**Chinese Internet Giants Want to Change Overtime Culture, but Employees Have Mixed Reactions**

Gloria Li, June 29, 2021

(Source: Daniel Cukier)

During an all-hands meeting on June 17, ByteDance’s newly-appointed CEO Liang Rubo unveiled results of an internal survey regarding the company’s so-called ‘big week/small week’ policy, a type of scheduling that requires employees to work one Sunday every two weeks, with double pay on the extra workday. The company-wide poll showed that around one-third of the workers wanted to maintain the status quo, while another third of respondents were in favor of the company cancelling the policy. The rest took a wait-and-see attitude.

As the intended reform plan failed to gain the support from a majority of the workforce, Liang said that ByteDance, which owns the world’s biggest social media sensation TikTok, would continue with the existing policy and conduct more research on it.

The ‘big week/small week’ system has been in use since ByteDance’s inception in 2012, epitomizing the social media titan’s workaholic culture. Another buzzword “996”, which refers to a working schedule demanding staffers work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, plus overtime, has painted a bigger picture of the hypercompetitive work environment among China’s booming tech industry. An online protest against the 996 schedule erupted in 2019 and sparked a national debate on the work-life balance dilemma.

**SEE ALSO:**[**Ep. 42: To 996, or Not to 996, That Is the Question**](https://pandaily.com/ep-42-to-996-or-not-to-996-that-is-the-question/)

In the previous years, news of incidents involving premature deaths of young tech workers in China have hit the headlines and provoked criticism against the culture of excessively long hours. However, the recent ByteDance survey uncovered employees’ mixed emotions towards the practice.

According to a post written by a ByteDance employee on China’s LinkedIn-like app Maimai, people wanted to keep the ‘big week/small week’ policy mainly because of the overtime pay, a tempting benefit that can substantially increase one’s monthly income. A former employee of the Beijing-based tech unicorn company told domestic media outlet [AI Caijing](http://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_13247290) that revoking the policy could result in a 20% drop in annual salaries.

A full-time employee of the company, who declined to reveal her real name due to the sensitivity of the topic, said in an interview with Pandaily that she wanted to maintain the policy because a compressed workweek only leads to heavier daily workload. “If the workload doesn’t change, canceling the policy just means that I need to do the same work with less pay,” she said.

Elan Wang, a third-year college student who interned at ByteDance from July 2020 to June 2021, told Pandaily that in compensation for the extra workday, the company will hold team-building activities for employees every second Wednesday. Wang also said that working on weekends can help staffers deliver better work performance and manage their time more efficiently.

Last week, ByteDance’s top rival Kuaishou announced that it would abolish their own version of the policy next month, which the company had adopted earlier this year. The short-video firm added that employees who work overtime would still get paid double on weekends and triple on holidays.

Kuaishou and ByteDance’s move came after an internal notice from Lightspeed & Quantum Studios, a video game developer owned by Chinese internet giant Tencent, went viral on Chinese social media earlier this month, stating that starting from June 14, employees must get off work at 6 p.m. on “health day” Wednesday, leave the office no later than 9 p.m. on other days and be released from work during weekends and public holidays. The statement also noted that employees need to apply to their supervisors for extra work hours if any urgent tasks arise.

Some netizens praised the change and said Tencent had set a good example for other internet companies, while some questioned the feasibility.

“It’s just words. Who dares leave work before his or her boss does?” one Weibo user commented.

“It only proves that no companies in the country are observing the labor law,” replied another.

China’s labor law generally prohibits workdays exceeding eight hours without overtime pay. Still, tech billionaires have endorsed the practice, claiming it could help companies achieve high-speed growth and enrich employees personally. Alibaba founder Jack Ma called the 996 schedule “a huge blessing.” Richard Liu, CEO of the Alibaba rival JD.com, said that “slackers” in his firm are not his “brothers”.

As Chinese authorities have stepped up a crackdown on the country’s big tech groups, some state media outlets are lending their voices to the anti-overwork uproar.

In December, a 22-year-old woman working at Pinduoduo, one of China’s largest e-commerce platforms, died after staying at the office until 1:30 a.m. The event ignited a public backlash against the company and the excessive workload it placed on its staffers. Following the outcry over the employee’s death, the Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau sent an investigative team to Pinduoduo to examine the company’s work practices. The government-run CCTV published an [editorial](https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-01-06/doc-iiznctkf0420583.shtml) that warned employers of sacrificing staffers’ health in exchange for profit and called for authorities to intensify regulatory oversight to protect workers’ rights. A [commentary](https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-01-06/doc-iiznctkf0420583.shtml) in the official Xinhua news agency said that the overtime culture is “distorted”, urging companies to stop such labor rights violations.

Facing the relentless pace of work and decline of upward mobility, China’s exhausted millennials and Generation Z are now excusing themselves from the rat race, which has led to a mass movement of “lying flat” – a lifestyle that advocates reducing desires and doing the minimum amount at work, enough to cover basic needs but no more. The term first appeared on search engine giant Biadu’s forum site Tieba and quickly gained traction on other social media platforms in April, striking a chord with many burnt-out and disillusioned young people in China.

According to digital media outlet [Radii](https://radiichina.com/laying-flat-involution/), the hashtag #Whether choosing “lying flat” is shameful# has been reviewed more than 530 million times on China’s Twitter-like Weibo before being taken down by authorities.

“Lying down is a form of nonviolent resistance to consumerism,” said one netizen.

“Lying down is not shameful as long as we can be self-sufficient,” read another popular comment. “We just want to work less and enjoy life more.”

However, Elan Wang, who previously interned at ByteDance, expressed different opinions about the “lying flat” trend. “I don’t want to lie flat,” she said. “What you need to do is to find your passion.”