

The Silver Lining in Shift Work: Can Your Organization Take Advantage of It?

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The general consensus is that “beyond the amount of time a job extracts, the... timing of work also shape[s] how a job affects life at home” (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004, 94).

AN INVISIBLE CRISIS?

While massive layoffs, mergers, and downsizings continue to grab media attention, more profound changes in the workforce that have received far less attention are well underway. For most employed Americans today, the standard workweek – 9-to-5, Monday through Friday – is a relic of the past. Far more common are “nonstandard” work schedules. Indeed, only a minority of employees in the United States (30 percent) work a standard workweek (35–40 hours, Monday through Friday). The large majority of workers work longer or shorter hours, work nonstandard shifts (evenings or nights), or work at least one weekend day. Even ignoring the number of hours worked, only a bare majority (54 percent) of U.S. workers are employed Monday–Friday during day hours.

This increase constitutes a potential, but as yet invisible, crisis. As we will suggest in this paper, the effects of shift work can be profound and, if implemented badly, harmful to employees and their families. But we are also happy to report that there is good news: The effects of shift work can be positive, in some surprising ways. Thus, the key question is, how can an organization tap the positive potential of this silent wave of growing shift work?

Nonstandard Work Schedules

The umbrella term, *nonstandard work schedules*, encompasses those working part-time and those working long hours (e.g., 50–60+ hours per week). The most rapid growth in nonstandard workers is among shift workers – a huge segment of the U.S. workforce. Although primarily in low-paid service-sector jobs (e.g., transportation, security, retail, cashiers, waitresses, waiters), shift workers also work in the health care professions, and increasingly in banking and information technology.

The independent contractor is another nonstandard employee. These itinerant pro-

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professionals are market-based and work outside the formal boundaries of an employing organization, as reported by University of Chicago sociologist James Evans and his colleagues Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda. Contractors are generally hired by project or by the hour or day and thus can control their own schedules. Many choose to work evenings or nights, thus, in effect, functioning as shift workers. In fact, many contractors choose this type of work precisely so they can have freedom and flexibility, as reported by Evans and his team. Although there are no data on how many contractors work nonstandard hours, they are a growing component of the workforce, suggesting that estimates of nonstandard workers, which are based on employees of organizations, under count the percentage of shift workers in the overall American workforce.

As employees and consumers, we are all aware of the benefits and costs of the 24/7 economy. We can buy groceries at any time of the day and any day of the week. Shopping malls and fast-food restaurants are often open until 9:00 p.m. or later every night. Police, firefighters, transportation workers, security forces, and health care workers all work around the clock. Toll-free service call centers are accessible late into the evening and often around the clock. Filling the seemingly endless need for continuous services requires that many employees work nonstandard schedules.

Shift workers typically work days, evenings, nights, or rotating schedules. However, shift lengths vary usually from eight to 16+ hours per shift. Moreover, rotators' schedules can rotate clockwise (i.e., day, evening, night) or counterclockwise. In addition, shift workers may spend longer or shorter periods of time on a shift before rotating. Many workers are on one shift for a week or less, or two weeks or longer. Others work more extreme schedules – including resident doctors, who typically work 3 days on and 3 days off, and offshore oil-rig workers, who may work two weeks on and two weeks off.

Within couples, shift work may result in a regendering of family roles, as found in separate recent studies by Angela Hattery, Rosanna Hertz and Joy Charlton, and Harriet Presser. In dual-earner couples who work 9 to 5, or the day shift, the wife typically does the bulk of the child care. However, this normative pattern is unworkable when the children are school age and the wife works during the after school and early evening hours (i.e., the evening shift). Clearly, the workplace context shapes the strategic arrangements that shift-working couples make for handling child care, according to sociologists Noelle Chesley and Phyllis Moen. In other words, the division of child care within couples is neither static nor always “traditionally” gendered; child care patterns vary with the mother's work schedule. For example, children whose mothers are employed full-time and working standard schedules are far less likely to be cared for by their fathers than those whose mothers work nonstandard hours.

Mothers' shift-work schedules may also directly or indirectly affect their children's socioemotional wellbeing. One indirect path may be through increased participation by the fathers in child care. Husbands whose wives work evenings may spend more time directly interacting with their children than husbands whose wives work days. This additional one-on-one time may have positive effects on the children and on the fathers.

Clearly, non-standard work schedules have serious and widespread implications for work-family relationships and present profound challenges to managers. A considerable body of literature has documented stress-related physical and mental health problems associated with night and evening work. For the most part, however, researchers have focused on the shift workers *per se* and not on the repercussions of their non-standard work schedules for other members of their families. Harriet Presser, a pioneer in this field of study, has documented shift workers' high risk of marital dissatisfaction and disruption, especially among night shift-working couples with children.

Who is Most Likely to be Working Nonstandard Hours?

Disadvantaged – and advantaged – workers. In general, U.S. workers who are more socially and economically disadvantaged tend to work nonstandard hours, although many of the advantaged do, as well. Moreover, single mothers and younger workers are more likely than married mothers and older workers to work nonstandard schedules. Interestingly, both the poorly educated and the well-educated work in this way, but generally for different reasons. For example, well-educated professionals and managers often clock well over 50 hours per week. In contrast, poorly educated workers may have to work two or three jobs per week to make ends meet or take jobs that require shift work; e.g., cashiers, wait staff.

Shift-prone occupations and industries. Not surprisingly, most shift workers are clustered within low-paying service-sector jobs such as cashiers, commodities sales workers in retail and personal services, and wait staff. Moreover, future job growth in the U.S. is projected to be disproportionately in these very occupations. Thus, the number of people working nonstandard schedules is likely to increase in the decades ahead and, according to Presser, this growth will disproportionately involve more women, and to a lesser extent, more blacks and Hispanics.

Presser, in her book, *Working in a 24/7 Economy*, notes that most shift workers work their schedules because the demands of their jobs dictate their work hours. However, in tight labor markets, such as nursing, employees often have a choice over their shift. With increased globalization, other professional workers (e.g., computer support staff, programmers, even radiologists and surgeons), may have to work around the clock, but may have some choice over their work shift. Industries such as financial services (e.g., investment banking), law, consulting, technology, hospitality, and the nonprofit sector are generally viewed as having high levels of regular spillover into the evening shift.

One “shiftworker,” a corporate lawyer with a Silicon Valley technology firm and mother of two kids, ages three and six, describes a recent day:

Re: shift work, aye caramba! It’s 10 p.m. here; I left work at 5:45, the kids have been asleep since 8:30, and I’ve been working since then. When I finish this e-mail, I’m going to pick up the house and review one more document. So even with [my company’s] more “balanced” approach to work and life, there is still no way to get it all done between 8:30 and 5:30 (which are basically the boundaries set by school/day care).

Partners of shift workers. Among U.S. workers, fewer than half of all dual-earner couples are “traditional” dual-earner couples in which both partners work standard hours on weekdays only. Moreover, among all dual-earner couples, the prevalence of nonstandard schedules is high for both those with children and without children. Thus, there is a reasonable probability that employees working standard hours will be married to partners working nonstandard shifts, and that they may experience negative as well as positive outcomes – not as result of their own work schedules, but as a result of their partners.’

An airline stewardess for a major carrier could not have kept her well-paying job if it weren’t for the fact that her husband, a police officer, also worked shifts. The airline’s practice was to post shift schedules one month in advance, subject to change. The unpredictability of her work hours made it next to impossible to arrange regular child care. Her husband’s ability to work his shifts around hers enabled him to share child care with her and provided her with ease of mind to stay on the job. In addition to knowing how important his flexibility was to her career, he also reaped the benefit of having so much one-on-one time to forge a strong bond with his stepdaughter.

People in global operations. Even managers, executives, and professionals who oversee the operations of widely dispersed teams, working in diverse time zones, function as shift workers. For example, the head of human resources (HR) in Asia for a large multinational electronics firm reported that he routinely had to take part in conference calls that started at 5:00 a.m. or ended at midnight, local time.

Managers with high work overload. Also, the huge volume of work that managers and professionals regularly have to do often spills over well into the “evening shift.” As Ellen Ernst Kossek and Mary Dean Lee found, long-hours work is largely brought on by waves of downsizing, leaving more work to be done by fewer people. In a diverse sample of companies that they studied, 60 percent had recently gone through downsizing and layoffs. Ironically, although changing leadership styles and management practices have led to greater autonomy and flexibility for employees regarding the timing and location of work, these improved job conditions do not affect the very high job demands. As one professional acquaintance said recently, “Yes, we have a lot of freedom and personal control over our work. We get to choose which 80 hours we will put in each week.”

Most of Kossek’s and Lee’s sample of managers and executives, reported that rising workloads presented a current challenge. According to one manager:

Long work hours are a big negative, especially in this difficult environment, because people aren’t getting the counterbalancing goodies that have eased the pain in the past: fast track advancement, recognition, appreciation.

Telecommuters. Some employees handle long hours by telecommuting, and while such work-at-home arrangements may help employees better coordinate work and family demands, they also often pose serious

challenges to employees and to managers. With more permeable boundaries between work time and personal time, it is all too easy to let work spill over into the evening. Such spillover often creates stress within the family and coordination problems with managers and co-workers.

WHEN SHIFT WORK IS BENEFICIAL

As the population working nonstandard shifts is growing, we need to know far more than we currently know about the impact of nonstandard shift work on employees, their partners, and their children. In one recent study conducted by the first author and funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the focus was on the socioemotional well-being of school-age children, eight–14 years of age, whose mothers regularly work days (i.e., 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) versus evenings (i.e., 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.) and whose fathers work full-time. Do children whose mothers are not regularly home during the after school and evening hours engage in more risky behaviors and show more signs of internalizing or externalizing behaviors (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress-related physical symptoms, rule-breaking, and aggression) than their peers whose mothers are typically home in the afternoons and evenings? Also, do fathers whose wives work evening shifts become more actively engaged with their children than fathers whose wives work days? How do children and parents in these two types of families view their mothers’ and fathers’ parenting behaviors? Finally, how are parenting behaviors – as rated by both children and the parents themselves – related to children’s socioemotional wellbeing?

Interviews With Families; Kids Grade Parents and Themselves

To address these questions, the study included interviews with Boston-area dual-earner families in which the mother was a

registered nurse who regularly worked either day shifts or evening shifts

What do we mean by parenting skills? How were they assessed? Building on Ellen Galinsky's book, *Ask the Children*, we asked the children in our study to grade their mothers and fathers separately from A to F on each of 12 skills – including raising the child with good values, and being there for the child when the child is sick. (Parents used the same measure to rate their own parenting skills.) Children also reported on their own risky behaviors. Specifically, they indicated how often they engaged in nine behaviors, including riding in a car without a seatbelt, and doing something dangerous on a dare. Finally, both mothers and fathers graded their own parenting skills. (The instruments that we used for grading parenting skills and for measuring risky behaviors are shown in the Exhibit 1.)

Regardless of their work shift, mothers do not shortchange their children. Mothers who work evenings spend the same amount of time directly interacting with their children as do mothers who work days!

More good news! Fathers whose wives work evenings spend more than twice the time interacting directly with their children than do their counterparts whose wives regularly work days. In a nutshell, children whose mothers work evenings spend more time with each parent separately than do children whose mothers work days. Regardless of what shift their mothers work, children rate their mothers similarly on such parenting skills as “making me feel important and loved” and “raising me with good values.”

There's more good news! Children whose mothers work evenings (but not days) rate their fathers higher on parenting skills, think their fathers know more about their everyday activities, and spontaneously disclose more about themselves to their fathers. It appears that *fathers whose wives work evenings step into a more active parenting role.* They provide additional engaged parenting on top of the parenting of the mothers, who are just as involved in parenting as their counterparts who work day shifts.

Moreover, fathers' engaged parenting is associated with higher wellbeing in the children. Specifically, hands-on fathering is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, stress-related physical symptoms, aggression, rule-breaking, and risky behaviors in the children.

Finally, regardless of their work schedules, mothers rated themselves high in their parenting skills. In contrast, fathers' ratings differed depending on the mothers' work schedules: Fathers whose wives worked evenings rated themselves *higher* than their peers whose wives worked days. And children whose parents rated themselves highly showed fewer signs of poor adjustment.

Summary of Shift-Work Effects

Evening shift work seems to have few negative effects on the socioemotional wellbeing of children. Mothers working evening shifts find enough time either before they go to work or on their days off to spend as much time with their children as do mothers who work day shifts. They may, however, experience more work-family conflict as a result of having too little time for themselves and perhaps for their husbands. Our study finds that fathers whose wives work evenings enjoy closer relationships with their children and a stronger sense of competence as a father. Other research supports the idea that positive parenting experiences are likely related to enhanced psychological wellbeing, which may in turn be related to increased productivity on the job.

WHAT MANAGERS AND ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO ABOUT SHIFT WORK

In most families where one parent works the evening shift, the other parent is the primary care provider for the children. Such parents, much like single parents, are “in charge” during the late afternoon and evening hours. They check the kids' homework, make sure

EXHIBIT 1 INSTRUMENTS TO MEASURE PARENTING SKILLS AND CHILDREN'S RISKY BEHAVIORS

Grading Parenting Skills: Children graded their parents' skills in the following parenting behaviors, using a grading scale of A, B, C, D, or F.

1. Making child feel important and loved.
2. Spending time talking with child.
3. Establishing family routines and traditions for child.
4. Encouraging child to want to learn and to enjoy learning.
5. Controlling temper when child does something that makes parent angry.
6. Appreciating child for who child is.
7. Being involved with what is happening to child at school or child care.
8. Knowing what is really going on in child's life.
9. Being someone child can go to if child is upset.
10. Raising child with good values.
11. Being there for child when child is sick.
12. Being able to attend important events in child's life.

Risky Behaviors: The children rated the extent to which they engaged in the following risky behaviors. The response scale was Never / Once or Twice / More than Twice.

1. Ride in a car without a seatbelt
2. Ride on a bike without a helmet
3. Do something dangerous on a dare
4. Carry a weapon somewhere - For example, a chain, knife, or gun
5. Threaten to beat up someone to make them do something
6. Take part in a gang fight
7. Skip school without permission
8. Have a fist fight with another person
9. Purposely set a fire in a building or in any other place
10. Hurt an animal on purpose
11. Smoke a cigarette or use tobacco
12. Get drunk on beer or other alcohol
13. Use or smoke marijuana (grass, pot, weed)
14. Take or steal something not yours worth a lot, \$100 or more
15. Take or steal something not yours worth a little, less than \$100.
16. Run away from home
17. Get into someplace like a movie or game without paying
18. Break into a building to take or steal something
19. Purposely damage or destroy property that wasn't yours

they are fed, and prepare them for bed. Consequently, they have much less flexibility in their lives than employees whose partners work standard hours. Yet most employers are unaware of the working schedules of their employees' partners.

Here are two sets of suggestions for employers, based upon these findings. The first set deals with ways of increasing awareness of the extent and nature of shift work within your organization. The second deals with ideas for action.

For Greater Awareness

Learn more about positive shift-work effects. The research results are consistent with an emerging trend in the literature on work and life roles – we are becoming increasingly aware that employees have whole lives, and employees and employers are better off for this realization. In other words, we are seeing a new paradigm for viewing the work-home interface – integration. This paradigm is in sharp contrast to the more common perspective that assumes *conflict* between the two spheres. As Nancy Rothbard has shown, good, intrinsically satisfying experiences at work can add to a person’s energy, just as soul-killing job interactions can deplete it. Although we have known about positive spillover for decades, it had been somewhat of a theoretical possibility. We are now seeing more serious analytic focus on the phenomenon and more empirical attention to it.

Jeffrey Greenhaus and Gary Powell provide a thorough framework for understanding how positive experiences in one role can produce energy and satisfaction in another. We offer this research on positive shift-work effects as [Exhibit 1](#) for how this synergy might occur. In the spirit of positive organizational psychology, we propose in-depth examination of some positive shift-work situations and methods for tracking the beneficial effects that they might have at home. Let’s focus on husbands of women who work evening shifts – men who have highly positive parenting experiences with their kids. We’ll follow them through the cycles of their daily routines to see what happens as they make their mini-transitions from home to work and then back home again.

Consider a father’s satisfying experience helping his daughter study for a math exam after dinner, coupled with an occasional exchange about her boyfriend or an upcoming sports event. In the morning, father, daughter, and mother have breakfast together and he wishes his daughter well on her test. He then drives to work with a smile on his face, parks his car, takes the

elevator up to his office, and engages with colleagues in friendly chats. He then turns on his computer and reads his e-mail, beginning the day in a relaxed and open frame of mind. Not only does he have no family stress to distract him from his work, but his positive energy provides him with additional cognitive and emotional resources to apply to his work.

The positive effects of shift work on parents’ experiences can be traced through these daily transitions. Previously, Douglas Hall and Judith Richter found that daily or “micro” transitions can have powerful effects on a person’s emotional wellbeing. Moreover, the results of this shift-work research apply to such issues as job design, supervisory practices, and human resource policies designed to help employees and managers develop more positive work-family synergy.

Assessment of the extent of shift work in your organization. The first step in helping your organization learn how work practices are affecting the integration of employees’ lives, is to document the extent of shift work currently in your organization. The goal is to determine how many employees and their partners work nonstandard hours, either as a formal work arrangement or as an informal practice. This information is best obtained through a survey that asks people to report the time periods in which they and their partner were engaged in work over the last week or so. A daily diary method is also possible, with employees keeping a diary for a week or two, in which they indicate in, say, 15 minute time increments, when they and their partner were engaged in work activities. These records could be completed anonymously, to allay any concerns about how the information might be utilized.

This information would be used as a first step in understanding the current extent of nonstandard work hours in your organization. You could then also ask people, perhaps through focus groups, to provide more in-depth qualitative data on how their and their partners’ shift work affect their lives and

their work experiences. Don't assume that these effects will all be negative. Be sure to ask open-ended questions that permit either positive or negative responses.

When you know the extent of shift work in your organization, you might then focus on what you can do about it. We recommend some of the following ways of maximizing and utilizing the positive effects of shift work on family and parenting roles.

Help employees recognize when they are doing shift work. When you understand the true extent of shift work in your organization you are likely to realize that *many employees are, in fact, working shifts without realizing it.* For example, the second author recently conducted a graduate admissions interview with a candidate in Singapore. The interview was conducted via telephone, and it finished around midnight Boston time. Yesterday he had a phone call from a collaborator in Australia who was calling at midnight, her time. And we're sure that most readers routinely have similar experiences. In fact, people with global responsibilities think nothing of participating in conference calls that take place in the middle of the night in their time zone. When they do this, they are working the night shift. Financial service professionals in Europe who need to be available for clients in New York or San Francisco are often on the telephone or on e-mail after dinner, London time. They are, in fact, then working the evening shift. Or when people travel internationally, when their bodies move from one time zone to another quite different one, they are in fact "rotating" to a different shift.

In all of these situations, it is important to recognize that the employees are working on different shifts. This means that they are not available to their families at the times when the families would normally be accustomed to having them around. And this means that the family has to adjust to one parent's "shift work." It also means that the employee and her or his family should be helped to recognize and label the alternative shift schedule on which he or she is working. The employee

and family should be helped to see that this different schedule can present strains and, sometimes, new opportunities for the family. Naming the employee's alternative schedule is an important first step in making the best of the situation.

Ideas For Action

Help working parents recognize and manage their daily-transition styles. To help working parents experience greater integration between their work lives and their home lives, especially when one is working the evening shift, it would be useful for employees to learn about their transition styles. By transition style, we mean the particular way that a person crosses the physical and psychological boundaries that separate work and home. Hall's and Richter's study found that people have fairly stable ways of making these daily transitions and that the styles can be different at the beginning and at the end of the work shift. They can also vary by gender.

The three basic transition styles are *anticipatory*, *discrete*, and *lagged*. As the words imply, the anticipatory style means that the person starts becoming concerned with the next domain before he or she physically leaves the current one. Many women have this style at the end of a work shift, calling ahead from work to check on the kids at the day care center or checking in with their partner on the way home to discuss plans or issues that need attention at home. The lagged style is just the opposite; it takes some time for the person to become psychologically engaged in the domain, even after entering it. For example, after returning home from work, it takes many men time to "unwind," perhaps by changing clothes, lying down for a few minutes, or relaxing with the kids or a newspaper. And the discrete style means that the psychological engagement with a particular domain tracks closely with where the person is physically. That is, the person starts thinking about home issues just about at the point when he or she walks in the door at home.

What happens to these transition styles when the person does shift work, especially when the person is not highly aware that he or she is in fact doing shift work? When a person interrupts her home routine in the evening to engage in work – receiving an international telephone call, dealing with an issue that came in through e-mail in the evening, etc. – this is what Hall and Richter called an *interposed transition*: unplanned psychological shifts that a person has to make when he or she is physically in one domain and becomes mentally concerned with the other. As Maggie Jackson points out, when family members have easy access to cell phones and e-mails, they are apt to be in touch frequently, for issues large and small. Such interruptions, or interposed transitions, are not always welcome, but they may be the price employees have to pay for the long hours they are away from home. As one partner in a large law firm commented, “Yes, I do feel chained to my Blackberry sometimes in the evening, but if the net effect is that I can get home in time to put my kids to bed, it’s worth it.”

We argue that shift work, especially informal shift work, greatly increases the number of interposed transitions in employees’ daily lives. And interposed transitions, because they involve rapid, unplanned mental boundary spanning, can be difficult and stressful. This may suggest part of the reason why dads and kids experience such positive parenting experiences when mom works evenings and dad is home: With mom away, dad is expecting to be fully engaged in the primary parenting role and is not expecting to engage in work activity. Thus, dads probably have fewer interposed transitions when they are “on” with the kids at home in the evening.

Moms who work evenings may be less likely to have an anticipatory transition style when they come home. Since it is late at night, they know the kids are probably in bed and things may be relatively calm when they walk into the house. Thus, the moms have less need to anticipate the need for “fire-fighting” when they return home, and

maybe they can afford the luxury of a more relaxed (discrete or even a lagged) home re-entry style at the end of their work shift.

As our shift-work findings suggest, these transition styles and parenting behaviors appear to be learned behaviors. They are not inexorably linked to one’s gender or character. Thus, through training and experience, people can learn to adapt their particular styles for making the cognitive and physical transit from home to work and back again.

Train workers to utilize flexibility when they do have it – Contractors and coarse-grained flexibility. One of the paradoxes uncovered in research on contractors, who may recognize that they do have a high degree of flexibility, is that they make little use of this flexibility. In one study, only 14 percent of the sample of contractors took advantage of the flexibility they could have had with their daily and weekly schedules to work nonstandard hours, according to Evans et al. in 2004. One reason for not taking advantage of their flexibility is the immediate pressure of the projects for which the contractors were hired, along with the need to please clients to obtain good references and referrals. Thus, the “freedom” of being self-employed can come with more strings attached than the contractors might have originally envisioned.

In a similar vein, a recent study by Work Family Directions (WFD) found that only 25 percent of large companies offer training on working off-site, and only 30 percent offer guidelines or policies on doing so. This study also found that more than half of all managers supervise off-site employees, yet only one in eight managers receives any training on how to do it. According to Maggie Jackson, “Growing evidence suggests that training is crucial for all kinds of virtual work arrangements to succeed.” (*Boston Globe*, March 2003).

It is easier for contractors to take time off between projects and to achieve what Evans et al. called “coarse-grained” flexibility than it is to experience the more fine-grained freedom of working nontraditional daily and

weekly schedules. (This would be like working long-cycle shifts, with several weeks or months of intensive hours, followed by weeks or months of down time.) Managers who hire significant numbers of contractors for the sake of maintaining a high energy, committed work force, would do well to be sensitive to their employees' needs for some down time between projects, rather than pressuring them to move quickly from one to the next.

Redesign jobs to cut down shift work. A quite different approach is to reduce or eliminate the need for an evening shift: *job redesign*. An excellent example is described in Lotte Bailyn's book, *Breaking the Mold*. Bailyn and her colleagues implemented an intervention with a group of product development engineers to help them deal with a severe shift-work problem. The engineers were not able to finish all of their work during regular daytime hours, causing them to stay at work late into the evening. The result was high levels of fatigue and family stress. Bailyn and her colleagues, with the support of the company's management, asked the work teams to redesign their jobs so that their lives would be more livable (*not* to make their teams more productive).

After diagnosing the nature of their work, the engineers quickly realized that the problem was that they were constantly being interrupted by other peoples' requests (e.g., e-mails needing immediate responses, telephone calls, meetings called on short notice, etc.). All of this interaction time was interfering with the completion of their individual work. As a result, they stayed at the office late into the evening in order to have uninterrupted time to finish their work.

With this realization, the engineers came up with a ground rule: Mornings were reserved for individual work. No one could call a meeting in the morning. No one could expect a response to an e-mail or voice mail in the morning. No one could poke their head into a person's office in the morning. All interactive work was to be done in the afternoon. This straightforward redesign enabled the engineers to complete their work by the

end of the normal work day and be home with their families in the evening.

The outcome met the goal of the intervention: The team members' lives were much more livable. And there was an unexpected bonus: The teams showed a significant improvement in productivity, in terms of meeting time, money, and quality objectives. This particular organization and others have applied this process of work redesign more widely, and it has been a powerful strategy for reducing the spillover of day work into the evening shift.

Set organizational boundaries. There are several ways that organizational practices can set boundaries on the work day. Here are some of the helpful practices that the Silicon Valley corporate lawyer, quoted earlier, observes in her firm:

- Our network-accessible Microsoft Outlook calendars really only show available time from 8 to 6, so to schedule a meeting outside those hours, you have to make a conscious choice to invade people's personal time.

- Meetings scheduled outside of 9 to 5 are generally disliked, people pretty openly push back, so that scheduling a meeting outside of regular work hours is at least viewed within the company, as "rude."

Other helpful practices include:

- My boss is a working mother (divorced) who speaks openly about leaving to take her kids to events, takes the nannies' (she has 2!) calls before she takes the CEO's calls in some cases and generally makes it known that her family matters to her AND TAKES UP HER TIME. This last piece is different from the law firm partners with whom I worked, since they would always talk about their families, but never actually left work to see them. Just having her as an available model in my department, makes it easier to be "hard-line" about leaving at a reasonable hour.

- Additionally, I sit near all the really key executives and I see them leave at reason-

able hours all the time. Our chief executive officer (CEO), though he has no kids, loves to golf and he leaves to play golf at about 3:30 most Fridays. Just having small clues that management is doing something other than work all the time does help.

- The other thing that is an awesome practice at [our company] is that people generally don't work on the weekends. That means no voicemails, no e-mails, and no expectation of getting things done over the weekend.

Tapping the Silver Lining

But if shift work cannot be eliminated, another quite different approach is to make the most of it. Our third set of recommended actions will help you find and use the "silver lining" in shift work.

Conduct appreciative inquiry into positive parenting experiences. In the many 24/7 work environments in which shift work is a permanent fact of life, employees can be helped to recognize and utilize the parenting benefits of shift work, especially when the mom is working the evening shift. We can teach parents, especially dads, to "catch themselves in the act" of positive parenting. All of us often have good experiences that we fail to recognize, appreciate, and capture. Many good times just disappear out of our consciousness like water on sand. Thus, the first step is to help male employees whose partners work evening shifts to reflect on recent experiences that they have had at home with their children. Ask them to keep a daily journal of their parenting experiences. Then, have them read back and reflect upon those experiences. This project might best be done in pairs, with employees acting as peer coaches, with the aim of developing a list of such positive parenting experiences. One large accounting firm is planning to start activities like this with groups of male partners, led by an external consultant, as a lunchtime seminar (a "lunch and learn," as they call it).

Brainstorm ways to increase these positive experiences. Here people would be encouraged to consider a number of these positive parenting experiences as a group, with an eye to identifying *themes*. These themes would represent underlying characteristics of the situations that could, if replicated, lead to a greater frequency of these experiences. Again, working with others, either in peer coaching pairs or in coaching teams, the use of shared experiences could multiply the learning's for each individual.

Identify ways these positive parenting experiences enhance work role performance. The next task is for people to focus on their experiences in the home-to-work transition following a positive parenting experience. Have participants visualize their daily commutes, perhaps writing down the experiences in their journals or sharing them with peer coaches. Then, when they have captured the daily-transition experience, have them reflect on the transition and analyze the impact it had on their work effectiveness. They could also share ideas for how the positive energy they brought from home could be leveraged in even better ways. For example, a group of colleagues could set up *lunchtime positive-parenting support groups*. The purpose would be to share positive spillover experiences and "best practices" in capturing this spillover to enhance work experiences, *not* to discuss conflicts and problems. Many organizations currently have "lunch and learn" sessions, in which individuals share work/family problems and develop coping strategies. In contrast, we are proposing positive synergy groups.

Implement and tell stories; share these synergy experiences. Once these positive experiences have begun to occur with regular frequency, spread the word! Communicate about them in employee bulletin boards, in department meetings, on physical bulletin boards, in the local newspaper, in blogs, and in whatever other ways you can think of. The idea is to normalize these activities and to make them part of everyday work

routines. Try to get them to happen more often.

CONCLUSION

Because shift work is going to become more and more a part of everybody's work experience, it is time that we managed it, rather than letting it manage us. So far, employees and employers alike have tended to treat work schedules as a given, and have had people and organizations work around them. As we have seen, in studies in which people voluntarily change their work schedules or reduce their work loads to produce a more flexible, more livable life, there is evidence that people are beginning to take back the time of their life.

The technology company that employs the lawyer quoted in this paper happens to rank in the top 20 of the 2007 *Fortune* list of

best companies to work for. In examining that list, it is clear that many of the exemplary practices cited in the article accompanying the rankings are flexible ways of making corporate accommodations to employees who work long, nontraditional hours. Therefore, we again see the value of corporate flexibility and accommodation to employees' needs in the competition for top talent.

When employees are capable of exercising more control over their work schedules and engage their partners and families in reworking family roles, they can experience positive effects both at work and at home. There is definitely a silver lining in the spillover effects of shift work. Now the burden is on us to recognize it and leverage it for greater work-life synergy.



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