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Why You Never See Your Friends Anymore

Our unpredictable and overburdened schedules are taking a dire toll on American society.

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Just under a century ago, the Soviet Union embarked on one of the strangest attempts to reshape the common calendar that has ever been undertaken. As Joseph Stalin raced to turn an agricultural backwater into an industrialized nation, his government downsized the week from seven to five days. Saturday and Sunday were abolished.

In place of the weekend, a new system of respite was introduced in 1929. The government divided workers into five groups, and assigned each to a different day off. On any given day, four-fifths of the proletariat would show up to their factories and work while the other fifth rested. Each laborer received a colored slip of paper—yellow, orange, red, purple, or green—that signified his or her

group. The staggered schedule was known as *nepreryvka*, or the “continuous workweek,” since production never stopped.

Socially, the *nepreryvka* was a disaster. People had no time to see friends; instead they associated by color: purple people with purple people, orange with orange, and so on. Managers were supposed to assign husbands and wives to the same color but rarely did. The Communist Party saw these dislocations as a feature, not a bug, of the new system. The Party wanted to undermine the family, that bourgeois institution. “Lenin’s widow, in good Marxist fashion, regarded Sunday family reunions as a good enough reason to abolish that day,” according to E. G. Richards, the author of *Mapping Time*, a history of the calendar.

Workers, however, were upset. One of them openly complained to *Pravda*: “What are we to do at home if the wife is in the factory, the children in school, and no one can come to see us? What is left but to go to the public tea room? What kind of life is that—when holidays come in shifts and not for all workers together? That’s no holiday, if you have to celebrate by yourself.”

The staggered workweek didn’t last long. Officials worried that it affected attendance at workers’ meetings, which were essential for a Marxist education. In 1931, Stalin declared that the *nepreryvka* had been implemented “too hastily,” leading to a “depersonalized labor process” and the mass breakage of overtaxed machines. That year, the government added a day of collective rest. The seven-day week was not restored until 1940.

Experiments like this one have given social engineering a bad name. Nevertheless, Americans are imposing a kind of *nepreryvka* on ourselves—not because a Communist tyrant thinks it’s a good idea but because the contemporary economy demands it. The hours in which we work, rest, and socialize are becoming ever more desynchronized.

Whereas we once shared the same temporal rhythms—five days on, two days off, federal holidays, thank-God-it’s-Fridays—our weeks are now shaped by the unpredictable dictates of our employers. Nearly a fifth of Americans hold jobs with nonstandard or variable hours. They may work seasonally, on rotating shifts, or in the gig economy driving for Uber or delivering for Postmates. Meanwhile, more people on the upper end of the pay scale are working long hours. Combine the people who have unpredictable workweeks with those who have prolonged ones, and you get a good third of the American labor force.

The personalization of time may seem like a petty concern, and indeed some people consider it liberating to set their own hours or spend their “free” time reaching for the brass ring. But the consequences could be debilitating for the U.S. in the same way they once were for the U.S.S.R. A calendar is more than the organization of days and months. It’s the blueprint for a shared life.

Remember the old 9-to-5, five-day-a-week grind? If you’re in your 30s or younger, maybe not. Maybe you watched reruns of *Leave It to Beaver* and saw Ward Cleaver come home at the same time every evening. Today few of us have workdays nearly so consistent. On the lower end of the labor market, standing ready to serve has become virtually a prerequisite for employment. A 2018 review of the retail sector called the “Stable Scheduling Study” found that 80 percent of American workers paid by the hour have fluctuating schedules. Many employers now schedule hours using algorithms to calculate exactly how many sets of hands are required at a given time of day—a process known as on-demand scheduling. The algorithms are designed to keep labor costs down, but they also rob workers of set schedules.

The inability to plan even a week into the future exacts a heavy toll. For her recent book, *On the Clock*, the journalist Emily Guendelsberger took jobs at an Amazon warehouse, a call center, and a McDonald's. All three companies demanded schedule flexibility—on their terms. The most explicit about the arrangement was Amazon. While filling out an online application, Guendelsberger found the following advisory: “Working nights, weekends, and holidays may be required ... Overtime is often required (sometimes on very short notice) ... Work schedules are subject to change without notice.”

One Amazon co-worker told Guendelsberger that she barely saw her husband anymore. He worked the night shift as a school custodian and came home to sleep an hour before she woke up to go to work. “We have Sunday if I’m not working mandatory overtime, and occasionally we have Monday morning—if I don’t have to work Monday morning—to see each other, and that’s pretty much it,” she said.

On the other end of the labor force are the salaried high earners for whom the workday and workweek remain somewhat more predictable. But their days and weeks have grown exceedingly long. For her 2012 book, *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, the Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow conducted a survey of 1,600 managers and professionals. Ninety-two percent reported putting in 50 or more hours of work a week, and a third of those logged 65 hours or more. And, she adds, “that doesn’t include the twenty to twenty-five hours per week most of them reported monitoring their work while not actually working.” In her 2016 book, *Finding Time: The Economics of Work-Life Conflict*, the economist Heather Boushey described the predicament in stark terms: “Professionals devote most of their waking hours to their careers.”

When so many people have long or unreliable work hours, or worse, long *and* unreliable work hours, the effects ripple far and wide. Families pay the steepest price. Erratic hours can push parents—usually mothers—out of the labor force. A body of research suggests that children whose parents work odd or long hours are more likely to evince behavioral or cognitive problems, or be obese. Even parents who can afford nannies or extended day care are hard-pressed to provide thoughtful attention to their kids when work keeps them at their desks well past the dinner hour.

To make the most efficient use of their scant time at home, some parents have resorted to [using the same enterprise software that organizes their office lives](#): Trello for chores, to-do lists, and homework; Slack to communicate with the kids or even to summon them to dinner. Anyone raising a teenager knows that nagging is more effective electronically than face-to-face.

Keeping up a social life with unreliable hours is no easy feat, either. My friends and I now resort to scheduling programs such as Doodle to plan group dinners. Committing to a far-off event—a wedding, a quinceañera—can be a source of anxiety when you don’t know what your schedule will be next week, let alone next month. Forty percent of hourly employees get no more than seven days’ notice about their upcoming schedules; 28 percent get three days or fewer.

What makes the changing cadences of labor most *nepreryvka*-like, however, is that they divide us not just at the micro level, within families and friend groups, but at the macro level, as a polity. Staggered and marathon work hours arguably make the nation materially richer—economists debate the point—but they certainly deprive us of what the late Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter described as a “cultural asset of importance”: an “atmosphere of entire community repose.”

I know this dates me, but I’m nostalgic for that atmosphere of repose—the extended family dinners, the spontaneous outings, the neighborly visits. We haven’t completely lost these shared hours, of

course. Time-use studies show that weekends continue to allow more socializing, civic activity, and religious worship than weekdays do. But Sundays are no longer a day of forced noncommerce—everything’s open—or nonproductivity. Even if you aren’t asked to pull a weekend shift, work intrudes upon those once-sacred hours. The previous week’s unfinished business beckons when you open your laptop; urgent emails from a colleague await you in your inbox. A low-level sense of guilt attaches to those stretches of time not spent working.

As for the children, they’re not off building forts; they’re padding their college applications with extracurricular activities or playing organized sports. A soccer game ought to impose an ethos of not working on a parent, and offer a chance to chat with neighbors and friends. Lately, however, I’ve been seeing more adults checking their email on the sidelines.

Is there any hope for clawing back some shared time off? In *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, Perlow describes how she developed a solution to white-collar peonage at Boston Consulting Group. She called her strategy “PTO”: predictable time off. It didn’t seem like a big deal. Teams would pull together to arrange one weeknight off per member per week. Not at the same time—clients still expected someone to be on call at all hours—but on different nights.

PTO turned out to be surprisingly complicated. Schedules had to be repeatedly adjusted to ensure that all evenings were covered. Not everyone liked the new system. “Bob,” for instance, didn’t want to take his night off while he was on the road; he would have preferred to spend that time with his family.

Still, Perlow and Boston Consulting Group deemed PTO a success, and it has since been adopted elsewhere. Drill down on why, though, and the answer does more to confirm the problem than suggest a solution. PTO made people meet more frequently and talk frankly to one another. They had to explain why a particular night wouldn’t work for them. They bonded. It was the together time, not the nights off, that made employees happier and more effective.

The “opt out” movement comes at the problem from a different angle. Its proponents call for people to reject the cult of busyness, in part by rejecting the notion that, as Jenny Odell writes in *How to Do Nothing*, our every minute should be “captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily.” But it’s one thing to delete Instagram from your phone so you can be more present for your wife and kids. It’s another to decide unilaterally that your boss’s emails can wait until morning.

And for those on the lower rungs of the economy, there’s no ignoring the scheduling algorithm—at least as long as the algorithm is king. In her 2014 book, *The Good Jobs Strategy*, the MIT business professor Zeynep Ton argues that on-demand scheduling may prove to have higher costs than benefits: Companies, especially ones that depend on customer service, lose money and market share when they desynchronize their labor force. She offers the example of Home Depot. When it opened in 1979, the company invested in full-time workers with home-improvement expertise. It quickly became the market leader. But then Home Depot began losing money, largely because of inefficient operations. In 2000, a new CEO imposed discipline in the company. However, seeking to cut labor costs, he also imposed “flexible” schedules. Home Depot started hiring more part-timers, most of them less knowledgeable than the full-timers. Customers couldn’t find anyone to help them navigate the store, and checkout lines became punishingly long. By 2005, Home Depot had plunged below beleaguered Kmart on the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

The Gap, IKEA, and a handful of other retailers have been trying to figure out how to mitigate the damage of inconsistent shifts. They are testing fixes such as making start and end times more consistent and giving no less than two weeks' notice of upcoming schedules, among other things.

But it's naive to think that policies like this will become the norm. Wall Street demands improved quarterly earnings and encourages the kind of short-term thinking that drives executives to cut their most expensive line item: labor. If we want to alter the cadences of collective time, we have to act collectively, an effort that is itself undermined by the American *nepreryvka*. A presidential-campaign field organizer in a caucus state told me she can't get low-income workers to commit to coming to meetings or rallies, let alone a time-consuming caucus, because they don't know their schedules in advance.

Reform is possible, however. In Seattle, New York City, and San Francisco, "predictive scheduling" laws (also called "fair workweek" laws) require employers to give employees adequate notice of their schedules and to pay employees a penalty if they don't.

Then there's "right to disconnect" legislation, which mandates that employers negotiate a specific period when workers don't have to answer emails or texts off the clock. France and Italy have passed such laws.

It's a cliché among political philosophers that if you want to create the conditions for tyranny, you sever the bonds of intimate relationships and local community. "Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals," Hannah Arendt famously wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She focused on the role of terror in breaking down social and family ties in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin. But we don't need a secret police to turn us into atomized, isolated souls. All it takes is for us to stand by while unbridled capitalism rips apart the temporal preserves that used to let us cultivate the seeds of civil society and nurture the sadly fragile shoots of affection, affinity, and solidarity.

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