

"I'll Be Online Later"

Sara Holoubek

CEO of Luminary Labs

In this series, professionals attending Next:Economy share their insights on the future of work. Read the posts here, then write your own. Use #NextEconomy somewhere in the body of the post and @mention Next:Economy conference panelists when sharing. For more insight and news on the Next:Economy, sign up for the weekly newsletter here.

"I'll be online later," you say, grabbing your laptop as you head out the door.

"Please don't," say a growing number of CEOs who are radically rethinking the modern workday. Prompted by Millennials who value work-life balance, an increasingly global workforce spanning time zones, and devices that allow us to connect anywhere, anytime, these CEOs recognize the value of redesigning business to accommodate life, and not the other way around.

18 months ago, I asked my team to do the unthinkable: stop emailing after 6 p.m. and on the weekends. Hailing from places such as McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, Samsung, and Omnicom, staff was somewhat sceptical that everything could be done in a 40-hour work week. But these are clearly smart people, and so in short order we prioritized tasks, right-sized meetings, and modeled the behavior from the top down. Nothing broke, and to this day, I start the day off getting work done instead of answering email.

And yet no one quite believes me that this is true. In fact, they get flustered. Of all the human-friendly policies we have researched for the Human Company Playbook, those that deal with working hours are perhaps the most contentious.

In a world that is always on, when does work stop?

In one corner is the argument for flexible hours, the darling of the tech set. When executed well, this approach allows staff to work when they work best while navigating life events that don't naturally fall before 9 a.m. or 6 p.m. However, probe a bit further and many employees admit that flexible hours often mean "always working," with little or no ability to shut off.

In the other corner is the 9-to-5 (or 6...or 7...) model, which can feel downright quaint in 2016. And yet it is making a comeback. At its best, a set hours policy has clearly defined and predictable boundaries, allowing staff to enjoy life outside of work. At its worst, this model can feel rigid, valuing “face time” over quality work.

So which working-hours policy—one that encourages quality work without burning out your staff—is right for your company? Here’s what four CEOs who participated in our ongoing Human Company Design research had to say.

Work When You Work Best

It should come as no surprise that Alexandra Cavoulacos, founder and COO of The Muse, promotes a thoroughly modern model. Informed by the 50 million (mostly Millennial) people who tap her company’s website to navigate their careers, Cavoulacos has codified a flexible work policy that encourages productivity while accommodating for life. “The human thing is to give people the chance to make the choices they need for their lives,” says Cavoulacos, a self-admitted night owl who arrives at work no earlier than 10 a.m.

In this model, each team member determines how, when, and where they work best. Many developers, for example, tend to come in later and work later. Other staff members come in at 8 a.m. and are done by 4 p.m. To manage such a wide variety of schedules, The Muse asks that all team members be transparent about their schedules and update their calendars accordingly. Cavoulacos says that core hours naturally emerged, with most people in the office from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. for meetings.

Work Can Wait™

When founding Basecamp, David Heinemeier Hansson was living in Copenhagen; Jason Fried was in Chicago. As a result, they only had three hours of overlapped working time that later served as the blueprint for a distributed model. “Most people work from home, on their own schedule. All we ask is that you have reasonable overlap with the people you work with,” says Hansson.

To avoid the “always working” trap, Hansson suggests a rough guideline of 40 hours a week. “The best workers are the ones who take vacation, are rested, and have fulfilling lives outside of work,” says Hansson. He and Fried openly buck the hero myth that dominates Silicon Valley. “We get plenty of sleep ourselves. We don’t send emails at 2 a.m. about work stuff. We built it into the software,” says Hansson. Released with Basecamp 3, the “work can wait” function allows users to set boundaries for work notifications. For example, a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule means Basecamp won’t tell you about messages received after 5 p.m. until the next morning.

Always on, But Not Always Answering

For service companies such as JDI, people are the product, which means that staff is often required to be highly available. And yet CEO Josh Dilworth-Jones makes it clear that always on does not have to mean always answering.

“Late-night email is a weird game of chicken,” says Dilworth-Jones. The challenge with email and other notifications is that human beings are designed to be responsive. “If a client sees me send an email at 9 p.m., they say ‘just call me,’ and all of a sudden, a condensed working period I have control of turns into an open-ended work session at 10 p.m. And I don’t think either of us really want to be doing that.”

The same goes for employees. Dilworth-Jones eschews the “I’ll be online later” that precedes a staffer’s exit for the evening. Rather, he offers a clearly defined order for getting in touch with someone when they are not in the office. They use Slack to indicate status; if one is not on Slack, it is assumed that he/she is not working. Texting after hours means that an issue is being escalated. Last, but not least, is a call. “A phone call is a deathly serious thing,” adds Dilworth-Jones.

Start with Your Value System

For Arjun Arora, a serial entrepreneur and venture partner at 500 Startups, working-hours policies should reflect an organization’s value system. In his companies, this means balancing responsiveness and the “hustle” (getting your work done) with intelligence, adaptability, and mutual respect.

This is in direct contrast to what he calls the “unspoken rules of killing it” in Silicon Valley. “Martyr capitalism is not good for the business long term,” he adds.

Arora’s preference is to create core working hours for meetings, typically 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and then offer flexibility for employees to manage their life. Special requests, such as the employee who wanted to telecommute one day a month to help out his parents’ small business, are also honored. “Because the values are set and clear, he was probably even more responsive (when telecommuting),” says Arora.

Arora’s best advice, however, is in the why. Backed by research and his own personal experience, “a team characterized by trust, respect, and admiration, working 40-hour work weeks, will outperform a similarly competent team characterized by fear, mistrust, and scarcity thinking, frantically ‘being productive’ 80 hours per week.”