How to Help Workers Stop Overworking from Home

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Surveys have shown that remote workers often work longer hours than they did pre-pandemic. Here's how you can stop them from overworking.

Photo: Unsplash

Whether you're working from the relatively tranquil confines of a sunny home office, or wrangling your toddler in-between Zoom meetings, working from home can often make the days feel longer.

A multitude of surveys conducted since the onset of the pandemic suggests that working at home can often mean working more hours compared to days when people more commonly reported to an office.

In an effort to resist the gravitational pull of their company devices, HR pros can employ a few choice practices to get their workers to log off and, hopefully, stave off burnout. Experts—like Joy Young, VP of people at Suzy, an audience analytics company—suggest several tips: set consistent work hours, block off some "me time," and regularly check in with staff.

Home work = more work

Working too much can be dangerous for workers: A 2021 study from the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization found that people who work more than 55 hours a week have "higher risks of ischemic heart disease"—which is a narrowing of the heart arteries—"and stroke," compared to those who work 35–40 hours a week or less. The authors noted, however, that additional research is needed in more countries and regions to study the connection between long working hours and health outcomes.

And even when people are working from home, they've found it easier to spend more time grinding than relaxing. According to a 2020 survey that queried 5,000 respondents

aged 20–64 who earned at least $20,000 in 2019, 35% of workers who saved extra time by not commuting to an office spent most of their excess time working at their primary job.

But extra time doesn't need to be spent hunched over a keyboard well after the sun goes down.

Young told HR Brew that many of Suzy's 267 employees have had trouble detaching from work, because "they're not able to participate in some of the activities that they normally have. In some ways, [they] are kind of using work to kind of fill some of those absences."

How to stop overworking

Young recommends setting core working hours, and making it a matter of company policy for leaders to convey when it's time to finish work. At Suzy, the core hours are from 9am to 6:30pm Eastern time. Beyond that timeframe, work communication isn't expected, and for employees on the West Coast, there aren't any meetings beyond 3:30pm Pacific time, Young said. Ingraining the concept in employee onboarding presentations "[sets] the tone across the board" that work messages stop flying in once core hours have elapsed, she explained.

Young said it's incumbent upon leaders to normalize taking breaks, so workers feel empowered to back away from the monitor.

Putting an hour in your calendar everyday where you're not responding to messages is a great best practice—and it's something she does herself.

"I made sure that I have an hour every day in my calendar. And, you know, people don't look over that time," when it comes to booking meetings, she said.

Young believes it's incumbent for HR to regularly check in with everyone—from the C-suite on down—and directly ask how they can help manage employee stress.

"It can't be a one-and-done conversation, because there's always something we could be doing differently," she said. Moreover, she added, discussing worker mental health and stress has to be a part of the normal HR mandate.

With those tools at the ready, HR teams might help the day feel less like an interminable slog and more like a normal day at the (home) office