# Harvard Business Review

# Managing the High-Intensity Workplace

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*by Erin Reid and Lakshmi Ramarajan*

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# MANAGING THE HIGH INTENSITY WORKPLACE

An "always available" culture breeds a variety of dysfunctional behaviors.

**BY ERIN REID AND LAKSHMI RAMARAJAN**

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**T**ales of time-hungry organizations—from Silicon Valley to Wall Street and from London to Hong Kong—abound. Managers routinely overload their subordinates, contact them outside of business hours, and make last-minute requests for additional work. To satisfy those demands, employees arrive early, stay late, pull all-nighters, work weekends, and remain tied to their electronic devices 24/7. And those who are unable—or unwilling—to respond typically get penalized.

By operating in this way, organizations pressure employees to become what sociologists have called ideal workers: people totally dedicated to their jobs and always on call. The phenomenon is widespread in professional and managerial settings; it's been documented in depth at tech start-ups, at investment banks, and in medical organizations. In such places, any suggestion of meaningful outside interests and commitments can signal a lack of fitness for the job.

That's what Carla Harris feared when she started at Morgan Stanley, where she is now a senior executive. She also happens to be a passionate gospel singer with three CDs and numerous concerts to her credit. But early in her business career, she kept that part of her life private, concerned that being open about the time she devoted to singing would hurt her professionally. Multiple research studies suggest that she had good reason to worry (see the "Further Reading" list).

To be ideal workers, people must choose, again and again, to prioritize their jobs ahead of other parts of their lives: their role as parents (actual or anticipated), their personal needs, and even their health. This reality is difficult to talk about, let alone challenge, because despite the well-documented personal and physical costs of these choices, an overwhelming number of people believe that achieving success *requires* them and those around them to conform to this ideal. That commonplace belief sometimes even causes people to resist well-planned organizational changes that could reduce the pressure to be available day and night. When Best Buy, for example, attempted to focus on results and avoid long work hours, some managers balked, holding tightly to the belief that selfless devotion to the job was necessary.

The pressure to be an ideal worker is well established, but how people cope with it—and with what consequences—is too often left unexplored. Is it beneficial to weave ideal-worker expectations into a company culture? Is it necessary, at an individual level, to meet those expectations? Interviews that we have conducted with hundreds of professionals in a variety of fields—including consulting, finance, architecture, entrepreneurship, journalism, and teaching—suggest that being an ideal worker is often neither necessary nor beneficial. A majority of employees—men and women, parents and nonparents—find it difficult to stifle other aspects of themselves and focus single-mindedly on work. They grapple painfully with how to manage other parts of their lives. The solutions they arrive at may allow them to navigate the stresses, but they often suffer serious and dysfunctional consequences.

In the following pages, we describe strategies that people commonly use to manage the pressure to be 100% available and 100% committed to work, as well as the effects of those strategies on the individuals themselves, on those they supervise, and on the organizations they work for. Finally, we suggest a route to a healthier—and ultimately more productive—organizational culture that can be driven by individual managers' small changes.

## Idea in Brief

**THE CONTEXT**
The expectation that people will be totally available and committed to work has never been stronger—but even in high-intensity environments, most people don't conform to that ideal.

**THE PROBLEM**
The strategies employees use to cope with unrealistic expectations often prove damaging to them and to the organizations they work for.

**THE SOLUTION**
It's time to redefine the "ideal" worker. People will be more engaged and productive—and organizations more successful— if individuals aren't pressured to suppress their complicated, multilayered identities.

## Three Strategies

In our research we found that people typically rely on one of three strategies: *accepting* and conforming to the demands of a high-pressure workplace; *passing* as ideal workers by quietly finding ways around the norm; or *revealing* their other commitments and their unwillingness to abandon them.

**Accepting.** Many people manage the pressure to be fully devoted to work by simply giving in and conforming. Indeed, at one consulting firm among the companies we studied, 43% of the people interviewed fell into this group. In their quest to succeed on the job, "accepters" prioritize their work identities and sacrifice or significantly suppress other meaningful aspects of who they are. People we spoke to across professions told us, somewhat ruefully, of giving up dreams of being civically engaged, running marathons, or getting deeply involved in their family lives. One architect reported:

> *For me, design is 24/7. This project I'm designing, **my boss e-mails me at all hours of the night**—midnight, 6 AM. I can never plan my time, and I'm kind of at his beck and call.*

When work is enjoyable and rewarding, an accepting strategy may be beneficial, allowing people to succeed and advance in their careers. But a professional identity that crowds out everything else makes people more vulnerable to career threats, because they have psychologically put all their eggs in one basket. When job loss or other setbacks occur, accepters find it particularly difficult to cope, as other parts of their lives have withered away. For accepters, treating work as the be-all and end-all may be fulfilling when the job is going well, but it leads to fragility in the long term.

Furthermore, people who buy in to the ideal-worker culture find it difficult to understand those who do not. As a result, accepters can become the main drivers of organizational pressure for round-the-clock availability. They tend to have trouble managing people who have lives outside the office. One senior consultant, describing the kind of employee he prefers to work with, said:

> *I want someone who's lying awake at night thinking, Man, what are we going to do in this meeting tomorrow? Because that's what I do.*

Perhaps surprisingly, accepters aren't necessarily good mentors even to people who are trying to conform to the organization's expectations. It can be difficult for junior colleagues to get these individuals' time and attention, in part because accepters are so absorbed in the job. In the words of one consultant, "They can no longer understand how unbelievably stressful it is to come in not knowing how to play the game." As a result, they often take a sink-or-swim approach to junior-colleague development.

**Passing.** The strategy employed by another group of workers is to devote time to nonwork activities—but under the organization's radar. At the consulting firm, 27% of the study participants fell into this group. These people were "passing"— a term originally used by sociologist Erving Goffman to describe how people try to hide personal characteristics (such as physical disabilities or race) that might stigmatize them and subject them to discrimination. Consultants who were successful in passing as ideal workers received performance ratings that were just as high as those given to peers who genuinely embraced the 24/7 culture, and colleagues perceived them as being "always on."

We found that although people across professions developed ways to pass, their strategies for doing so varied. For example, some consultants focused on local industries, which permitted them to develop rosters of clients they could serve with minimal travel time, thus opening up space for other parts of their lives. One consultant explained how he was able to carve out time to sustain his romantic partnership and be an amateur athlete while still appearing to be an ideal worker:

> *Travel comes out of your personal time, always. That's why I work for [local businesses]. They are all right nearby, and I take a car.*

Another consultant also limited himself to working with local clients and often telecommuted to reduce his work hours. He used another key tool as well: controlling information about his whereabouts. He reported (with some pleasure) that he had actually skied every day the previous week—without claiming any personal time. Yet senior colleagues saw him as a rising star who worked much harder than most people at the firm.

For other passers, the ticket to success was not staying local but exploiting distance. A journalist we interviewed described taking a regional reporting assignment for a prestigious national newspaper, which allowed him to work from home, engage with his family, and file his articles in the evenings after his children went to bed, all while retaining a reputation as an ideal worker. He laughed, saying:

> *No one ever really knew where I was, because I was hundreds of miles from the home base. I was the only one in my region.*

Although passing enables people to survive in demanding cultures without giving their all to work, passers pay a psychological price for hiding parts of themselves from their colleagues, superiors, and subordinates. Human beings have a need to express themselves and to be known by others. When important aspects of their identities cannot be shared at work, people may feel insecure and inauthentic—not to mention disengaged. These feelings have real costs for organizations, too: Our research indicates that over time, passers have a relatively high turnover rate. This suggests that although they may get by in the short term, hiding key dimensions of themselves from their colleagues can be difficult to sustain in the long run.

Passing as an ideal worker can also make it hard to manage others. Passers don't necessarily want to encourage conformance to the ideal-worker image, but on the other hand, advising subordinates to pass—and effectively engage in subterfuge—is also problematic. So is suggesting open resistance to the demands for round-the clock availability, because (as we shall see) the careers of people who resist are likely to suffer. To complicate matters further, passers may believe that most people in the organization *want* to work all the time. One senior leader who himself passed but avoided counseling his employees to do likewise made this comment:

> *I want [my employees] to be happy, but if they derive their happiness from working a lot, that's not for me to judge.*

A subtly destructive aspect of passing is that by failing to openly challenge the ideal-worker culture, passers allow that culture to persist. Their track records prove that people don't need to be workaholics to succeed—but the organization continues to design and measure work as if that were the case.

**Revealing.** Not everyone wants to pass—or can—and some who initially pass grow frustrated with this strategy over time. These people cope by openly sharing other parts of their lives and by asking for changes to the structure of their work, such as reduced schedules and other formal accommodations. At the consulting firm, 30% of those interviewed pursued this strategy. Although it's often assumed that people who resist the pressure to be ideal workers are primarily women with families, we have not encountered enormous gender differences in our research. Data from the consulting firm shows that fewer than half of the women were "revealers," while more than a quarter of the men were.

Revealing allows people the validation of being more fully known by colleagues, which is denied to the passers. However, it can have damaging career consequences. At the consulting firm, performance reviews and promotion data showed that revealers paid a substantial penalty. For example, one consultant indicated his unwillingness to make work

## Surviving a High-Intensity Workplace

There's no perfect strategy for managing oneself in an organization that values selfless dedication, but it's useful to know your own tendencies, understand their risks, and mitigate those risks to the extent possible. To get started, think about this question:

### How do you tend to respond to texts and e-mails from colleagues in the evenings?

| RESPONSE | STRATEGY | MOTIVATION | RISKS TO BE AWARE OF | WHAT YOU CAN ALTER |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **RAPID ENGAGEMENT** You always reply and, if requested, bang out some work (e.g., "I'll have it for you in five minutes!"). You rarely make evening plans. | ACCEPTING | You devote yourself completely to work because it is expected and rewarded. | You may burn out or be slow to rebound from setbacks. You may have trouble mentoring others and creating a pipeline of promotable employees. | Set aside blocks of time for other aspects of your life. Don't expect subordinates to make work their highest priority. Be open to different ways of working. |
| **FEIGNED ATTENTIVENESS** You respond and give the impression that you are working (e.g., "Am on it— will take a few hours"). You tend to make and keep evening plans but rarely mention them. | PASSING | You seek to protect your career while sustaining other aspects of your life. | You may not build close relationships at work. You may perpetuate the ideal-worker myth. | Come out to selected colleagues so you feel better known and they don't feel compelled to sacrifice their personal lives. Make it clear that outside activities don't hurt your performance. |
| **NEXT-DAY FOLLOW-UP** Unless it's urgent, you don't alter your plans (e.g., "At a show—will get to this tomorrow"). You may not even respond that evening. | REVEALING | You wish to be open in your relationships and believe the organization may need to change. | You may damage your career. You may sacrifice the credibility needed to push for change. | Emphasize results, not effort, when discussing work. Encourage others to be open about their behavior and thus change workplace norms. |

his top priority when he asked for paternity leave. With his wife eight months pregnant, the soon-to-be father expected a temporary reprieve. Instead, he faced questions about his dedication:

> *One of the partners said to me, "You have a choice to make. Are you going to be a professional, or are you going to be just an average person in your field? If you are going to be a professional, then nothing else can be as important to you as your work. If you want to be world-class, it's got to be all-consuming."*

Over time, being sanctioned for failure to conform can lead to resentment. Instead of motivating people to devote themselves first and foremost to their work, it may cause them to leave the organization in search of a better fit.

The experience of revealing their nonwork commitments and being penalized for doing so can make it difficult for people to manage others. Like passers, revealers may struggle with encouraging their subordinates to accept ideal-worker pressures, but they

may shy away from advising resistance because they know the costs firsthand.

## There Has to Be a Better Way

Our research suggests that if employees felt free to draw some lines between their professional and personal lives, organizations would benefit from greater engagement, more-open relationships, and more paths to success. We outline three steps that managers can take to create a richer definition of what it means to be an "ideal" worker—without sacrificing high performance. These changes don't have to be pushed by a senior leader within the organization; they can be effectively implemented at the team level.

**Develop your own multifaceted identity.** People in leadership positions can avoid the fragility that results from blind acceptance of ideal-worker norms by deliberately cultivating their own nonwork identities: a civic self, an athletic self, a family-oriented self. One architect told us that when he defined himself solely in terms of his work, professional struggles and setbacks made him miserable. Ironically, as he broadened his focus, he found more professional fulfillment. As managers become more resilient, they may also learn that

employees whose lives are better balanced create value for the organization.

Managers can start to change organizational norms by pointing out the positive things that employees' outside activities bring to the workplace. One consultant whose firm had recently merged with another enterprise observed that none of his new colleagues ever stayed in the office past 5:30 PM. When he asked about this pattern, he was told:

> *We don't want our folks to spend every waking minute at work; we want them to be well-rounded individuals, to be curious, to see things out in the world,* and to have all kinds of different experiences that they can then bring to bear on their work.

People who pursue outside activities—volunteering in local politics, for example, or at a child's school—are exposed to experiences, specialized knowledge, and networks that would be unavailable to them if they had spent that time holed up at the office.

**Minimize time-based rewards.** Employees who choose a passing strategy do so in part because it's common to evaluate *how much* people work (or seem to), rather than the quality of their output. This tendency is often reinforced by subtle and not-so-subtle beliefs and practices. For example, a senior consultant expressed his conviction that successful consultants must have the "high-five factor": They've spent so much time on-site with the client that when they enter the client's building, employees give them high fives. One firm we worked with awarded a prize to the person who had taken the most flights in a year. Valuing work time over work product—which motivates people to deceive others about how many hours they're clocking—is an easy trap to fall into, especially for professionals, whose knowledge-based work is difficult to evaluate.

We propose that managers reduce the incentives for passing (and the costs of revealing) by encouraging people to focus on achieving their goals and measuring actual results rather than hours invested. For example, instead of celebrating a high-five factor based on time spent with the client, managers could praise employees for the quality of the

**FURTHER READING**

Here is a small sample of the research on ideal-worker norms in white-collar jobs:

***Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives***
Mary Blair-Loy
Harvard University Press, 2005

***Challenging Operations: Medical Reform and Resistance in Surgery***
Katherine C. Kellogg
University of Chicago Press, 2011

***Breaking the Mold: Redesigning Work for Productive and Satisfying Lives***
Lotte Bailyn
ILR Press, 2006

***Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It***
Joan Williams
Oxford University Press, 2001

***Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family***
Anne-Marie Slaughter
Random House, 2015

**"Gendered Challenge, Gendered Response: Confronting the Ideal Worker Norm in a White Collar Organization"**
Erin L. Kelly, Samantha K. Ammons, Kelly Chermack, and Phyllis Moen
*Gender & Society,* June 2010

advice provided or the number of repeat engagements secured. Managers can also move away from time-based rewards by working to set reasonable expectations with clients.

Other policy changes can be made even more easily. One employee we interviewed remarked that her current boss differed from her old one because he believed late nights were a sign that she was working inefficiently, and he discouraged them. Another employee stated that her manager simply asked her to set her own deadlines—realistically. When given such autonomy, high-performing workers who would otherwise pass or reveal are likely to follow through on their commitments.

**Protect employees' personal lives.** Most organizations leave it to their employees to set boundaries between their work and their nonwork lives—often with the best intentions. When Netflix offered unlimited time off, for example, managers thought they were treating their people like "grown-ups." But providing complete freedom can heighten employees' fears that their choices will signal a lack of commitment. Without clear direction, many employees simply default to the ideal-worker expectation, suppressing the need to live more-balanced lives.

Managers have the power to change this by flipping the script and actively protecting employees' nonwork time and identities. They can, for example, institute required vacations, regular leaves, and reasonable work hours—for all employees, not just some. Making a firm commitment to avoid excessive workloads and extreme and unpredictable hours, rather than simply giving people the option to request downtime, will help them engage with other parts of their selves.

**THE PRESSURE** to be an ideal worker is at an all-time high, but so are the costs to both individuals and their employers. Moreover, the experiences of those who are able to pass as ideal workers suggest that superhuman dedication may not always be necessary for organizational success. By valuing all aspects of people's identities, rewarding work output instead of work time, and taking steps to protect employees' personal lives, leaders can begin to unravel the ideal-worker myth that has become woven into the fabric of their organizations. And that will enhance employees' resilience, their creativity, and their satisfaction on the job. ▽

**HBR Reprint** R1606G