



Breaking Free from a “9 to 5” Culture

by Rebecca Zucker

Many organizations learned in the past year that remote work can be highly effective, with 83% of employers surveyed saying that the shift to remote work has been successful for their company, according to a [PwC study](#). In addition, [54% of workers want to continue working remotely](#) after the pandemic. Now that it's clear *where* the work is done is not as important as people once thought, the other dimension of flexibility workers crave is the freedom to determine *when* the work is done. A [2019 study](#) by the International Workplace Group found that 80% of workers would turn down a job that did not offer a flexible work schedule for one that did, and [76% of workers](#) said they'd consider staying at their current employer if they could work flexible hours.

According to a [Microsoft Work Trend Report](#), the 9-to-5 workday is disappearing, as the increase in remote work has allowed for more flexible hours. Employees are increasingly working asynchronously, completing tasks on their own schedules, which may be different from those of their colleagues. Asynchronous work is now essential to being part of a modern, digital economy, staying competitive in the war for talent, and building a globally distributed workforce.

Tsedal Neeley, a Harvard Business School professor and author of the book [Remote Work Revolution](#), told me, “Companies have to profoundly rethink what it means to be part of a modern work structure. This idea of 9-to-5 or face-time culture is actually not helpful for a digitally advanced economy.” She highlighted that underlying face-time culture is the need to monitor or see people in order to feel like work is advancing. However, this assumption that being productive requires seeing people do the work is not only limiting, but also fallacious, as technology and automation are increasingly used to get work done and are inherently not as observable. Asynchronous work, she says, is “a completely new mindset in line with a digital economy.” (Incidentally, Professor Neeley and I could not find a time to connect live to discuss this article, so we communicated asynchronously).

Likewise, Jay D'Aprile, Executive Vice President at Slayton Search Partners, an executive search firm, said of asynchronous work, “It's just the way it's going to be in the future, and I think that companies that don't accept that are going to be disadvantaged in the war for talent because employees have choices and are looking for that. The war for talent is over, and the talent's won.” D'Aprile and his team also work asynchronously. He said, “I trust my people. They don't have to tell me when they come and go. I trust

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them to get the work done...If I need them, I can always text them. They set their own schedules. I start at 5am, but I don't expect them to."

Michael Montano, Head of Engineering at Twitter shared, "We're definitely seeing this kind of demand from our employees and an expectation for greater flexibility and choice in how they work, where they work and when they work. On top of that, we're building this global, distributed workforce, so we're seeing this necessity to work asynchronously. And I think how we embrace that is through a combination of tooling, technology, but also very much through culture."

So how does an organization shift its culture to break out of the traditional 9-to-5 and move to an asynchronous way of working? Here are several strategies to follow:

Start at the top

Whether you are looking to shift to an asynchronous way of working at the team, department, or company level, it needs to start with the leadership of that entity. Not only does it require senior leadership buy-in, but these leaders also need to walk the talk and model working asynchronously. Michael Montano from Twitter said, "I think Jack [Dorsey] was very intentional, as was the rest of the leadership team, around thinking about how are we are going to embrace this trend, knowing that to serve our customers around the world, we're going to build this distributed workforce? Knowing that the best talent is going to expect this flexibility of choice in how they work. So, we started to really model that ourselves and start to try that out ourselves. And that's something we did in our leadership team, as well as what I'm doing with the engineering leadership team."

Conversely, a lack of support from the top can impede or altogether kill this cultural shift. In their book *Overload*, professors Erin Kelly and Phyllis Moen chronicle a dual-agenda work redesign experiment called STAR (an acronym for Support. Transform. Achieve. Results.) with a division of an IT firm that they ran in collaboration with Jody Thompson and Cali Ressler from Culture Rx, who pioneered the Results Only Work Environment (ROWE). STAR was designed to benefit both the organization and the participating employees. Employees were given the freedom to determine how, where, and notably *when* they did their work. Within six months, they saw significant improvements in key outcomes such as reduced burnout, increased job satisfaction, and increased engagement and retention, with no negative impact on productivity. However, the IT firm was later acquired, and new management, considered to be "old school," re-imposed a more rigid 9-to-5 work schedule and onsite work policy, ultimately shutting down the STAR initiative.

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Focus on outcomes

Identifying clear goals and outcomes will allow employees working asynchronously to focus on the desired results versus when, where, or how the work is done. Ellen Taaffe, a leadership professor at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, was president of a boutique brand and product research development firm, now called Ravel, when she engaged CultureRx to help her firm transition to ROWE. She said, "It was a shift to go from 'Here's all the work to be done' to 'Here's the outcomes we want.' So, it became very outcomes-based, which is what helped us to deliver in a stronger way. In many companies, if you're so busy doing the work without being as clear on the outcome we need, and how will our client use it — it really helped us to be very focused."

Likewise, focusing on outcomes will enable employees to be more efficient, aligned, and empowered. Michael Montano of Twitter shared, "One of the most important things in terms of making an asynchronous culture work is, how are you creating clarity of purpose and goals in the company? How are you cascading that down so that you're not having this dependency on the centralization of leadership, where you then get the benefits of teams that are distributed, can coordinate amongst themselves, can understand what's important, and go and deliver on it and really focus on leveraging their creativity versus spending their time trying to gain all that in meetings."

Clarify what needs to be synchronous

Distinguish which tasks and activities are better conducted synchronously. These tend to be things like project kick-off meetings to set roles, responsibilities, expectations, and deadlines, as well as client meetings (and potentially prep for these meetings). At my own leadership firm, given the limited time the partners have together, we reserve partner meetings for topics that require more in-depth discussion and debate or involve higher-stakes decisions to be made. Anything that doesn't fall into these categories, such as status updates or straightforward questions on various topics, etc. are posted on the appropriate Slack channel for others to read and respond at their convenience.

In addition, higher-touch activities such as conducting one-on-ones, providing others with coaching, feedback, and mentoring, as well as some onboarding activities, should also be conducted live. And with 65% of people now working remotely feeling less connected to their colleagues, fundamental activities like team building are important to schedule synchronously.

Challenge existing norms and assumptions

A work culture is full of unwritten rules and unexamined assumptions of how, where, and when things get done that often go unquestioned. Newer employees, who are not yet fully indoctrinated into the organization's culture, may be able to more easily observe

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these and reflect these back to the team. Likewise, an outside facilitator can help the team surface, articulate, and challenge these existing rules and assumptions so the team let go of them. This is recommended since the team leader is a key part of the current system and may find it challenging to question elements of the status quo, even if they support working asynchronously.

These unwritten rules may include what is considered an acceptable response time, what topics require a meeting, the standard length of meetings and how those meetings are run, how long people take for lunch (or if they take lunch), by what time people are at their desk working, how available someone is outside of standard work hours, etc. Our often unexamined assumptions are how we make meaning of what happens when people behave outside these norms — that “if I can’t see you working, then you must not be working,” “If I log off at 3 p.m., then I’ll be letting others down if someone needs something,” “she’s working a lot of hours, so she must be getting a lot done” or “he’s not responding as quickly as I’d like, so he must not be that committed.”

Taaffe said about her prior firm, “There was an expectation of what time you got to the office. And honestly, we had to learn to work asynchronously because it was hard. Even those of us who really were strong proponents of this had to let go of certain things. I remember feeling guilty about doing something in the middle of the day, even though I was getting my work done.”

Make clear agreements and hold each other accountable

In discussing new ways of working, team members can conceive of how they’d ideally like to construct their day and still get things done. This will likely be different for many people. Identify dependencies for various workstreams and stakeholder needs. How will these be met? Make clear agreements around several elements, such as the use of various technologies and when these technologies are shut off, acceptable response times, and how urgent issues should be handled, etc. It’s also making agreements around new ways of being, such as, “We don’t judge each other’s commitment by our response times.” Kelly said, “I have a close collaborator who accepted no meetings from 4 to 5 p.m. every day, and she would always get me an answer. But, it was going be from 4 to 5 p.m. And there were very few things that were actually urgent enough that I needed it before 4 to 5 p.m. I knew how to reach her if I needed, but she was attending to, and fully engaging with, her work in the other hours.”

Holding people accountable to these agreements is equally important. This involves calling out what Thompson and Ressler call “sludge.” Sludge consists of all the off-handed comments and questions that work against shifting to the new culture, such as “Ah, I see you’re working bankers’ hours today?” or “Where were you at 3 p.m.? I tried to reach you.” Thompson and Ressler recommend replying to these types of comments with a simple, “Is there something you need?” This quickly refocuses the conversation on the relevant tasks or goals to be accomplished — versus where, when, or how they are

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being accomplished. At the IT firm Kelly and Moen worked with, employees practiced handling sludge using role plays.

Experiment, assess, and adjust

Making the shift to asynchronous work is not a “one-and-done” event, but an iterative process that will likely need adjustments and fine tuning over time to successfully make the change. Anxiety around such a shift is normal but starting as an experiment can help win over people who are more resistant and turn them into promoters, once they experience positive outcomes, both personally and professionally. Start small by experimenting with new behaviors and see what works, what doesn't, and how it feels. You might go food shopping at 2 p.m. or start your workday at 11 a.m. or try working only in the evening if you are a night owl. There will be some people who have an easier time adjusting than others. Taaffe shared that one team member had a particularly hard time breaking out of the 9-to-5 norm, so his teammates challenged him to go see an afternoon movie.

After a month of experimenting with asynchronous work, Taaffe's team reconvened to report back, evaluate their progress, and make necessary adjustments. She said, “You've got to keep coming back to it and assessing how are you doing and figure out how you solve for the pain points.” These included properly anticipating and planning for inputs needed from others on certain projects to move forward with subsequent parts of the work. She said, “Some things we could figure out ahead of time, but some we figured out over time...it just took a little bit of time and then, it was just very energizing.”

Keep an eye on inclusion

Asynchronous work comes with both advantages and challenges with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. On the plus side, Neeley said, “Asynchronous work, and in particular, flexible work where you can get talent from anywhere without asking people to move is incredibly important for the purpose of diversity...We have many more pipelines from which to hire people, and from an equity and inclusion standpoint, people will feel happier when they're not extracted from their home communities, if they can remain there and still be productive at your organizations.”

The task will be for leaders to be thoughtful and intentional with respect to inclusion. Neeley continued by saying, “The challenge is going to be all about making sure that we develop the muscles for inclusive cultures, inclusive leadership of a distributed environment. So how we measure performance, how we coach people, how we ensure that people build networks that help them understand not only the organization, but also how to grow and lead within that system. All of that has to be facilitated, and we just need to be better and stronger managers and leaders to do that.” Creating this

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awareness and offering trainings for managers and leaders on inclusive leadership can help set up the shift to asynchronous work for greater success.

The future of work points to more asynchronous ways of working, with multiple benefits for both employees and organizations. Using the above strategies can help make the shift from the traditional 9-to-5 a smoother and more productive process.

<https://hbr.org/2021/07/breaking-free-from-a-9-to-5-culture>

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