‘996’ Working Hour System: Why Does it Happen?

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996 refers to a working system that requires employees to work from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM, six days a week. This is common with a good number of companies, especially internet companies, which set it as their official work schedule.

On March 26, a couple of Chinese programmers created a 996.ICU repository on Github, the most widely used code-sharing platform around the world, to protest overtime work. ‘996.ICU’ resents how programmers’ arduous lives of working from 9 am to 9 pm could risk them of ending up at an intensive care unit. The slogan of the protest is “developers’ lives matter”.

Sparks were kindled as early as 2016, when a number of employees revealed that their employer, 58.com, does not reasonably compensate them for working 996. In a stunning response, the company  claimed that its business had grown exponentially and that it wanted to motivate employees to be dedicated to their jobs. 58.com claimed that it not only would be worth their while for employees, but also that the overtime was only encouraged, not compulsory.

In January, Youzan, the largest ecommerce provider on WeChat, officially made 996 its standard working schedule at the annual company gathering, where  CEO Bai Ya addressed his employees saying that “when looking back on our hard work in a few years’ time, we will find it worthwhile.”

In March, employees working at JD.com aired their grievances that the company is compelling them work a 996 schedule.

Contributors to the 996.ICU Github repository keep  a list of more than 120 Chinese companies who have followed the 996 schedule, including almost every known major Chinese internet firm including Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba, Huawei, Bytedance (parent company of TikTok), Xiaomi, Ele.me, Pinduoduo, and NetEase.

Within the fast-paced internet and tech industry, web developer is known to be one of the most stressful jobs. A poll by PingWest found out that most of the members of the 996 movement are working as web developers. Other members come from positions such as business development specialists, accountants, rideshare drivers, UI/UX designers, and IT architects. One operation manager working for an advertising agency even told PingWest that he works overtime seven days a week because he is required by his superiors to keep an eye on ad campaign statistics.

While local laws regulate workers’ schedules, they are not enforced sufficiently to be effective, allowing the 996 phenomenon to become entrenched in the tech industry. Many well-known figures in the industry, including Jack Ma, the founder and former CEO of Alibaba, have voiced their support for 996, on the premise that their companies and China’s rapid growth depend on it.

After talking to multiple sources throughout the industry, PingWest found that employees in many leading companies were not officially forced to work in by a 996 schedule. They may find themselves working overtime on occasion, but not as a rule. The sources have asked PingWest to withhold their names to avoid company retaliation for talking to a member of the press.

One source working in a major internet company, for instance, told PingWest that he works from 10:30 AM to 9:30 PM every weekday. 996 is not required in his company, and overtime only happens in a certain team when that team is near the deadline of a project.

However, in his last job at another internet company,  he worked until 11:15 pm nearly every day. He told PingWest that he enjoyed his projects so much that he did not feel like he was being forced to work overtime. Another source said that the company where he works never decreed 996 internally, and he only works a little bit overtime until 7 or 8 PM. However, employees working at the business department work longer. Normally only in busy seasons staffs work the 996 schedule.

A mid-level executive said that at his AI startup, he does not work 996 and neither do colleagues under him. “The schedule is not that strict and my colleagues and I do not need to clock in and out every day.” Due to his company’s position in the industry, employees are not under too much pressure.

The CTO of a company said that he requires his employees to work from 10:30 am to 9:30 pm, and work in shifts on Saturdays, due to the fact that his company is in fierce competition. And yet he also believes that employees cannot maintain a high level of productivity all the time.

He measured employee productivity with a formula that equates four low-output hours with one high-output hour. Additionally, in a 12-hour work shift, he argues that employees can maintain high productivity for only four hours even in an optimistic expectation. The rest eight hours equals to two hours’ high productivity, and thus, 12-hour work a day is reasonable.”

Among people PingWest talked to, roughly 80% could not find an internally declared and strictly enforced 996 work schedule, while nearly all of them could say that they have a somewhat modified version of 996, such as 995 (five days), or 11115 (11 AM to 11 PM for five days).

PingWest found that the level of acceptance for 996 among Chinese tech workers is higher than what one might expect from the GitHub project.

Reasons vary, but most sources instinctively pointed to the fact that they love their jobs, and that they don’t have much to do at home, either. When asked to give detailed reasons, here’s what they offered:

**1. 996 or not depends on companies and department leaders**

Each companies has its own working environment and requires employees to behave differently. Some companies encourage employees to work overtime, such as Baidu, Alibaba, Huawei and Bytedance. Such companies embody a culture of what Chinese people have dubbed the “wolf spirit.” In other companies, sometimes an individual supervisor may arrange longer work schedules for employees.

**2. Competition**

Workload in China are indeed more than average normal in the international community, especially European and North American countries. The phenomenon of 996 is fundamentally caused by China’s pursuit of fast development in the internet industry. As capital flows into the industry, product iteration cycles are pushed faster. A good timing for Product-Market Fit (PMF) is also important. Driven by these factors, workloads for tech workers ratchet up.

**3. Better pay**

A 1000 square feet apartment in Beijing can cost about one million dollars, an amount few people can afford. Chinese Go player Ke Jie, who ranks number one in the world and was a testing rival to Google’s AlphaGo software, still had to apply for home loans for his house, even though he has an award of around RMB 1.05 million per year. Under these circumstances, employees in big cities like Beijing are driven to seek curry favor with their superiors so that they stand a better chance of promotion and, with that, higher pay to cover an already high cost of living.

The 996 issue is a complex one in China. Due to external competition among internet companies and internal competition for higher pay, 996, or something similar, has become a common phenomenon across the tech industry fundamentally. While unyielding 996 schedules may be condemned, the consensus here is that so long as these conditions prevail, and employees are willing to work extra hours, then 996 is a personal and organizational choice, and is unlikely to be going away anytime soon.