

# THE BETTER WORK TOOLKIT

## A Science-Based Approach to Designing Work-Life Solutions That Work

### Introduction

**Flexibility, collaboration,** and **autonomy** are workplace strategies intended to give workers more predictability and control over their work and home lives. Instead, they're often extending the workday into an unpredictable, 24/7 everydayathon, crowding out time for meaningful, concentrated work with endless meetings and overflowing inboxes, and spurring ever greater work devotion in order to live up to the notion of the always on, work-devoted, indefatigable "ideal worker." In short, the strategies designed to ease work-life conflict aren't working.

Part of the reason why is not only that many workplaces adopt policies without devoting time or resources to adequately implement them, but that current systems fail to account for what science is beginning to unravel about what really drives human behavior.

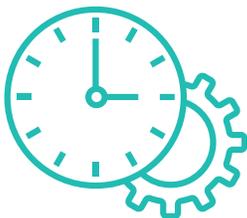
A growing body of behavioral science research shows that change is hard for humans. We do

things a certain way because they've always been done that way. We get stuck in unhealthy patterns, even when we know better. We make decisions that are easy in the present moment, but turn out to be short-sighted in the long run. We overestimate our own importance, fall prey to setting unrealistic expectations, and we tend to be influenced by what everyone else around us is doing, whether we consciously realize it or not.

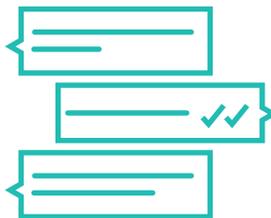
An ideas42 study of three knowledge workplaces has found that, at the most fundamental level, flexibility, collaboration, and autonomy have all exponentially increased the number of choices knowledge workers face in a typical day. That taxes time, attention, and cognitive bandwidth and creates more opportunity for predictably flawed human decision making.

To be sure, there are bigger economic forces at work driving work-life conflict. In recent decades, a host of factors have profoundly changed the

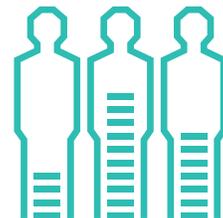
#### FLEXIBILITY



#### COLLABORATION



#### AUTONOMY



# “Human freedom is not in our ability to make decisions. It’s in our ability to put ourselves in an environment that will lead to better outcomes.”

*Dan Ariely, behavioral economist, Duke University*

workforce, home life, and the very nature of work itself—technology, globalization, an influx of women and mothers entering the workforce, an aging population, and the rise of contract work in a gig economy. Worker productivity has more than tripled in the last 70 years and the economy grown richer,<sup>1</sup> yet workers haven’t shared in the fruits of that labor, as real wages have been flat or falling,<sup>2</sup> and benefits that are the norm in other advanced economies—like paid family leave, paid sick days, affordable childcare, and paid vacation days—remain rare.

Getting work right, and taking even small steps at the individual, team, and organizational levels to redesign the way flexibility, collaboration, and autonomy work, is of paramount importance. American knowledge workers log among the longest and most extreme hours of any advanced economy, with four in 10 working at least 50 hours a week.<sup>3</sup> Busyness and long work hours have become badges of honor. New “efficient” scheduling technology to match labor with demand has created chaos in the schedules of many hourly workers. American families are feeling ever more harried, worried they aren’t spending enough time with family,<sup>4</sup> and putting in 11 more hours of work a week than they did in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> More than half of American

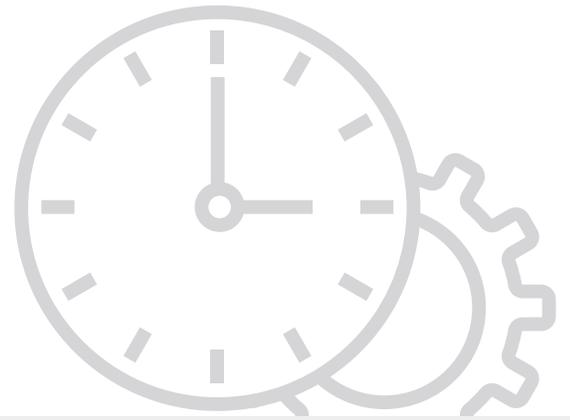
workers didn’t take all of their vacation in 2015, leaving 658 million days unused.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that women have been graduating from college in greater numbers than men since the mid-1980s, women are overrepresented in low-wage work and stuck in middle-management.<sup>7</sup> Levels of stress, anxiety, disengagement, and burnout at work are high.<sup>8</sup> Today’s stressful workplace is the fifth leading cause of death in America. Workplace-associated health care costs as much as the \$174 billion spent every year on diabetes care.<sup>9</sup> “The workplace has become hazardous to our health,” said Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor of organizational psychology at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business.

The answer is not to jettison flexibility, collaboration, and autonomy, but rather, to use an understanding of human psychology to redesign work systems in order for individuals, teams and organizations to use them more skillfully. In this toolkit, we outline the challenges, best practices and promising new ideas to ease four particularly thorny choke points—reducing e-mail overload, inefficient meetings, and long work hours, and increasing restful time off—based on universal behavioral science principles.



# FLEXIBILITY

*How do you know when you're done?*



**“Even when organizations say they care about people having work-life balance, there’s this undercurrent of recognition for the people who are there 24/7, who pick up the phone whenever they’re called. And then there’s the big question for most knowledge workers: How do you know when you’re done?”**

*Phyllis Stewart Pires, senior director, WorkLife Strategy, Stanford University*

## THE CHALLENGE

In many work environments, flexibility is still viewed as a privilege for a chosen few. So workers with flexible schedules and remote work tend to put in longer hours, viewing the time as an accommodation or gift.<sup>10</sup> Because work can spread across 24 hours, seven days a week, boundaries between work and home can dissolve. Work and e-mails spill over into time and space once reserved for being “off” to rest, recover, and live the rest of life. Now, Americans work more odd hours, nights, and weekends than workers in other countries.<sup>11</sup> The mere anticipation of getting off-hours work e-mails, and the constant checking for them, are spiking stress levels.<sup>12</sup>

## THE SCIENCE

**The Planning Fallacy:** Humans are notoriously bad at predicting their own futures and often fail to anticipate how long tasks will take to complete.<sup>13</sup> In planning their schedules, workers may overestimate how much they can actually do in a day, which, in a flexible environment,

can extend the workday into the evening, and consume mental bandwidth with worry about how to get it all done, or guilt when the day ends and the task remains undone.

**Affective forecasting:** Humans underestimate how much emotional and physical states will affect their future decisions.<sup>14</sup> In procrastinating, or putting off work in the moment, workers may assume they’ll be fantastically productive in the future, and not take into account that they may feel exhausted, distracted or unmotivated when it comes time to actually do that work in the future.

**Network effects:** Working flexibly forfeits the gains that come when workers work at the same time and in the same place, and taxes individual attention. To coordinate, workers rely more on e-mail at all hours. To compensate for knowledge gaps and because humans are neurologically attuned to novelty, workers are driven to check e-mail constantly, in part to signal their commitment to work.

# Designing Solutions

## PROMISING NEW IDEAS

**Create slack.** Put time in your calendar every day or every week to account for unanticipated “shocks” and planning fallacy bias.<sup>15</sup>

**Make it costly to send business e-mails after hours.** Use technology to schedule e-mails to go out during the work day. Or design a prompt that asks someone to think twice before hitting Send.

**Create autoresponders for off-hour e-mail.** Signaling that e-mail is sent outside of work hours helps create a new norm that taking time off to rest and re-energize is more valued than burning out.

**Make refreshing the inbox a conscious choice.** Removing auto refresh disrupts the cycle of constant checking and interruption.

**Use commitment devices.** Colleagues, teams, and organizations can use precommitment strategies to help meet deadlines, to cut meeting time, or to leave the office or stop working at a certain hour.<sup>16</sup>



### BEST PRACTICE

In rigorous, randomized control trials, researchers found that training workers and managers to work flexibly, normalize caregiving responsibilities, and focus on performance rather than hours worked in a results-only work environment, improved worker health and cut quitting rates nearly in half. Workers—and their family members—began sleeping more and feeling less stress and work-life conflict.<sup>17</sup>

**“The culture here is, when you go home, the time is yours for you to go enjoy your family and your life outside of work. So when you’re at work, you’re focused. When you’re working a full eight hours, and not checking Facebook, but really working that whole time, you’re tired. When you go home, I’m so grateful that the rule here is no checking e-mail before and after work. I’ve got other stuff to do. Like taking care of my baby. It’s really nice.”**

*Lisa Ho, project manager, Menlo Innovations, Michigan*

# COLLABORATION

*Too many meetings, too little time*



**“There were times I was averaging 90 hours a week at the office, but 60 hours of actual working. Work would come in waves at totally random times. So it could be midnight. You’d think you were finishing up, and something gets fired off that somebody needs you to do. So you stay all night. Go home and shower, take a two or three-hour nap. Come back. My longest work day was 41 hours. I was delirious by the end.”**

*Patrick Curtis, former Wall Street investment banker, now CEO of start-up [wallstreetoasis.com](http://wallstreetoasis.com), California*

## THE CHALLENGE

Work has become increasingly complex. In the past two decades, the amount of collaboration between managers and employees has ballooned by 50 percent, leading to what researchers call “collaborative overload.” In a typical week, as much as 80 percent of workers’ time is spent on meetings, phone calls, and responding to e-mails, leaving little time for actual work.<sup>18</sup> The typical knowledge worker is interrupted every three minutes, and can take as much as 23 minutes to get back on track.<sup>19</sup> These frequent disruptions and task-juggling tax cognitive bandwidth and force workers work faster, increasing time pressure, frustration, and stress.<sup>20</sup>

## THE SCIENCE

**Egocentrism:** Humans have a hard time seeing the world accurately from another’s perspective.<sup>21</sup> We often overestimate how vital we are at work and don’t see how our actions affect others, so send e-mails to get ideas off our plates, without recognizing we’re loading others’. We also have a “fear of missing out,” so

we’re inclined to go to all meetings and be part of all conversations.

**Asymmetric cost structures:** When we send an e-mail, we may just want to get an idea or thought out quickly before we forget, especially if we work at different times and in different places from coworkers. Our inbox may be clear, but we’ve just added to the workload and cognitive load of others. When that e-mail comes from the boss, research shows we’re driven to answer, regardless of time of day or night.<sup>22</sup>

**Risk aversion:** Technology makes it easy to overcollaborate—to CC colleagues on e-mail, to send a host of calendar invites for meetings. Because humans are driven to seek safety, the safe choice for the sender is often to include more people than necessary. The safe choice for the recipient, particularly when the sender is in a position of power, is to respond to e-mail and attend meetings. This leads to a culture of inefficient collaboration that bogs down individual attention.<sup>23</sup>

# Designing Solutions

## PROMISING NEW IDEAS

**Reduce meeting time by making the agenda divisible.** Dividing up meetings by time and topic reduces risk aversion and encourages advance thinking and intentional scheduling. The idea is to create a norm that respects other people's time.

**Make invisible individual work visible.** Schedule time for concentrated work, and make it as important as meeting time.<sup>24</sup>

**Be clear about trade-offs.** When scheduling meetings or asking to collaborate, make it a practice to acknowledge that other work will have to be done at another time.

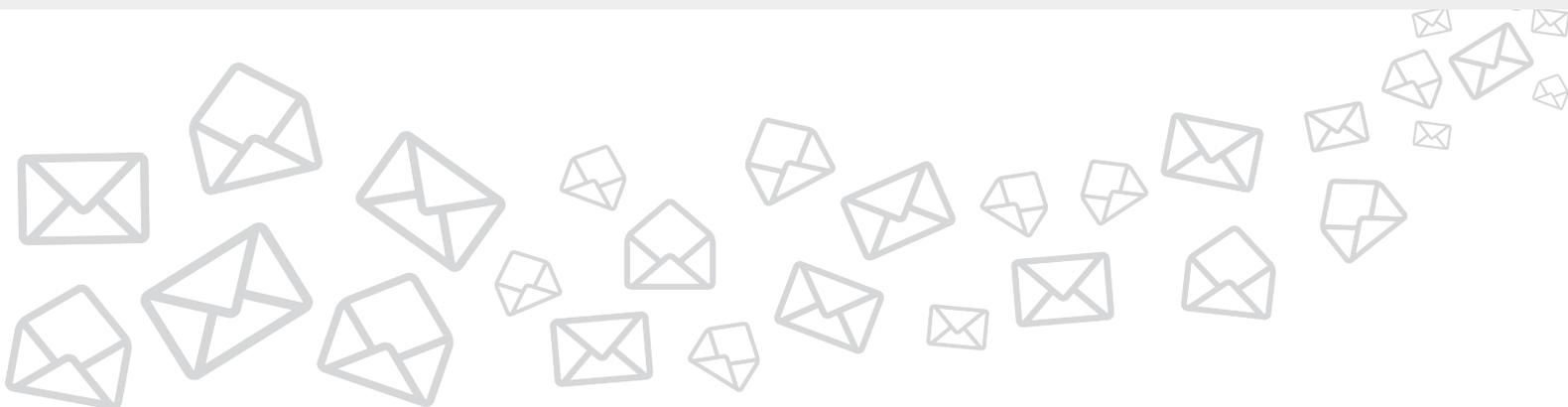


### BEST PRACTICE

A multi-year study at the Boston Consulting Group of giving workers predictable time off, with no expectation of work or e-mail checking, wound up not only improving personal satisfaction, but also project performance, with a 35 percent increase in teamwork and collaboration, a 35 percent increase in value to clients, and a 100 percent increase in team effectiveness.<sup>25</sup>

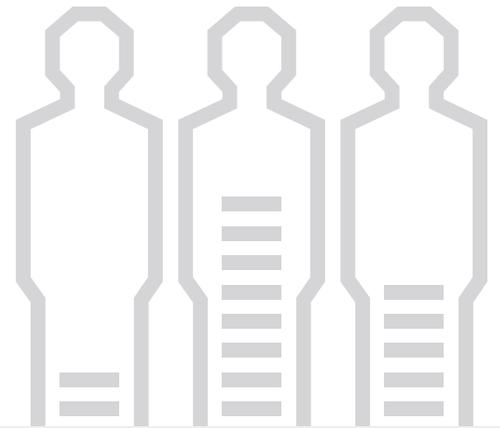
**“I talk to 100,000 people a year. I ask them what they spend their day doing. They all answer: ‘e-mails and meetings.’ No matter the country or the culture. This is what drowns us every day. You can’t innovate and change if there’s no space for it.”**

*Lisa Boddell, CEO and founder, futurethink, New York*



# AUTONOMY

*More is not always better*



**“There’s almost a weird masochistic pride that some people take, and being like—‘I work WAY more than 40 hours. That’s the bare minimum.’ And what is that? Why do we have that kind of culture?”**

*Ciannat Howett, environmental lawyer, Georgia*

## THE CHALLENGE

For knowledge workers, it’s difficult to know how much work is enough, when it’s good enough, and when it’s done. Many work environments still rely on face time and hours worked to judge performance, and overtly or unconsciously signal that more is always better. Some workers even pretend to work long hours, just to fit in.<sup>26</sup> By design, organizations reward work, not making time for life, caregiving, or work-life balance.

## THE SCIENCE

**Perceived social norms:** Humans are driven to conform to what they see others doing, often without realizing it.<sup>27</sup> Many workers who struggle with work-life conflict—yet have a measure of autonomy—see the problem as one of time management or a lack of willpower. But it’s hard not to overwork and overdo if that’s all you see everyone else doing. We don’t see people on vacation. We do see late night e-mails. And in many workplaces, intensive work, not time off, is what workers talk about to show status.

**Self-image:** Humans are motivated to maintain a positive self-image.<sup>28</sup> Many workers are driven not just to be good, but excellent, which in many performance evaluations is described as going “above and beyond.” Workers will strive intensely to meet that ambiguous goal.

**Identity as a worker:** We each have dozens of different social identities—worker, parent, caregiver, child, friend, community member. Because we spend much of our time working, our identity as a worker may become dominant.<sup>29</sup> That can lead workers to, for instance, divert attention to the pull of checking work e-mails in the evening rather than devoting full time and attention to time with family or friends.

# Designing Solutions

## PROMISING NEW IDEAS

**Create urgency around scheduling paid time off.** Use technology and reminders to get workers to actively choose to schedule vacation, facilitate planning for it, creating contingency plans to handle workload, and providing slack to smoothly transition back to work.<sup>30</sup>

**Offer incentives aligned with values to disconnect.** Offering to donate to a favorite charity for every day a worker disconnects, for example, encourages real rest by signaling rest is valued, and uses loss aversion, or the discomfort from not having money sent to an important charity, to reinforce rest behavior.<sup>31</sup>

**Rethink promotions and evaluations to reward work-life balance.** By taking a clear stand that work-life balance is a value, that the “rock stars” are not just those who go “above and beyond” at work, the organization signals that overwork is not the expectation.

**Make non-work time visible.** Put life events on your calendar and uncover, be honest about how that time is important.

**Put your “to-do” list on your calendar.** Scheduling when tasks will get done helps reduce decision fatigue and allows workers and managers to intervene before workloads get too heavy.

### BEST PRACTICE



To counter burnout and the loss of women in science and academic medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine sought to redesign a work culture that equated excellence with long hours, devising a “time bank” of work and life supports for hours spent volunteering, mentoring, and other “invisible” but expected work. Preliminary results of a pilot found improved work-life balance, greater job satisfaction and loyalty and higher rates of successful grant approvals.<sup>32</sup>

**“When I work hours that are outside my normal boundaries, I’m very ineffective. Most of the stuff needs to be redone. I need time away to clear my head. I’ll come back the next day with better ideas. Our CEO is the same. He’s an avid mountain climber. He says he’s able to do his best thinking when he doesn’t have any other worries than where the pickaxe goes next.”**

*Michelle Hickox, executive vice president and CFO, Independent Bank, Texas*

# SEVEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

*It's about investing in human capital. It's not just a perk anymore.*

## **1 Work-life conflict is a health hazard.**

The way work is organized is making us sick. And it will take fundamentally rethinking work, not just adding a few wellness programs, to fix it. The stress of long work hours, chaotic schedules, and the inability to control or predict workflow is associated with an estimated 120,000 excess deaths a year, 5 to 8 percent of health care costs and a 35 percent greater chance of having a physician-diagnosed illness. Long work hours alone are associated with a 20 percent higher mortality rate.

## **2 Work-life balance improves health.**

Ongoing research conducted by the Work, Family and Health Network, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control, has found that training workers and managers to work flexibly, normalize caregiving responsibilities, and focus on performance has improved health and sleep, reduced stress, and increased quality family time.<sup>33</sup>

## **3 Flexibility is the future.**

Two-thirds of Millennial workers, now the largest generation in the workforce, say they'd like to work remotely, and 66 percent of older workers say they'd like to shift their work schedules.<sup>34</sup> With the majority of children being raised in homes where all parents work,<sup>35</sup> a growing elderly population requiring care (more than one in five U.S. residents will be 65 or older by the year 2030<sup>36</sup>), and the rise of contingent work in the gig economy, flexible work will be critical for managing the changing nature of work and the competing demands of work and home.

## **4 Longer work hours don't mean more productivity.**

In fact, productivity begins to fall off after 48 hours a week, and drops steeply after 55 hours, as fatigued and stressed workers make more errors, get sicker, and are more prone to accidents.<sup>37</sup> International comparisons show that the two countries with the longest work hours, Japan and South Korea, are actually the least productive.<sup>38</sup>

## **5 Work-life balance makes good business sense.**

If everyone who could and wanted to telework was given that option, the national savings to workers and businesses in the U.S. would total more than \$700 billion a year.<sup>39</sup> Cisco Systems, Inc. reported a gain of \$195 million one year from increased productivity and savings associated with a new flexible, results-focused work environment.<sup>40</sup>

## **6 Overwork disadvantages women.**

More men put in longer hours than women, who still tend to be primarily responsible for caregiving. This is true particularly at the professional management level. Overwork came to be seen as desirable in the 1980s, and compensation increased for those willing to put in long hours. That not only has increased the gender wage gap by about 10 percent, but led to occupational segregation and the attrition of women from high-level positions and professions.<sup>41</sup> That's not good, because the presence of women and women leaders not only boosts performance and profitability,<sup>42</sup> but makes teams smarter.<sup>43</sup>

## **7 Work gets better when workers have work-life balance.**

One 10-month study found that giving workers flexibility over time, manner, and place of work led to a 13 percent performance increase, improved work satisfaction, and cut the attrition rate in half.<sup>44</sup> Happy workers are 12 percent more productive.<sup>45</sup> And well-rested workers perform better.<sup>46</sup>

### **About New America**

New America is committed to renewing American politics, prosperity, and purpose in the Digital Age. We generate big ideas, bridge the gap between technology and policy, and curate broad public conversation. We combine the best of a policy research institute, technology laboratory, public forum, media platform, and a venture capital fund for ideas. We are a distinctive community of thinkers, writers, researchers, technologists, and community activists who believe deeply in the possibility of American renewal.

### **About Ideas42**

At ideas42 we believe that a deep understanding of human behavior will help us improve millions of lives. We create innovative solutions to tough problems in economic mobility, health, education, consumer finance, criminal justice, energy efficiency and international development. We're a nonprofit with more than 80 active projects in the United States and around the world, working closely with partners from government, foundations, NGOs and corporations.

## Authors

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