

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS

Welcome to the 24/7 Workplace

Millennials are currently the largest generation in the workplace. In a few short years, these 18- to 35-year-old workers will be its leaders.



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What will the future millennial-led workplace look like? If today's trends continue, we can say one thing about that future workplace — it will exist 24/7.

When I teach intergenerational workplace dynamics, I spend a great deal of time discussing how the concept of work hours has changed over the past century. As the 18th century saw industrialization and, most notably, the introduction of electric lighting, factories made their workers put in substantially longer days than before — 14 hours a day, seven days a week. The workers rebelled. Through unions and collective bargaining, factory workers started demanding shorter hours and five-day workweeks.

Eventually, business leaders said yes — most famously, Henry Ford and his motor company. Then, in 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt institutionalized the eight-hour workday with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act. This act included overtime pay requirements for certain employees. As the century continued, the 40-hour workweek became the default standard for many white-collar workers as well.

As every generation continues to struggle with work-life balance, the question is how do we balance work and life when work becomes handcuffed to life?

For many lawyers from the traditionalist and baby boom generations, the 40-hour workweek was never a true reality. Client and partner demands often made the workweeks 50-plus hours. However, one thing did remain constant — work stayed in the office. Yes, you could review briefs at home or edit contracts in bed. But, for the most part, the workday had a distinct beginning and end.

THE 24/7 WORKPLACE

Enter our current technology revolution. With the advent of PCs, the Internet, smartphones and cloud-based document management systems, the workday does not need to end at 5 p.m. anymore. Technology, particularly mobile technology, has allowed the workday to go on all day, every day.

It has reached the point where it's forecasted that we'll no longer live in a traditional 9 a.m. to 5

p.m. workplace. Instead, we'll be living in a 24/7 workday, and that's the one millennials entered and are now poised to lead.

There are certainly advantages of the 24/7 workplace. Gone are the days of being tied to your desk while awaiting a client call. Now you can take the client call after your 6 p.m. spin class. The legal memorandum does not need to be researched in the library and written at the office. It can be researched online, typed at home and emailed to the partner at midnight. Client files are no longer stored in bulky redwells. Instead, you can download the file from your office's cloud, call the client on Sunday at 3 p.m., and have the documents ready to go before that night's episode of *Girls*.

But there's a caveat. Technology means that you can make your daughter's softball game ... while taking a conference call. You can take a two-week vacation ... while checking your work emails. You can go out on a dinner date ... while reviewing some deal documents. You can live your life on your own terms, but your life and your work become inextricably intertwined.

Those are the golden handcuffs of the 24/7 workplace.

The idea of working 24/7 is, of course, very familiar to lawyers. As *The New York Times* stated in a recent article, "The pressure of a round-the-clock work culture — in which people are expected to answer emails at 11 p.m. and take cellphone calls on Sunday morning — is particularly acute in highly skilled, highly paid professional services jobs like law, finance, consulting and accounting."

The *Times* article focused on two researchers who were asked by a major consulting company how it could increase retention of its female employees. The researchers concluded that the problem wasn't simply family-friendly policies or flexible working hours. The issue was larger than that — everyone was just working too many hours. Did they need to?

"Is it really necessary for people to be on call 24/7? The answer is increasingly no," one of the researchers stated. "These professions are beholden to the whims of the client, and every question has to be answered immediately — but it probably doesn't."

Therein lies the challenge for millennial workplace leaders. Technology makes it absurdly easy to work round the clock. Client and partner demands may seem to make it necessary. But as every generation continues to struggle with work-life balance, the question is how do we balance work and life when work becomes handcuffed to life? When did taking conference calls at Little League games, checking emails on vacation and reviewing deal documents on a date become an accepted part of the modern workplace?

We need to work. We need to live. Do we need to mandate logging off to truly balance both? That's the work-life challenge for millennial leaders in this new 24/7 workplace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Silverthorn is the Diversity and Education Director for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Through the Commission's online platform, *2Civility*, Silverthorn works on blog posts, social networking sites, and online discussion groups focusing on legal education, diversity and young lawyers. She also works with law schools, law students and other legal groups, developing education courses and workshops.

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