

The Death of the 9-to-5: Why We'll All Work Flex Schedules Soon

By Alexandra Levit;

Several months ago, I was talking to a college senior about her career plans. She wanted a job with flexible hours, and I asked why. The young woman said she wanted the freedom to take a short nap right after lunch when her energy flagged the most and the ability to work late at night when her brain was sharpest.

If I had made a comment like this when looking for my first job 16 years ago, I would have been laughed out of the room. But coming from a college student today, the request doesn't sound all that strange.

According to a new study by Bentley University, 77% of Millennials say that flexible work hours would make the workplace more productive for people their age. Given their comfort with digital technology that allows them to work anytime and anywhere, this statistic hardly comes as a surprise. But as the Millennial generation becomes the majority, we can expect flex time and telecommuting to become a common workplace practice rather than a special privilege.

In fact, by around 2030, the Millennial majority will likely have done away with the 9-to-5 workday entirely. Here are four key reasons why Millennials will insist that flex-work hours happen sooner rather than later.

1. Work-Family Balance

Leslie Doolittle, assistant dean and director of academic support services at Bentley University, has found that work doesn't define Millennials as much as it does older generations. Doolittle says family, friends, and making a difference in the community are more central to Millennials than they are to older people.

Given this, demands on Millennials' personal time are bound to increase as they balance work commitments with raising young children. And, as they are closely connected to their parents, they are likely to be personally involved in caring for them as they age.

The trade-off, of course, is catching up on email at 10 PM or finishing a project on a Saturday morning to make up the time, but in my experience, that's one that most Millennials are fine with making.

2. Continuing Skills Education

According to research conducted by The Hartford, 50% of Millennials desire training and development from their employer. And companies are listening. Bersin by Deloitte said that U.S. spending on corporate training grew by 15% in 2013 (the highest growth rate in seven years).

In addition, many companies are fulfilling the Millennial desire for "experience-hopping" through leadership rotation programs that allow them to test out different areas of a company. The renowned General Electric rotation program is a great example, which allows young employees to experience various functions within GE, such as finance, sales, manufacturing, and engineering.

In any case, Millennials will be spending time taking classes and working additional jobs to skill up, and some of this activity is bound to occur during the classic workday.

3. The Disappearing Corporate Office

By 2030, professionals will work mostly from home using super-fast data terminals. Most companies will have nixed their permanent physical office locations in favor of chains of interconnected hubs with different plans for individuals to access space. Meetings will routinely occur virtually and across geographies and time zones, rendering air travel to visit clients or partners unnecessary. And if the office isn't necessary—why are set office hours?

4. The (Company's) Bottom Line

The fact is, Millennials are right—flexible work hours do make employees more productive. Research by Stanford professor Nicholas Bloom found that working remotely increases productivity, overall work hours, and employee satisfaction. Over a nine-month period, Bloom observed 250 employees at Ctrip, a Chinese travel website. Half of the employees worked from home, and half worked in the office. Turns out, removing the time it takes to physically commute to work and the distractions of the in-office environment made a huge difference: The telecommuters completed 13.5% more calls than the office workers, performed 10% more work overall, left the company at half the rate of people in the office, reported feeling more fulfilled at work, and saved the company \$1,900 per employee.

Evolving to a Flexible Workplace

We're not there yet—so what will the transition look like? My guess is that we'll start with “easier to swallow” flex-work arrangements, such as job-sharing (two employees split the workload and time commitments of one 40-hour per week job), day shifting (some employees work from 7 AM to 3 PM while others work from 10 AM to 6 PM), and on-peak/off-peak work schedules (employees work more hours during their busy season and vice versa).

In the meantime, more and more people will convince their bosses to let them work from home one or more days a week.

With Millennial employees entering the workforce in droves, the momentum behind making flex-work a reality for all will grow. Is your company ready?

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