

Back to the Future: Mixing Work, Home Is a Very Old Dilemma December 12, 2006; Page B1

For Steven Crawley, the term "normal business hours" used to mean whenever he was awake. But he got tired of watching his life lose the tug of war with work. "When it reaches a point where you have to schedule an appointment to talk to your wife," he says, "it's time to take a look at things."

More than a year ago, the HR executive decided to eliminate various email accounts and stopped using his cellphone as a primary contact number. He also pulled the plug on his voicemail at work, forcing people to find him. "It is a lovely bottleneck that assures only those willing to actually stalk me can connect," he says.

It worked. "The more off the grid I get, the better our sales and margins, while staff and -- most important -- domestic morale improve," says Mr. Crawley. "At this rate, I'll be happily living in a cave by the time I retire."

Some would consider that step into prehistory real progress in the effort to reach work-life balance, a great debate for those fond of irony. Many of us don't strike a balance between work and life so much as we defend against the utter destruction of either.

Another irony: the notion that modern technological conveniences are entirely convenient when, in fact, they have dissolved the workplace's boundaries of place and time.

That means people bring work into the home. Often overlooked is how much people also bring home into work. If they didn't, the biggest online shopping day last Christmas season wouldn't have been a workday. Anyone who still thinks people are actually working at work and not working at home needs to be cleared for landing on reality's runway. Work and life aren't so much balanced as they are stirred into a stew that often satisfies neither quarter.

That blend, it turns out, isn't so new. For thousands of years, work and family weren't separated. Children helped supplement income and women participated in barter, producing, for example, extra butter for trade. At the same time, men engaged in social support of their children. But in '50s and '60s, men were expected to devote themselves

entirely to work and women entirely to home, says Stephanie Coontz, author of "Marriage: A History."

"This was the only period in history when so many people lived this way that you could afford to design your social and work policies on this assumption," she says. The problem is, those policies have hardly changed to reflect today's dual-provider families. Employers and governments, she adds, "are stuck in this brief period -- the 1950s."

Some say we overestimate modern burdens. The time spent working during your lifetime has, on average, dropped steadily, to roughly 20% from 50% in the late 1800s, says Jesse Ausubel, director of the program for the human environment at Rockefeller University. Today, Mr. Ausubel estimates, as much as 90% of the population is working less than ever, having "enormous amounts of time for leisure" and accounting for tourism and recreation booms.

If trends keep going the way they are, cubicle-dwellers, at best explorers of the great indoors, might someday work only the 25-hour week that characterized early ancestors. "We're trying to get back to where the hunter-gatherers were -- to our primitive ancestors, who weren't so primitive," he says. "They were pretty efficient."

Blackberrys and other communications doodads -- arguably the working world's instruments of torture -- might get us there if they don't kill us first.

Oddly, users love them. Lexmark International commissioned a new study of "knowledge workers" in which more than 80% claimed that technology helps them to be more productive and work more flexibly. "People see this less as an electronic ball and chain and more like a lifeline," says Tim Fitzpatrick, vice president, Lexmark.

The study found some 92% of respondents say they make or take work-related communications outside of work, including on vacations. Nearly three-fourths say they stay "switched on" during weekends and a fifth of them have interrupted a date for work purposes. (The study failed to ask how poorly those dates ended.) "The boundaries haven't just blurred," says Mr. Fitzpatrick of work-life divisions. "Those boundaries have been obliterated."

But, some have no problem forcing work into its cage. "I recommend having children," says marketing manager Matt Carolan. "I have four. They have a way of demanding your attention, or at least the use of your personal computer."

The same was true for Debra McNeil, a former mutual-fund portfolio manager who would have been a workaholic were it not for her kids. Her worst imbalance came every month when she'd spend one night rebalancing a \$300 million mutual-fund portfolio until 4 a.m. After emailing her boss during one such session, she got a call from him at 4:30 a.m.

Now she lives in Montana and her work as a financial-services consultant and her personal life blend throughout the day.

She sees farmers working long hours in the same way her great-grandparents did; they milked cows at 5 a.m. and fixed tools after supper. "They didn't see it as a work-home balance, it was just all the stuff you did," she says. "With technology, we have to relearn those skills that our great-grandparents already had."

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