

Remote Employees Are Working Longer Than Before

Data show more people working weekends, nights

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While the shift to working from home in 2020 has provided much-needed flexibility for professional workers during the COVID-19 crisis and shown that a [remote workforce can maintain productivity](#), negative aspects of the experience—[isolation](#), diminished collaboration and burnout—have emerged.

Research shows remote employees are working longer, spending time in more meetings and having to keep up with more communication channels.

Nearly 70 percent of professionals who transitioned to remote work because of the pandemic say they now work on the weekends, and 45 percent say they regularly work more hours during the week than they did before, according to a survey of 2,800 workers by Los Angeles-based staffing firm Robert Half. The survey also found that working parents were more likely to work weekends and more than eight hours per day than those without children. Men were more likely than women to report working on weekends and putting in 40-plus hour workweeks. And more workers under the age of 40 said they usually work weekends and more than eight hours per day than those older than 40.



"While remote work affords employees greater flexibility, it also makes disconnecting extremely difficult," said Paul McDonald, senior executive director at Robert Half. "Many people feel pressure to keep up with rising workloads and are putting in long hours to support the business and customer needs."

Renee Zung, vice president of career services at career management firm Keystone Partners in Raleigh, N.C., was not surprised by the findings. "It is easier to unplug when you work onsite at an office," she said. "Leaving your office at the end of the workday creates a natural boundary, and traveling home provides the time you need to unwind and decompress. It is hard to set up boundaries if your office is in your bedroom or at the kitchen table. It is easy to check one more e-mail, add more details to a presentation or return a few phone calls to colleagues."

The lack of employee training on how to manage the boundaries between work and life in the years before COVID-19 is an underlying problem, said Cali Williams Yost, a [nationally recognized expert on workplace flexibility](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/managers-should-not-expect-full-productivity-right-now.aspx) - (<https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/managers-should-not-expect-full-productivity-right-now.aspx>) and founder of the consultancy Flex+Strategy Group in New York City. "Managing the boundaries between work and life is a skill set people need and most didn't have before the pandemic and still don't," she said. "Simply handing an employee a laptop and downloading Zoom or some other collaborative software is not enough to help employees manage their work and lives through the pandemic and beyond."

Fear and uncertainty about the economy and job security also drive some of this behavior, Yost added. "Taken together—lack of boundary-setting skills, lack of alternatives to work, and fear—this is a perfect storm of overwork."

Separate research supports the Robert Half findings. A July report from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) showed that the average workday lengthened by 48.5 minutes in the weeks following stay-at-home orders and lockdowns across the U.S. in March. The number of meetings and internal e-mail activity also increased. The economists analyzed data from more than 21,000 companies in 16 large metropolitan areas worldwide.

The NBER study noted that the results do not necessarily mean that people are working all those extra hours.

"It is unclear if this increase in average workday span represents a benefit or drawback to employee well-being," said Evan DeFilippis, a Ph.D. candidate in organizational behavior at Harvard Business School in Boston and one of the study authors. "On one hand, the flexibility to choose one's working hours to accommodate household demands may empower employees by affording them some freedom over their own schedule. On the other hand, the change in work schedule may be a consequence of a blurred distinction between work and personal life, in which it becomes easy to overwork."

The consequences of overworking could be dire to workers' health, Zung said. "Stress is a common factor in heart attacks, depression and other health-related problems. If you are working nonstop that means your body is working to keep you up, adding stress to your organs, especially your brain and



heart. Sitting too long at your computer can lead to carpal tunnel, back issues and vision issues. Wearing earbuds all day long can lead to hearing loss."

Supporting Work/Life Balance

Experts agree that the trend toward a longer workday will not be sustainable, and that HR and line managers should support flexible scheduling and encourage employees to take breaks during the day and time off when needed. "The pandemic has pushed companies to prioritize employee experience," McDonald said. "Savvy employers are making lasting changes to support their staff's needs and well-being, such as providing greater autonomy and flexibility."

Yost said HR and line managers need to make work/life boundary management a regular conversation. "Set clear priorities so employees can plan their lives around them," she said. "Clarify expectations for accessibility and responsiveness such as during what hours e-mails or instant message should be reviewed and responded to, or when is it best to call or text."

Managers need to monitor the number of hours that their employees are logging and make it a priority to encourage time off and assist in balancing employee workloads, Zung said. "Having a weekly meeting to prioritize workloads, reassign projects, or move project end-dates will create a better work environment and a culture that encourages employees to power down nightly and during the weekend. Line managers need to model 'checking out' behaviors so their employees believe it is acceptable to do the same."

