

Wall Street Journal
WORK & FAMILY
May 18, 2006
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Taking Back the Weekend: Companies Help Employees Cut Back on Overwork

The last place most people would look to for help reducing their workload is their employer.

But that's exactly where John L. Williams got help last year cutting back his workday to a manageable length. Overloaded with unplanned phone calls and reports, Mr. Williams, an account executive at Cummins Inc., an engine manufacturer, had been taking work home and toiling as late as 2 a.m. on his laptop.

Luckily for him, Cummins had embarked on a pilot project to eliminate unnecessary work. Now Mr. Williams is getting more core job duties done at the office -- and getting to bed earlier.

At a time when most employers are piling on more work, a small but growing number of companies, including Alcan, Cummins, Eli Lilly, AstraZeneca, Texas Instruments and International Business Machines, are actually taking steps to reduce workloads. While corporate efforts to streamline work aren't new, the latest moves are different in two ways. They are driven by employee dissatisfaction, not budget-cutting. And they have two purposes -- not only increasing productivity, but improving work-life balance.

"Overwork has become the big issue right now," says Brad Harrington, executive director of the nonprofit Boston College Center for Work and Family. Solving the problem forces companies to go deeper than setting up new policies. "You can't create a policy that says, 'No more overwork.' It's too deeply embedded" in how companies operate, Mr. Harrington says. Tackling it requires deeper change.

At Cummins, based in Columbus, Ind., an annual survey of 6,700 employees in 2004 showed a drop in employee satisfaction with workloads, says Janet Dunn, Cummins's director of diversity development. So two Tennessee work teams met last year with WFD Consulting, Newton, Mass.-based consultants, to figure out how to jettison low-value tasks.

Team members began meeting biweekly to identify and cut out redundant work, Ms. Dunn says. They reduced unplanned phone calls and the number of sales-history and analysis reports they had to generate for salespeople, by referring requests to online resources. Customer-help teams also organized to back each other up on service calls, to avoid any one employee's getting backed up with complex jobs. Such changes helped enable Mr. Williams, who works in a pricing unit, and more than 30 others to get more done during the workday, he says. Cummins plans to expand the pilot to other teams.

Similarly, at Alcan, based in Montreal, a 2005 survey of 55,000 employees revealed dissatisfaction with heavy workloads and long hours, says Steven Price, a human-resources director. In a series of steps, a half-dozen top executives got coaching on how to be better role models, partly by speaking up about their own challenges managing workload. Executives began encouraging employees “to push back and say, ‘I’m not working on weekends as much,’” Mr. Price says. In Alcan’s finance unit, employees were discouraged from working Sundays. The mandate was one of many improvements in processes that saved thousands of hours of work annually.

Elsewhere, some CEOs are calling on employees to speak up about scut work. At auto retailer CarMax, Richmond, Va., CEO Austin Ligon begins some monthly meetings by asking, “What are we doing that is stupid, unnecessary or doesn’t make sense?” The question draws a laugh and gets employees engaged in improving their workplace, he says. A Naperville, Ill., general manager, for example, created a new time-saving process for parking cars.

Boston Consulting Group logs consultants’ total hours on a weekly “Red Zone Report”; any employee who works too long falls into the Red Zone, raising questions among managers, says Jeanie Duck, a senior vice president: “Are they working more than they should? Is it something they’re choosing to do, or is it being forced on them?” In some cases, consultants get help prioritizing work. Also, managers who burn out their teams hurt their chances of promotion, Ms. Duck says.

After a 2004 survey of 42,000 IBM employees revealed that four in 10 thought 15% of their job duties were unnecessary, IBM developed a Web-based tool for managers to use in routing out low-value work. The goal: to eke out “more time for customers and, as a byproduct, more time for our families and our personal life,” says J.T. Childs, IBM’s vice president, global diversity.

Vincent Cozzolino, an IBM vice president in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., knew he had a problem because overtime costs were rising and people in his 600-employee unit had begun to “push back” when asked to do new projects. The intranet program surveyed employees about low-value work, asked why they did it, then presented managers with the data. When employees said on the survey, “I’m doing it because Vinnie wants me to do it,’ ... I’d have to ask myself, ‘Do I really want this or don’t I?’” Mr. Cozzolino says.

He and his managers trimmed meeting requirements, bought new equipment to reduce time spent quality-checking computer parts, and consolidated two labs, saving hundreds of work hours, he says. IBM has expanded the program in the U.S. and six other countries.

IBM technician Lou Colomban has benefited. In the past, he routinely told his wife he wouldn’t be home until after dinner or much later on days he had to send out server updates for corporate customers. The tedious process consumed much of his workday, while his regular tasks backed up. As part of the work-reduction program, Mr. Colomban suggested automating the process. The updates now run faster and smoother. “It’s been a stress-reducer,” he says.