

Efficiency, Effectiveness and Wellness in the post-COVID Workplace

“There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.”---- Peter Drucker

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Abstract

In 1840, factory owners were compelled by organized labor to limit their workday to eight hours. Subsequent to this action, management discovered that output actually increased, while mistakes and accidents decreased. In 1916, the Adamson Act established an eight-hour day for railroad workers. This was the first federal law that regulated the hours of workers in private companies. The eight-hour day became a standard for most workers in 1937, when the Fair Labor Standards Act was first proposed under the New Deal (Samuel, 2000).

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Before COVID changed perceptions about how people could accomplish their tasks, employees were expected to put in full days at the office, and then expected to respond to after hour emails. They were expected to willingly donate nights, weekends, and vacation time; all without complaining (Carmichael, 2015). The organizational charts of many companies have work cascading down the organizational pyramid from top to bottom. Based on that concept, we work long hours because authority figures tell us to. Managers want their employees to be “Humble, Hungry, and Smart” (Lecioni, 2016). The problem with “hungry” is that a work ethic equating with excess work hours (or the perception of busyness) is an old-school management philosophy that is not sustainable. It leads to overwork, diminished effectiveness, and burnout. That’s not to say we can’t work very hard or for very long hours. We can. We just can’t do it routinely. One 60-hour work week in order to resolve a specific crisis is quite different from chronic overwork. Predictable, required time off makes teams more productive (Perlow, 2009).

Why do people overwork? Potential drivers may include economic incentive, corporate culture, or the technology that always people to keep the office just a click away. Perhaps it is the psychology of work: we log excess hours due to a mix of inner drivers (ambition, machismo, greed, anxiety, guilt, enjoyment, pride, short-term rewards, desire or need to prove we are relevant, or perhaps a sense of duty). We have all worked with people for whom it is abundantly clear that, for them, their work life is actually less stressful than their home life. For them, the workplace is somewhere they feel in control. Some may not realize the unintended consequences of overwork is, do not believe it, or consciously choose not to act on the knowledge (Carmichael 2015, Kalina 2021).

If there are silver linings in the post-COVID workplace, one may be that we have confirmed a previous suspicion - overwork doesn’t result in more output, or better output. Managers were unable to distinguish between employees that had actually worked a full 80-hour week from those pretending to. (Reid 2015) demonstrated no evidence that employees pretending to work 80 hours accomplished less while those actually overworking accomplished more. In fact, overwork harms employees which, in turn, harms their organizations. Overwork impairs interpersonal communication skills, judgment, and ability to manage emotional reactions. It can lead to stress, exhaustion, burnout, poor sleep, depression, drinking, and heart disease. These unintended consequences affect the company bottom line by negatively impacting our customer interactions along with increasing absenteeism, turnover, and health insurance costs (Virtanen, 2015). If for no other altruistic reasons, wellness must be prioritized due to the resultant improved customer outcomes and improved business bottom-line.

The worldwide human and economic toll of COVID-19 is still being determined. People suffered. Revenues and operating margins declined. Our workforce, infrastructure, and supply chains were strained. The pandemic profoundly transformed workplaces around the world, catalyzing unprecedented acceleration in change management processes. In 2022, the unintended consequences of COVID-19 are the *800-lb gorilla* present in every

boardroom. If organizations genuinely desire well-balanced, healthy, and happy employees they must prioritize work-life integration and assure employee wellness is a leadership priority.

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