long. Employees are still expected to work 40 hours per week, but they can do so at total convenience of time and place. People enjoy this model because it allows them to construct their entire life in the way that reflects their preferences.

Almost immediately, workers in this universe encounter two sets of problems. The first is one of self-control. When people have all day to execute the required amount of work, they find it very hard to allocate their time efficiently across 8 continuous hours before signing off. The other set of problems involves coordination. Workers struggle to find time with each other to discuss their work. For example, one team member works a 5AM to 1PM shift so that she can take off early for the weekend, and another works 3PM to 11PM so he can take care of a sick child during the day. An enterprising behavioral economist in this universe comes up with a solution: if each individual commits to a specific set of 8 hours in which to do their work, workers might be able to address the self-control problem. And one way to get people to commit is to make it clear that their coworkers will be expecting them to do so because they are working at the same time. So, the 8-hour office workday is born—an individual commitment device sustained by persistent and powerful network effects.

Trying to work together across 24 hours

As individual workers confront their own difficulties in handling "tight" flexibility, teams and organizations are also rendered less effective as members try to collaborate across the 24-hour period allowed by the model. In essence, they forfeit the **network effects** associated with the traditional workday. In particular, when individual workers shape their working time in accordance with their own schedule, they may be imposing cognitive costs on their colleagues. As we learned during interviews with the three organizations we examined, when one worker returns to work late in the evening or early in the morning, it is likely that they will e-mail their colleagues during that window. The person working either will have to wait a longer time for a response or will interrupt the non-work time of their colleagues who mentioned checking their e-mail in off hours "just in case" an issue requires their attention. However, we heard no reported instances in which an issue actually needed an employee's attention immediately while they were offline. Instead, we hypothesize, the psychological reward associated with resolving an "information gap" compels employees to check for new e-mails during non-work time.[23] People like novel stimuli, and the trickle of messages into inboxes provides a steady stream of them, but each notification also makes workers aware of an information gap: there is a new message, but what does it contain? In order to close the gap, people check their e-mail. Signaling is also a key consideration; being responsive on e-mail during "offline" hours may serve as a signal of a strong commitment to work, or at least mollify the worker's fear of seeming uncommitted.

Unintended Consequences of Flexibility	Common Example	Further Reading
Workers fall victim to the **planning fallacy**, making their time allocation across 24 hours inefficient.	A worker takes longer on a task than she expected, and has to spend her evening catching up on e-mail.	Buehler, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994). Exploring the "planning fallacy": Why people underestimate their task completion times. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*(3), 366-381.
Workers make poor **affective forecasts**, so it is difficult to predict future productivity.	A worker plans to finish working after his children go to bed, but doesn't realize how exhausted he will be when the time comes.	Sayette, M. A., Loewenstein, G., Griffin, K. M., & Black, J. J. (2008). Exploring the cold-to-hot empathy gap in smokers. *Psychological Science, 19*(9), 926-932.
Working flexibly forfeits the **network effects** gained when workers work in the same time period and place, which stretches individual attention.	A worker finds her time interrupted by constant work notifications from 5-9PM, when she is taking care of a parent, and finds it hard not to respond.	Loewenstein, G. (1994). The psychology of curiosity: a review and reinterpretation. *Psychological Bulletin, 116*(1), 75-98.

Collaboration: Egocentrism and the fear of being left out

During our site visits, workers described a "culture of collaboration." Employees emphasized that, in their minds, collaboration is important because it improves work product by leveraging diverse perspectives and ideas. We agree with these workers, and so does the academic literature.[24] For example, the design of a new organizational onboarding process likely benefits from including perspectives from workers across different departments and of varying lengths of employment. Likewise, the revision of the organizational PTO policy likely benefits from including perspectives from employees at different phases of their lives.

Collaboration, however, can occur so often that it places excess strain on employees who strive to represent every available perspective in their individual work. While collaboration takes many forms across different media, one form common to most organizations is the standard meeting. Meetings are important; they allow for real-time discussion of issues and help foster a culture of inclusive decision-making. At the same time, working groups may default into meetings that are unstructured and lack clear goals when individual work would be more productive. Many workers shared sentiments about the burden of meetings: "The way I'm scheduled is the most stressful. I'm in meetings all the time. There's just no time to process." Or, "I'm lucky to even have one or two hours of 'real work' in my day." Similarly, employees report being overburdened by a culture in which e-mail is the dominant form of communication. When someone spends much of their day in meetings, "e-mail debt" can pile up, leaving only evenings and weekends to catch up. We believe that the stress generated by overscheduling is a result of the design of the modern workplace.

Invisible switching costs

Imagine that you had to schedule four 1-hour meetings during an 8-hour work day. Would you rather space out each meeting and schedule one meeting every other hour throughout the day or schedule all four meetings back to back during the first four hours of the day? If you space out your meetings, you get time to collect your thoughts between each meeting. However, in the latter case, you get a four-hour chunk of uninterrupted work time. Research suggests that interrupted work may be performed faster, but people experience more stress and frustration while working this way.[25]

The hidden cost of task switching is often unaccounted for and can make it difficult for employees who require large blocks of uninterrupted time to make progress on their work. In the modern workplace, asynchronous work streams and schedules make it difficult to schedule meetings so that employees can have those blocks, and numerous requests for collaboration can make it hard to have unscheduled time at all.

Ultimately interactions between features of the workplace and features of human psychology produce what we refer to as *over-collaboration*—a phenomenon in which employees spend too much time communicating about work, and therefore have less time to execute it.

Failures of mind-reading

Where does over-collaboration come from? By taking both the perspective of the requestor (the individual who sends a request for input, collaboration, or meeting) and the recipient (the individual who receives the request), we can begin to understand how the workplace erodes individual work time. **Egocentrism** is an underlying feature of human psychology that makes it inherently difficult for people to see the world accurately from another person's perspective,[26] and it is at the root of over-collaboration. We want to be clear: in this instance, we do not employ the term 'egocentrism' in order to describe individual workers as narcissists. That use of the term would suggest that over-collaboration is a problem unique to specific individuals. Instead, we understand egocentrism to be a basic phenomenon common to all human beings.

When a worker sends a request for feedback, input, or collaboration, egocentrism clouds their ability to accurately assess and weigh the cost of deliberation placed on the recipient. But equally crucial, collaboration requests are much costlier for the recipient than the requestor; **costs are asymmetric**. With current meeting and scheduling technology, it is essentially costless for a requestor to add one, two, three, or more recipients to a meeting or e-mail thread. From the perspective of a requestor, it makes sense, when in doubt, to err on the side of inclusion. By being inclusive, requestors reduce the risk of negative reactions from those who were left out. As one worker said, "We over-include out of niceness." It is also clear that by including others, a requestor reduces the risk of missing out on valuable opinions. However, what is less obvious in the moment of request is that each subsequent collaborator brings fewer unique opinions than the one before. A fifth collaborator won't have much to add that the other four people in the room haven't already said. Yet each new recipient has to read the request, understand its importance, and decide whether to participate. On the level of the individual request, these cognitive costs are small. In the aggregate, however, workers find themselves fatigued by long sequences of meetings and overflowing e-mail inboxes. Because the requestor is focused

on the specific request they need fulfilled, it is unlikely they will weigh these drawbacks when adding potential collaborators to their e-mail or meeting.

There also exists an asymmetry of information between the requestor and recipient. The requestor knows exactly why they invited a recipient to a meeting, but it can be unclear to the recipient why they have been included. Furthermore, the requestor knows whether the recipient's attendance is expected and the consequences of their absence, but to a recipient, this too can be unclear. Even when requestors attempt to close this gap by explaining the purpose of the request, they may not be successful: one study found that people think that they are much better communicators over e-mail than they actually are.[27]

Burdened with the decision to accept or reject an invitation, a recipient may rely on decision-making heuristics. It is difficult to evaluate questions such as: "Should I attend this meeting?", "How much time should I invest in preparing for it?", and "What will my contribution be?" Instead, it is much easier for recipients to rely on the assumption that the requestor included them for a good reason and, in the absence of immediate painful tradeoffs, choose the conservative option and attend the meeting. **Risk aversion**, on the part of both the requestor and the recipient, leads to the high meeting load workers experience.

Hierarchy plays an important role in these scenarios. When a supervisor makes a request to meet, it is clear that such a meeting is important. Meetings with peers are more ambiguous, and in the face of that ambiguity, the conservative option is to accept. Beyond a risk-averse approach to declining an invitation for collaboration, a recipient may overestimate the need for their expertise. Some workers shared that they have to attend certain meetings to represent their team or can't take vacation because otherwise some work will not get done. However, when asked, these same employees typically say that without their input and in their absence, the work still gets done, and it gets done quite well. In effect, people sometimes overestimate the importance of our individual contribution to group projects.

Other reasons for excessive collaboration

The initial request to collaborate is further exacerbated by overconfidence and the planning fallacy. Both requestor and recipient may underestimate the necessary contribution and effort—it's just one meeting, just a 4-week initiative, just one project—and fail to account for external factors that almost always create more work and require more collaboration.

Finally, there are incentives to calling meetings and accepting meetings beyond improving work product. Meetings may serve as a signal of importance. If a worker's opinion is valued across different departments within the organization, they can easily fill their day with meetings. Meetings are also a mechanism for accountability of attention. In a workplace where employees feel overburdened, meeting attendance ensures that people are paying attention to the issue at hand (though, on several occasions, we did hear employee accounts of having to control laptop and smartphone use within meetings—employees were busy collaborating virtually!). Meeting acceptance and attendance help recipients feel a sense of connectedness to the work at hand and create a positive feedback loop:

go to meeting, feel valuable, repeat. This would be fine if such behavior were costless, but the demands created on time and attention are too great to ignore.

Unintended Consequences of Collaboration	Common Example	Further Reading
Egocentrism makes it difficult to treat others' time and attention with the same value as one's own.	Workers spend 90 minutes in a meeting trying to make a decision because they cannot agree on the terms of the discussion.	Epley, N., Keysar, B., Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2004). Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(3), 327-339.
Asymmetric cost structures promote over-requesting collaboration.	A meeting with nine attendees only needs input from four, but the rest were invited because it was easy to do so.	Cross, R., Rebele, R., & Grant, A. (2016). Collaborative overload. *Harvard Business Review, 94*(1), 74-79.
Risk aversion promotes over-requesting and over-accepting of collaboration.	The other five attendees from above said yes to the meeting invite because it was less risky than saying no.	Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica: Journal of the econometric society,* 263-291.

Autonomy: Perceptions of "self-inflicted" work-life conflict

When asked about the source of their work tasks, many of our interviewees reported that much of their work was self-generated. These workers described a great deal of autonomy in defining the scope of their work and in deciding what they worked on. Even if their tasks were managed by a supervisor or dictated by external circumstances, most workers felt some degree of latitude in determining how to execute those tasks. Unanimously, employees appreciate having this autonomy. Their appreciation is unsurprising; there is strong evidence demonstrating the link between autonomy and employee satisfaction.[28]

Despite reporting a great deal of autonomy, the same employees reported that work consistently took up a larger-than-ideal portion of their work-life mix. "I wouldn't say I'm struggling with it [work-life conflict], but it is something I want to get better at," shared one interviewee. Some employees find it difficult to leave the office when they want to, some find it difficult to fully disconnect from work-related communications outside the office, and others find themselves rescheduling personal commitments because of work more often than they do the opposite. If workers have autonomy to decide what work they take on, theoretically they should be able to select their tasks so that they achieve their ideal work-life mix. What explains the contradiction between employees' perceived autonomy and the lived experience of work-life conflict?

The uncertainty in communicating what to work on, how hard, and when

Knowledge work is inherently harder to measure and predict than other kinds of work. When the concept of knowledge work was first introduced by management consultant Peter Drucker in 1959, he suggested as much: "How far our personnel management theories really applied even to yesterday's machine workers is an open question. For managing tomorrow's employees, the products of the educated society, they are likely to be quite inadequate."[29]

Over 50 years later, how much progress has been made on understanding how to predict the inputs and outputs of knowledge work? Not much. In 2011, a General Services Administration report concluded, "There is little movement in the research or application field of how to measure knowledge worker productivity and from there improve it."[30]

For the individual worker, this ambiguity can make it difficult to accurately plan for the completion of work and assess when a work product is truly finished. Between colleagues, failures to communicate expectations about the level of effort or time invested in a particular project can make these challenges even more acute. And the challenges presented by ambiguity in knowledge work are compounded by several psychological phenomena that make it even harder to put the "right amount" of effort into a given task. There is a clear set of contextual factors that consistently nudge people toward overworking: perceived **social norms, positive self-assessments,** and **which identities are made salient.**

Unobserved social influence

We know that explicit rules can tell people how to act: "Report to work at 9AM." "Complete this task by the end of the day." "Employees are granted 15 days of paid time off per year." But implicit expectations for how to act, derived from observed social norms, can be just as powerful in driving human behavior: "My boss shows up at 8AM." "My colleague submits her end-of-day tasks at 11:59PM." "Is anybody actually taking 15 days off?" Decades of psychological research have demonstrated that people are driven to conform to **perceived social norms** in an effort to maintain social relationships and a positive self-concept.[31] Drawing on this work, researchers have shown that manipulating the perception of norms can be used to induce pro-social behaviors, like reducing energy consumption or increasing voter turnout.[32] In the context of work, social norms around safety practices have been found to drive compliance and proactive safety behavior in the workplace.[33]

Frequently, the influence of other people's behavior on our own occurs at a nonconscious level.[34] Therefore, behaviors derived from the observed behavior of others can still confer a sense of autonomy and control to an individual. Since people have a hard time recognizing when others' behavior influences them, they attribute that influence to other factors,

An outdated approach

In the "old model" of work, employers didn't concern themselves with their employees' personal lives. Employers were only concerned about their employees' work, maximizing productivity, and incentivizing behaviors that added business value—generally incentivizing employees to do more work. Because most workers had a "silent partner" at home, this arrangement made sense. With more women entering the workforce, however, both men and women are having difficulty living up to the antiquated vision of an ideal worker. But organizations are still incentivizing this behavior, and it's proving challenging to shake this history.

such as their own ambition. At our research sites, we found little evidence of supervisors explicitly telling employees to work more hours, to check their work e-mails at all times, and to cancel personal commitments for work commitments.

What we did find, however, is that work behaviors in coworkers are far more observable than nonwork behaviors. This isn't surprising; work communication happens through work-related media like e-mail, and few workers go out of their way to send their coworkers pictures of their nonwork lives through those channels (though perhaps we should encourage them to do so). Because work behaviors are far more salient to colleagues, workers may construct erroneous perceptions of how much those around them are working. These false perceptions may be encouraging overwork.

How self-image and performance evaluations interact

By design, organizations reward work and leave self-care as an individual determination. This is not a criticism; it is simply an observation about the ways in which organizations are structured. Doing more work is frequently rewarded with promotions and compensation increases, but organizations lack mechanisms to even formally understand how an employee is "performing" in the rest of their life, much less evaluate that performance. In order for many exempt workers to receive high marks during performance reviews, they may need to offer their time and work on general organi-zational needs. Going "above and beyond" is seen as a way to succeed across the working world. "We just rolled out a new performance review process and now in order to receive an exemplar rating [the highest rating], I have to also volunteer on an internal, cross-functional committee in addition to completing my core work," one employee reported. We also heard that "people reward capability with more work" and "the more you do, the more work they let you do."

Traffic: a helpful boundary

Each of our sites are located near major roadways, where traffic varies widely based on time of day. One worker nicely summed up the effects of traffic: "I have to get on the road by 3PM, or I'll sit in traffic for two hours. But I can get the rest of the work done at home." Across many interviews, we found that the deadline imposed by traffic often helped workers clearly prioritize what needed to get done before the traffic hit.

This approach is understandable. Organizations want to get the best work out of their employees. But our research suggests that structuring the performance evaluation in this way interacts with people's self-images to produce overwork. The psychological literature abounds with evidence that people are motivated to maintain a **positive self-image**.[35] A person's self-assessment can sometimes be exaggeratedly positive, so facing evidence of being merely a "good" worker may produce cognitive dissonance.[36] When an individual holds two beliefs that are in conflict, they work to reduce the dissonance by changing their behavior, changing their beliefs, justifying their beliefs with new ideas, or simply trying to ignore the conflicting information.[37] Many interviewees across our three sites spoke of a "culture of excellence," and of wanting to do the best possible job at all times. As one person reflected, "You have people who are type A—motivation is intrinsic in our people." In the context of work, individuals who hold positive self-assessments may find an evaluation that is "good" (but not "excellent") discomforting, and ramp up their working habits to attempt to reduce the dissonance.

This phenomenon may be exaggerated at our research sites because they are mission-oriented organizations. Research has shown that intrinsic motivations, such as pride over one's work, can be independent of or even oppositional to economic motivations.[38] Employees doing mission-driven work may have a hard time making decisions about time management and may work in excess of the requirements of their role simply because they care deeply about the mission of the work.

Why work dominates

Even with an understanding of how workplace norms and positive self-assessments can drive overwork, there remains a question. Why would an individual strive to act in accordance with work norms to the detriment of, say, acting in accordance with desirable community norms or parenting norms? One explanation is that for many people, their most salient identity is **their identity as a worker.** On an average day, people spend more time working than any other activity. They are bombarded with work-related stimuli more than those that could prime our identity as a family member or community member. A recent Gallup survey found that a majority of Americans get a sense of identity from their work (and 70% of college graduates say that they do).[39]

Perhaps more importantly, however, identities as workers often—especially for non-parents—come with more clearly defined roles and responsibilities. What does it mean to be a good worker? It usually means delivering on the responsibilities of the job description. In any given moment, the immediate consequences of work commitments are evident. Meetings, for example, are clearly delineated responsibilities in one's schedule. In contrast, many personal responsibilities, though as important or more important, feel less clearly defined. Those non-work commitments that are clearly defined (like childcare) are usually quite effective in helping workers disconnect. But without these hard commitments, non-work "duties" are indistinct, and in the face of this ambiguity, the worker identity dominates.

These three insights suggest a structural problem: visible work behaviors create norms because of the way communication technologies are structured. Performance evaluations are not designed to reward people for good self-care. And while clearly defining workers' roles and responsibilities is the natural course of organizing people to work together, it stands in clear contrasts to the sometimes-fuzzy needs from the rest of our lives. It is worth emphasizing that these systems have not been inflicted upon us. We have chosen them.

Unintended Consequences of Autonomy	Common Example	Further Reading
Perceived social norms encourage people to work more than they need to.	A worker sees e-mails from two coworkers who happened to have weekend work to attend to, but doesn't see anything from the six colleagues who are away from work.	Prentice, D., Miller, D. (1993). Pluralistic ignorance and alcohol use on campus: Some consequences of misperceiving the social norm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. 64*(2), 243—256.
Workers' **self-image** causes them to reduce cognitive dissonance by striving to be the best.	A worker consciously decides to seek the top level of her performance evaluation and works excess hours to attain it.	Sedikides, C., & Strube, M. J. (1995). The multiply motivated self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 21*(12), 1330-1335.
Peoples' **identities as workers** are salient and concrete, so people are biased toward behaving like workers.	A worker knows that reading to his child at night is more important to him than keeping up with work, but his child won't send him an urgent e-mail if she doesn't get read to.	Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological review, 117*(2), 440.

What to Do About It

The features at the center of work-life conflict for knowledge workers (flexibility, autonomy, and collaboration) are also innovations that have allowed organizations to adjust to the needs of the changing nature of work and a changing workforce. We do not recommend going back. But intentionally or not, we have implemented these systems with an incomplete understanding of how their design interacts with and affects human decision-making. The good news is that people made these systems; people can also change them.

Based on our research, we have chosen to focus on four specific problems: not enough restful vacation time, too much e-mail, too much time spent in meetings, and too many working hours. We've chosen to target our solutions in this way because our understanding of the general conditions (that flexibility, autonomy, and collaboration are imperfectly designed for real people) does not lend itself to specific solutions. In other words, our diagnosis starts to give us the overall context to design individual solutions for individual problems. These solutions are not going to take away flexibility or autonomy from workers, or ask them to collaborate less. Instead, they leverage these features of the modern workplace (with some tweaks) to promote both better work and less conflict with the rest of life.

Below are high-level design concepts that start to point to specific solutions. Undoubtedly, to adapt them for any given workplace will require additional design, and not every solution will make sense for every workplace. Our hope is to provide tools for organizations to re-examine their processes and policies in order to reduce work-life conflict.

1

DESIGN SOLUTIONS

How to Get People to Take More Vacation

Reasons for not taking restful vacation

Our first problem is concerned with ensuring that ***workers are taking time off, and that on that time off they are actually disconnected from work.*** We found across our sites that workers were not using their entire balance of vacation over the course of a given year, that people were losing vacation because of this, and that, while on vacation, some workers felt compelled to stay connected via e-mail and phone.

There is a myriad of reasons that workers fail to take vacations, and fail to truly disconnect during them. The first is a simple issue of **salience and limited attention.** Workers are busy, and frequently they have more urgent things to do than plan vacations. Even with vague intentions for when they should take time off, they may defer vacation planning until that time actually arrives, when it may be too late to coordinate. In the moment, the needs of work are clearer than the vague intention to take time off, so vacation fails to happen. Workers are also **risk-averse.** If there is any chance something could go wrong while they are away, that chance may discourage them from taking time off in the first place (though, in practice, true emergencies for our interviewees were exceedingly rare). Finally, when workers do take time off, they are aware that work is piling up in their absence. In an effort to avoid the painful process of slogging through their inbox upon their return, workers smooth work backwards into their vacation. Of course, these are not the only features of human decision-making that limit the number of vacation days workers take, but these insights help illuminate how we might approach the effort to get them to take more. Organizations hoping to increase the amount of restful vacation that workers are taking should understand the specific contexts their workers face.

What are the concrete steps you need to take in order to ensure you use your vacation?

When and where will you take vacation?

What will you do immediately before vacation?

What will you do immediately after vacation?

What are obstacles that might prevent you from taking vacation? Strategies to overcome?

Strengthens intentions

Builds strategies for overcoming obstacles

SOLUTION 1:
Create a moment of choice and follow up

WHAT IT IS:

During a regularly occurring time, such as a performance review, prompt the scheduling of vacation. Ask workers:

- ***when they will be off***
- ***how long they will be off for***
- ***how they will take the steps needed to prepare to be away***

Workers should also be given the opportunity to set up timely reminders so they remember to follow through.

Ask managers and team members:

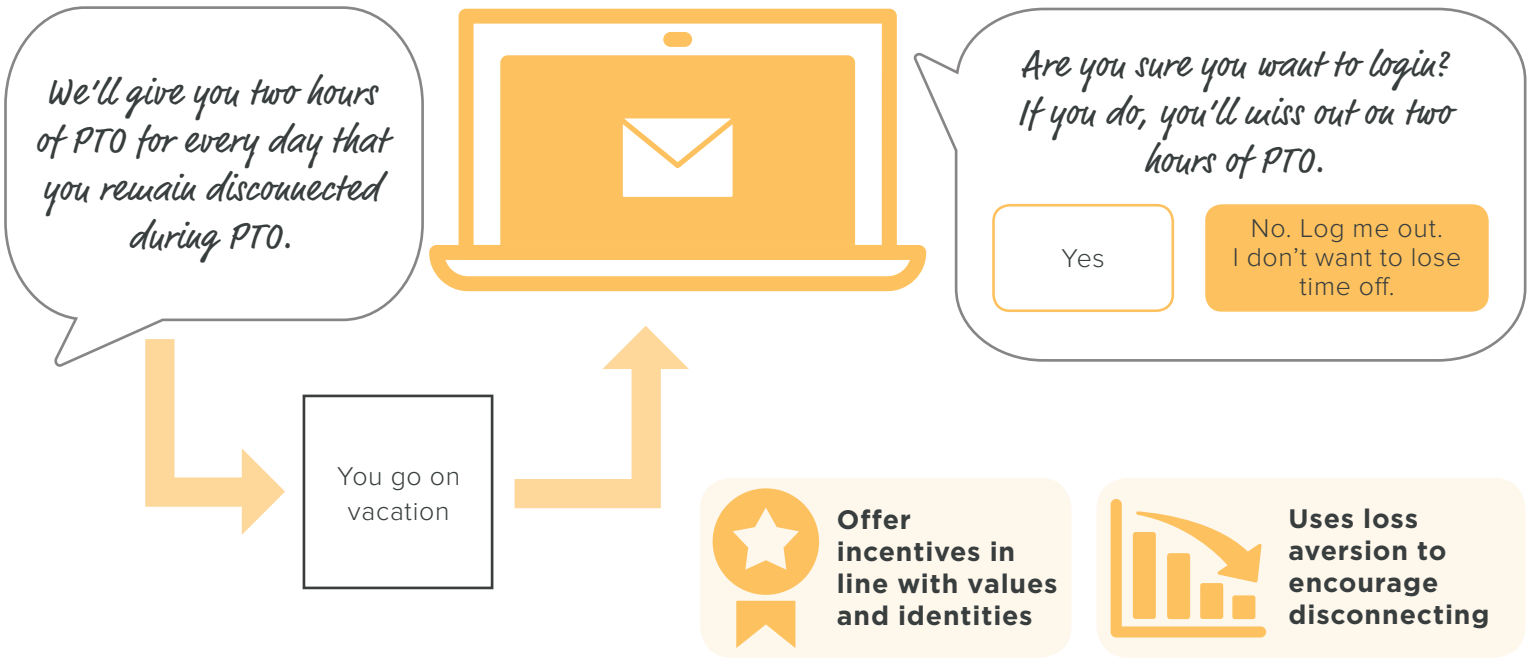
- ***to review the steps needed to prepare for time off***
- ***to check in two weeks ahead to make sure preparation is going as planned***

WHY IT WILL WORK:

People may have vague intentions to take time off, but attention is limited, so they don't take the steps needed to actually commit. By providing workers with a moment of choice to confirm their plans, and helping them build a plan to follow through, employers can increase the chance that vacation will happen. This moment could occur in a number of different settings:

- ***a performance review***
- ***work planning***
- ***at the beginning of the year***

Taking the time to address vacation plans and expectations also sends an organizational and managerial signal that time off is important.



SOLUTION 2:
DISCONNECTION BONUS

WHAT IT IS:

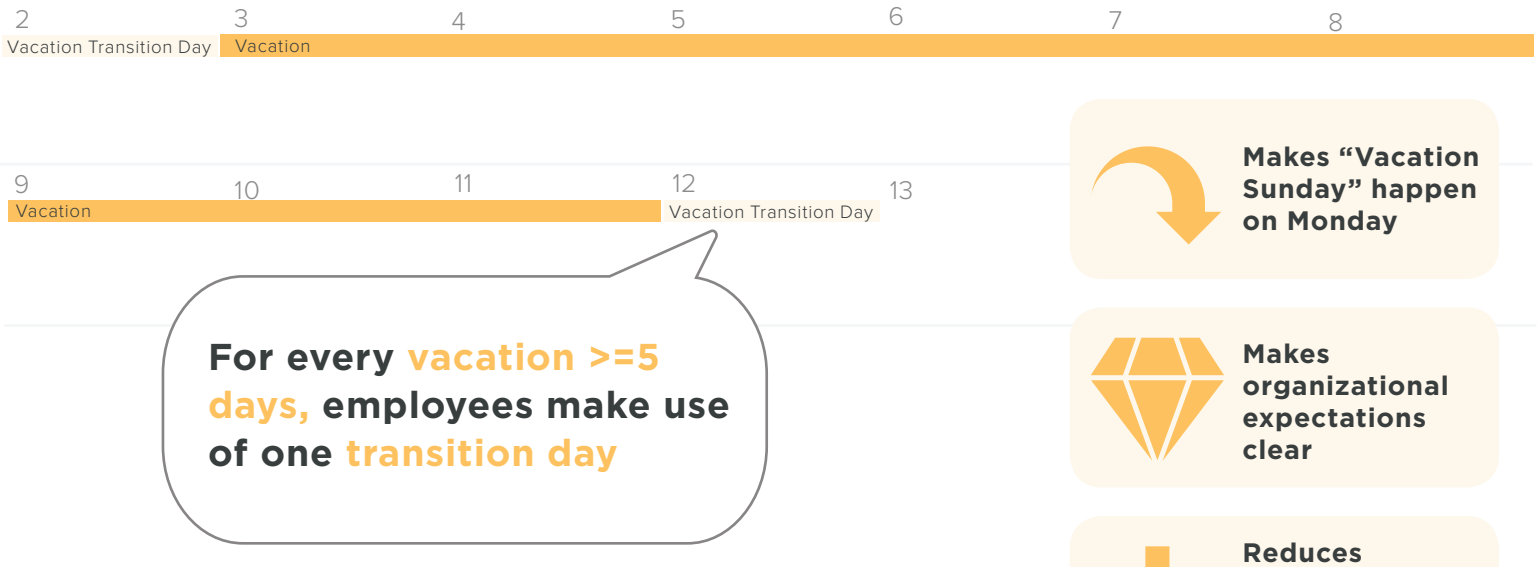
Offering a bonus for taking vacation or for actually disconnecting during that time off feels like an obvious answer, but the way that a bonus is designed has enormous implications for its potential effectiveness. The ideal bonus would start at a meaningful size and manifest increasing gains for each additional day of disconnection, but would have to be forfeited if the worker did check in on work. The bonus could take many forms:

- ***additional vacation time***
- ***a direct financial incentive***
- ***a donation to a charity the worker cares about***

Which is the most effective will depend upon the culture of the organization.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Incentives work (in many contexts, if we are careful about their design). In the absence of a compelling reason not to check in on work, workers may seek out work to minimize risk and avoid a massive spike in work upon their return. These impulses aren't dominant; it is simply the case that nothing is opposing them. By leveraging loss aversion, the bonus provides that opposition.



Makes "Vacation Sunday" happen on Monday

Makes organizational expectations clear

Reduces retrospective impact of busy vacation end

SOLUTION 3:
PTO(n)

WHAT IT IS:

One simple solution is "paid time on." Implement a standard practice that the last day before a worker's vacation, and the first day that a worker returns from vacation, they should not be RSVPed to any meetings or have any deliverables due, and they shouldn't deactivate their vacation responder. This grants the slack needed to adequately prepare for time off and to catch up on the things they missed by disconnecting.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

People smooth work into their vacation because they did not accomplish everything they wanted to before leaving, or to avoid an unmanageable workload spike upon their return. By making that spike manageable on either side of the vacation, people can feel comfortable truly stepping away.

2

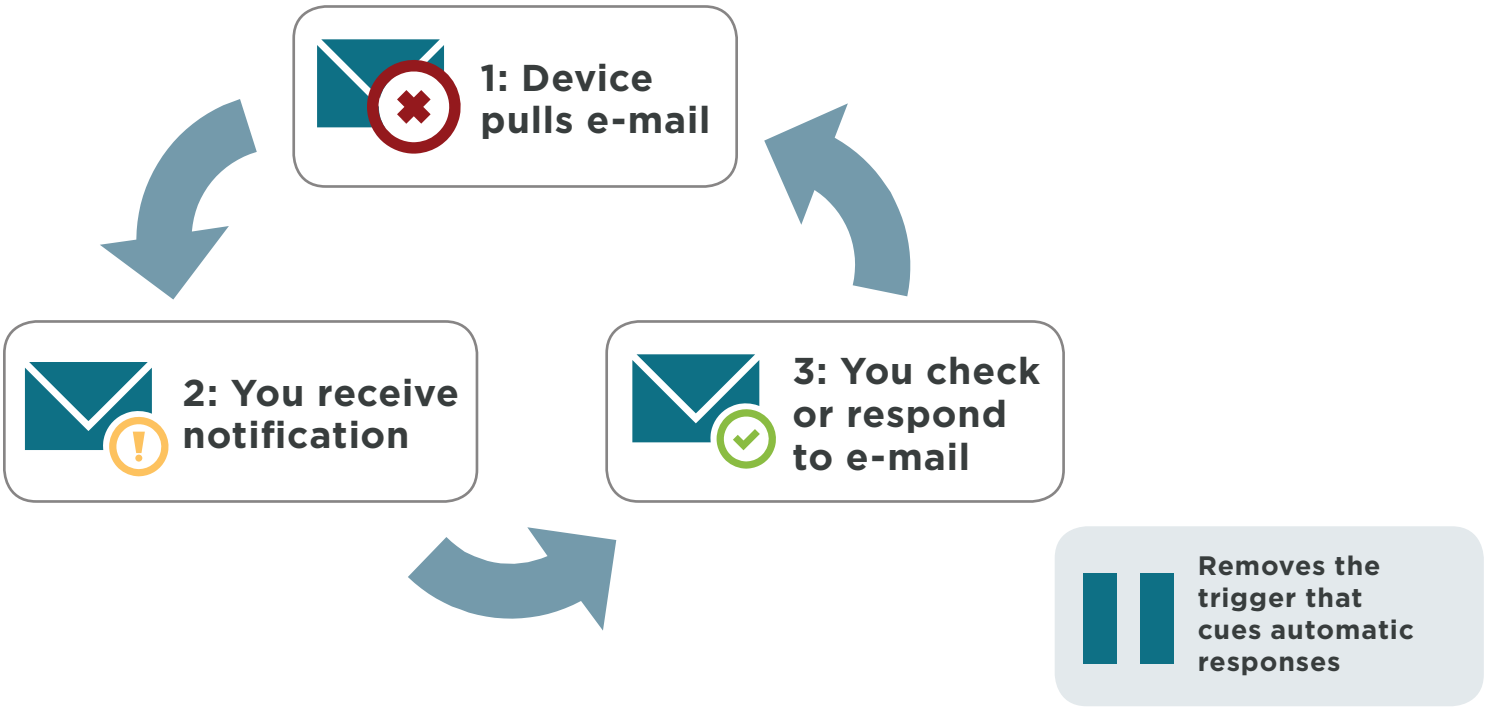
DESIGN SOLUTIONS

How to Get People to Spend Less Time on E-mail

Reasons for spending too much time on e-mail

The reasons that e-mail proves endlessly distracting for workers could fill an entire report by themselves. From the perspective of behavioral science, it is worth highlighting a few specific reasons. The first is that e-mail is only costly in the aggregate; the time and effort it takes to send or respond to a single message are low. But as messages pile up, the total attentional demand becomes significant, and the switching costs associated with changing focus from one e-mail message to the next become meaningfully high. These issues stem from a more basic concern: in the modern organization, asynchronous communication is uniquely valuable. Because individual workers have schedule control, colleagues who need to collaborate are not always able to do so simultaneously. Asynchronous communication platforms (like e-mail) allow workers to function this way, but people frequently fail to account for the costs of doing so.

Another important driver of inefficient e-mail behavior is the interaction between novelty, information gaps, and habits. E-mails are novel stimuli; it wouldn't be worth sending them if they didn't contain new information. Evidence suggests that humans are uniquely attracted to novelty, and that we derive utility from resolving "information gaps."[40] Information gaps occur when a person is aware that there is something they don't know, and they know how to take steps to acquire that information. E-mail platforms represent a perfect incarnation of this paradigm. The sender and beginning of the message are immediately clear, but recipients must click on the message to see the full content. Over time, this behavior can become a habit: people are cued by an incoming message, follow a routine by clicking through to the full message, and are rewarded with new information.[41] This behavior ends up consuming time and attention in ways that can reduce productivity.



SOLUTION 1:
DISABLE AUTOMATIC SERVER PULLS

WHAT IT IS:

Disabling the automatic population of e-mail in-boxes with new messages can prevent workers from having their attention pulled away. When workers need to check for new messages, they must do so actively by refreshing the browser page or window.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

People frequently underestimate how much attention their e-mail inbox takes from them (in any given moment). By prompting them to consider whether they actually need to be aware of new messages, we can reduce the frequency of interruption. Of course, there is a risk that workers will become habitual refreshers, constantly updating their inbox manually because they are rewarded with new information for doing so. By instituting a rate limit (say, once every 30 minutes) for habitual refreshers, this problem can be combatted.

During agreed off hours

You send an internal e-mail

You receive an automatic reply

Automatic reply: It's after business hours

Hi,

Thanks for your e-mail. It's after business hours and I'm spending time away from work to rest and reenergize. You should take time for yourself too.

Thanks,
Uyhun

Reinforces desirable norms

Marks "invisible" non-work behavior as visible

SOLUTION 2:
INCREASE THE TIME AND ATTENTION COSTS OF SENDING E-MAILS

WHAT IT IS:

Another way of reducing the distraction of e-mails is to reduce the volume of e-mails sent. E-mail is more costly in time and attention for people to receive than it is for them to send, and by increasing the cost of sending information through e-mail (without making it too frustrating), we can ensure that only truly important e-mails are sent and received.

When an e-mail is sent during a time that the organization or team has agreed should be "off-time," the sender will receive an auto-reply from their colleagues suggesting that the sender is the one deviating from the norm, and that most people are doing other things at the moment. To be inclusive of workers with different schedule needs, the "off-time" should be agreed upon at the team level.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Having internal auto-responders for off hours sends a clear organizational signal of what the expected behavior is. While the sender may think of themselves as being uniquely committed for doing additional work during off-hours, the responder attempts to correct that misperception by making it clear that time away from the office is vital for workers.

MOST IMPORTANT (Read today)	From	Time Received
! Need input on diagnosis draft	Dan Connolly	3/12/17 2:34PM
! Plan your vacation coverage	Uyhun Ung	3/10/17 9:11AM
! I need your agenda for the meeting this afternoon	Dan Connolly	3/9/17 11:24AM

Read soon (1-2 days)	From	Time Re
Feedback on report	Suman Gidwani	3/11/17 1:
Schedule meeting for next week	Uyhun Ung	3/10/17 2
Updates to website	Dan Connolly	3/9/17 11:2

Not important (read when applicable)	From	Time Re
Interesting article	Uyhun Ung	3/7/17 10
Lunch next week for Paul's birthday?	Uyhun Ung	3/6/17 11:
Discount tickets to Broadway on Thursday	Suman Gidwani	3/4/17 9:

Make priority e-mails visually salient

Make clear when the e-mail replies are done for the day

SOLUTION 3:
REDUCE THE TIME AND ATTENTION COSTS OF RESPONDING TO E-MAILS

WHAT IT IS:

By default, most e-mail interfaces categorize messages by timestamp. Under this default, one challenge for workers is understanding which e-mail messages are the most important, and prioritizing their time to address the important ones first. By overhauling the visual display of the inbox to reflect the priority level of a message or the deadlines associated with it (rather than the timestamp), workers could manage their inbox more effectively. It may be possible for senders to include a priority level or deadline that is interpretable by software so that the inbox view could be organized automatically.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Even if the first two strategies successfully reduce the number of e-mails employees send and help workers avoid being distracted by their inboxes, workers will still need to carve out time to respond to messages. Building tools to help people look at their inbox and understand the relative importance of messages will make this time more efficient.

3

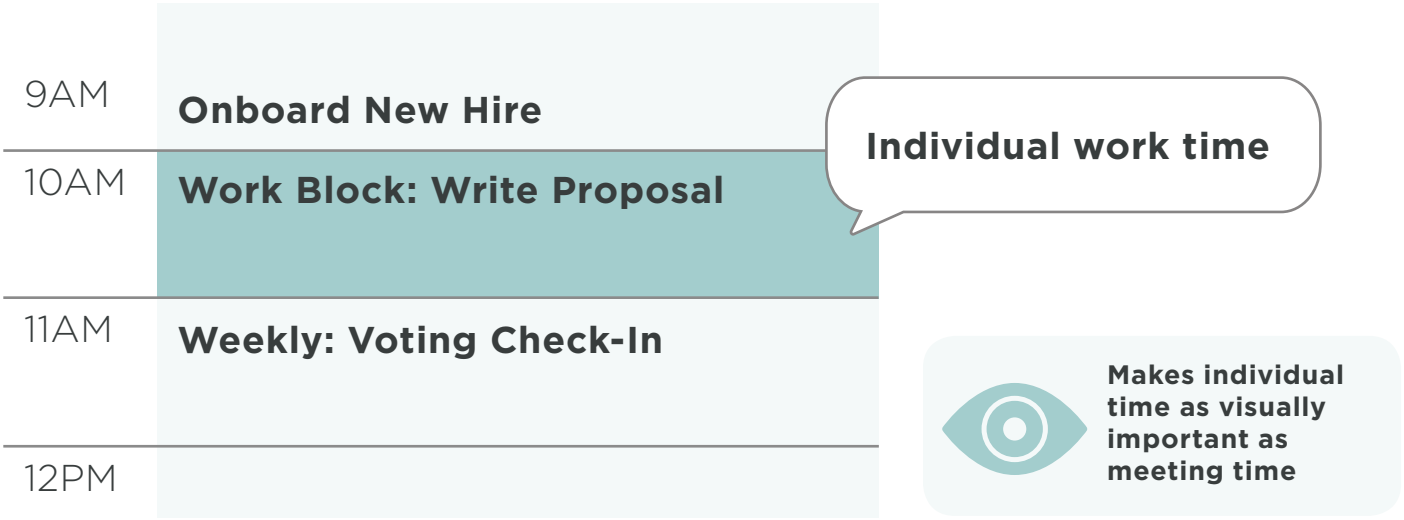
DESIGN SOLUTIONS

How to Reduce Time Spent in Meetings

Reasons for having too many meetings

A schedule packed with meetings is a sure formula for work-life stress: while a worker shuttles from meeting to meeting during the day, e-mails and individual work pile up, and can only be completed after the official workday ends. Meeting requestors and acceptors are **risk-averse;** sending an additional invite and accepting an unclear request are less likely to backfire than not including somebody or declining a request that might be important.

But **organizational norms** around scheduling (supported by the software that does the actual scheduling) also play an important role. Meetings between two or more people are officially bounded with start and end times on the calendar; they have visual definition. The time required for individual work is not identified in this same way, so it fits in around meetings. When a new meeting request comes in, indistinct individual work time is easily sacrificed in favor of the new request, even if the individual work may be more important. Of course, other factors may also be at play: meetings as a signal of importance, simple planning fallacy leaving little time for individual work, or mistaken mental models of meetings as automatically effective work practice.



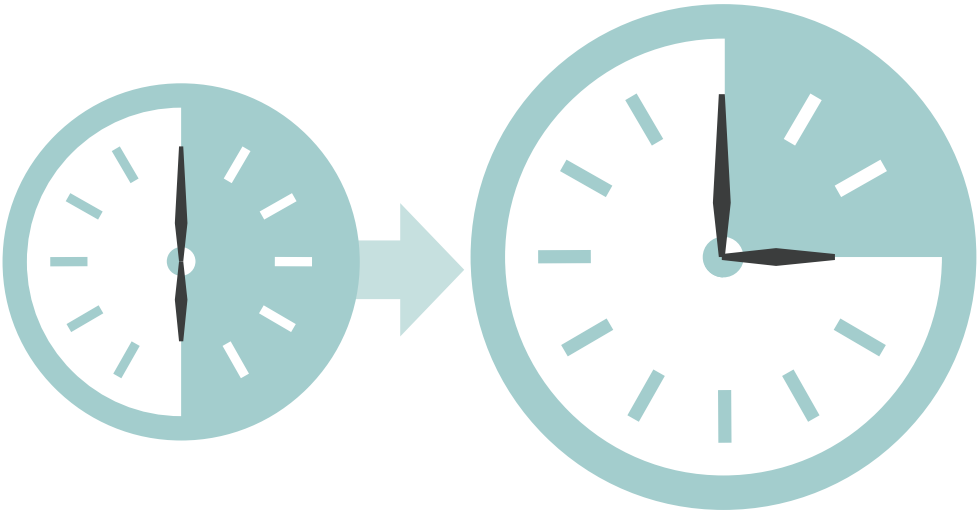
SOLUTION 1:
MEET WITH ONESELF

WHAT IT IS:

For many workers, their daily schedule is a mix of meeting time and individual work time, but meetings often dominate. By giving individual time the same level of calendar priority as multiple-person meetings (scheduling "meetings with oneself"), workers could reduce this disparity. Organizations could support this effort by identifying individual work spaces and making them "bookable" just like group work spaces can be reserved for meetings.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Giving required individual work time the same level of priority as multiple-person meetings would establish the need for that work to be done. Instead of "fitting it in" around a meeting schedule, individual work is scheduled for completion.



Forces intentional thought about necessary meeting length time

Encourages people to make the most out of scheduled time

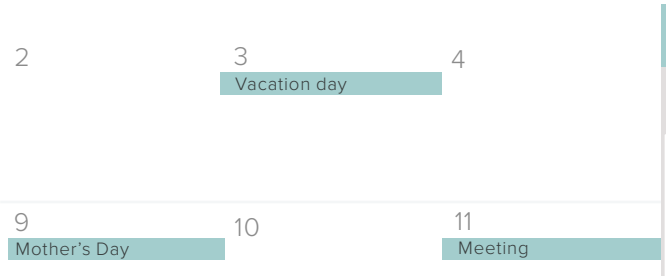
SOLUTION 2:
SHORTEN DEFAULT MEETING LENGTHS

WHAT IT IS:

Workers we spoke to frequently had several recurring meetings per week (team check-ins, manager one-on-ones, organization-wide groups). By identifying different meeting "types" and reducing each type's default time by 50%, organizations could understand how much meeting time was truly needed. Along with this solution, we recommend that organizations remove the default meeting lengths on their calendaring software, in order to force schedulers to actively choose how much time is needed.

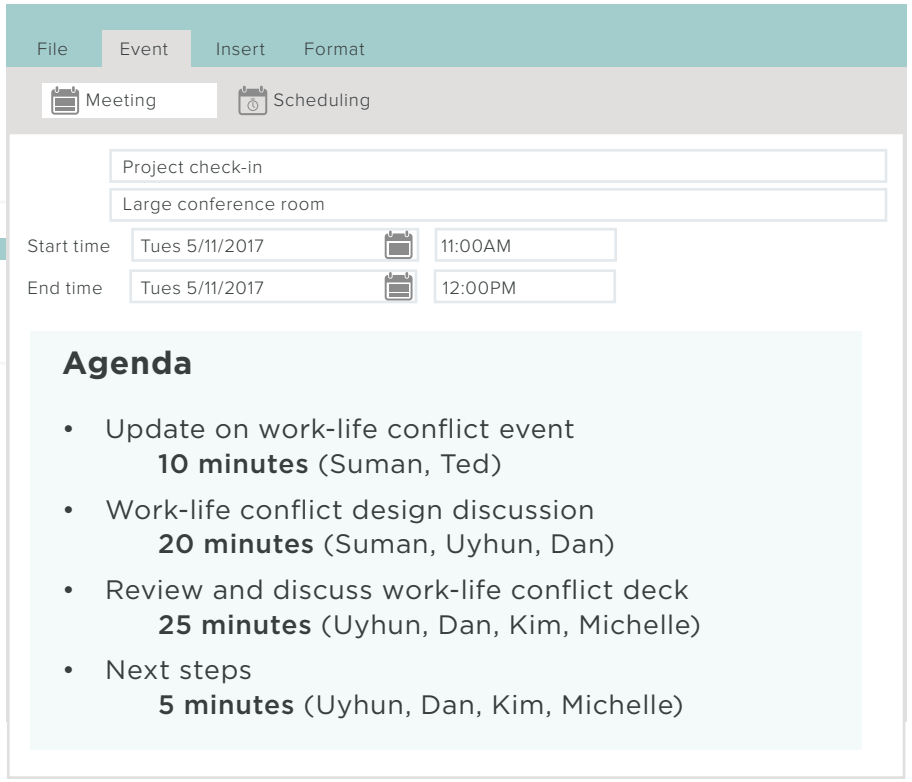
WHY IT WILL WORK:

Default meeting lengths are suggested by scheduling software and enforced by organizational habit. Removing those defaults and prompting people to make an active choice about how long they truly need to discuss the topic at hand will increase meeting efficiency.



Reduces the total time cost of meetings

Encourages advance thinking and intentional scheduling



SOLUTION 3:
ENSURE EVERY MEETING HAS A CLEAR AGENDA, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

WHAT IT IS:

The lack of clarity on whether to invite someone to a meeting and whether that person should accept is due in part to ambiguity about why the meeting is occurring in the first place. Through calendaring software, organizations could enforce the assignment of a time-estimated agenda, roles, and responsibilities for the meeting. Some colleagues could be invited to be in attendance or "in the loop" (they get notes from the meeting, but don't have to attend). This would also allow people to attend only the part of the meeting that is relevant to them.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Meetings are a blunt instrument for sharing information. Making them more granular though the scheduling interface allows individuals to understand where they add the most value.

4

DESIGN SOLUTIONS

How to Get People to Work Less

Reasons people work more than they plan to

As with the other problems we describe, there are a number of reasons that people work more than they plan to. But a few are especially relevant to our lens of analysis. The **planning fallacy** is an obvious contributor; people plan to accomplish more than they reasonably can in a given time period, so that work spills over into the rest of life. **Norms** are also a clear factor: work behavior is salient among coworkers, so people may overestimate the amount that their colleagues are actually working and shape their own behavior to that misperceived norm. Finally, the demands of work are often **construed more concretely** than those of personal life. In any moment when workers are forced to choose, the concrete responsibility may feel more urgent, even if it is less important.

What were my three greatest contributions this year?

What's an area I can improve in over the next year?

How do I do at balancing my work and personal life?

How do I do at self-care outside of work?

FOR PERSONAL REVIEW ONLY

Reframes organizational priorities

Emphasizes other important behaviors

SOLUTION 1:
MAKE NON-WORK "PERFORMANCE" PART OF THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

WHAT IT IS:

Frequently, workers complete self-evaluations as part of the performance review process. Workers should be asked to evaluate themselves on the status of their non-work lives. Due to privacy concerns, this evaluation should only be accessible by the worker, and we do not recommend that managers evaluate employees on their non-work behavior. Organizations may even consider asking workers to do their self-evaluation on paper and disposing of it in advance of their performance review. Here, the goal is not the record of evaluation, but the process of self-evaluating "non-work" performance.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

Asking about non-work "performance" sends an organizational signal to the individual that the rest of life matters. More intense solutions could try to incorporate that evaluation into a promotion and pay raise calculation (which would be a much more powerful signal), but we do not recommend these solutions because the risk of creating unhealthy incentives is high. The "light-touch" version would help workers reflect about their non-work lives without incurring this risk.

9AM	ideas42	New America: Interview Onboard New Hire
10AM	Work Block: Write Proposal
11AM	Weekly: Voting Check-In
12PM	T&D: Manager Proposal Discussion
1PM	Weekly: Work-Life Balance Check-In
2PM	“Slack”
3PM	Uyhun	Suman: Check-In Unconditional Cash Transfer: Literature Review
4PM	Uyhun	Dan: Check-In
	“Slack”

Individual work time

Accounts for invisible bias in predictions

SOLUTION 2: BUILD IN SLACK

WHAT IT IS:

This solution will only work for firms that are able to afford some slack. Everyone is affected by the planning fallacy. That’s why we suggest giving employees 80-90% of the workload a full-time employee “should be” responsible for. This allows the remaining 10-20% of their time to be consumed by work that was underestimated either in length or intensity. Essentially, managers should assume that their initial assumptions about what an employee’s work level “should” be are wrong and staff workers at a level under that. This process could even be facilitated by automation: workers list the tasks they are responsible for in a given timeframe, and a software assistant analyzes their time estimates to suggest when realistically the work will be completed.

WHY IT WILL WORK:

This strategy requires that organizations trust that because of planning fallacy and overconfidence their employees’ schedules will be filled even if less work is assigned. This strategy tries to put the onus of solving work-life conflict on the organization, rather than the individual.

SOLUTION 3:
FIX THE OTHER THREE THINGS (MEETINGS, E-MAIL, AND NOT TAKING VACATION)

WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT WILL WORK:

Focus on the first three problems first. **Meetings, e-mail, and not taking vacation** are major contributors to work-life conflict. If organizations can solve these problems, work hours will decline by default. If we succeed on these three objectives, we will face a new challenge: how to ensure that the streamlined work process does not simply lead to people committing to do more work. In order to face that challenge, we must first reduce the stress created by meetings, e-mails, and a lack of vacation.

Where to Go From Here

It is our hope that this report has provided a novel perspective on where the problem of work-life conflict comes from, and how organizations can design solutions to address it. Work-life conflict is very far from being solved permanently, but that does not mean that a solution is out of our reach. By taking seriously both the quirks of individual decision-making and the challenges embedded in cultural and organizational structures, we can make people happier, healthier and better off.

We want to be clear: there are real stakes to getting this right. Work-life conflict affects people's health, their relationships, and their happiness. Today's workers are too commonly confronted with impossible decisions between their livelihoods and their lives. We cannot dismiss work-life conflict as a problem of American culture, or one of individual choice. We must have the courage to say that it is the responsibility of organizations to actively strive for an end to conflict between work and life.

Endnotes

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