Making Time Off Predictable–& Required

Professional services firms typically have a 24/7 on-call culture. But one management consulting company is getting better results by experimenting with downtime – even in this economy. | **Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter**

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PEOPLE IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES (consultants, investment bankers, accountants, lawyers, IT, and the like) simply expect to make work their top priority. They believe an "always on" ethic is essential if they and their firms are to succeed in the global marketplace. Just look at the numbers: According to a survey we conducted last year, 94% of 1,000 such professionals said they put in 50 or more hours a week, with nearly half that group turning in more than 65 hours a week. That doesn't include the 20 to 25 hours a week most of them spend monitoring their BlackBerrys while outside the office. These individuals further say they almost always respond within an hour of receiving a message from a colleague or a client.

Yet our research over the past four years in several North American offices of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) suggests that it is perfectly possible for consultants and other professionals to meet the highest standards of service and still have planned, uninterrupted time off. Indeed, we found that when the assumption that everyone needs to be always available was collectively challenged, not only could individuals take time off, but their work actually benefited. Our experiments with time off resulted in more open dialogue among team members, which is valuable in itself. But the improved communication also sparked new processes that enhanced the teams' ability to work most efficiently and effectively.

Predictable time off is the name we gave to the designated periods of time that consultants were required to take off. This was in addition to time the consultants took off with the natural ebbs and flows of their work. These predictable periods were established at the start of a project and required individuals to be off completely – no checking of e-mail or voicemail. The concept was so foreign that we had to practically force some professionals to take their time off, especially when it coincided with periods of peak work intensity. Eventually, however, the consultants came to enjoy and anticipate having predictable time off, particularly as the benefits for their work became evident.

IDEA IN BRIEF

» People in professional services believe a 24/7 work ethic is essential for getting ahead, and so they work 60-plus hours a week and are slaves to their BlackBerrys.

» The authors' research in several offices of the Boston Consulting Group, however, suggests that consultants and other professionals can meet the highest standards of service and still have planned, uninterrupted time off – whether in good economic times or bad.

» Here's how: Impose a strict mechanism for taking time off, encourage lots of talk about what's working and what isn't, promote experimentation with different ways of working, and ensure top-level support.

After we had conducted more than 10 multi-month time-off experiments at BCG, the effects of the recession became sharply apparent. The time pressures on service professionals proved even greater in this period of collapse – a fact borne out in a survey we recently conducted with an additional 250 individuals across professional services firms: 66% of respondents reported increased pressure in their work life, and 36% reported a significant increase.

When faced with sobering bottom-line effects of the recession, leaders at BCG paused to discuss and reconsider the benefits of implementing predictable time off – and decided to go ahead with this counterintuitive approach to increasing their efficiency and effectiveness. The payoff, they feel, is about far more than individual gains; it's about preserving a strong, engaged pool of talent and, ultimately, cultivating productive work processes for the long term.

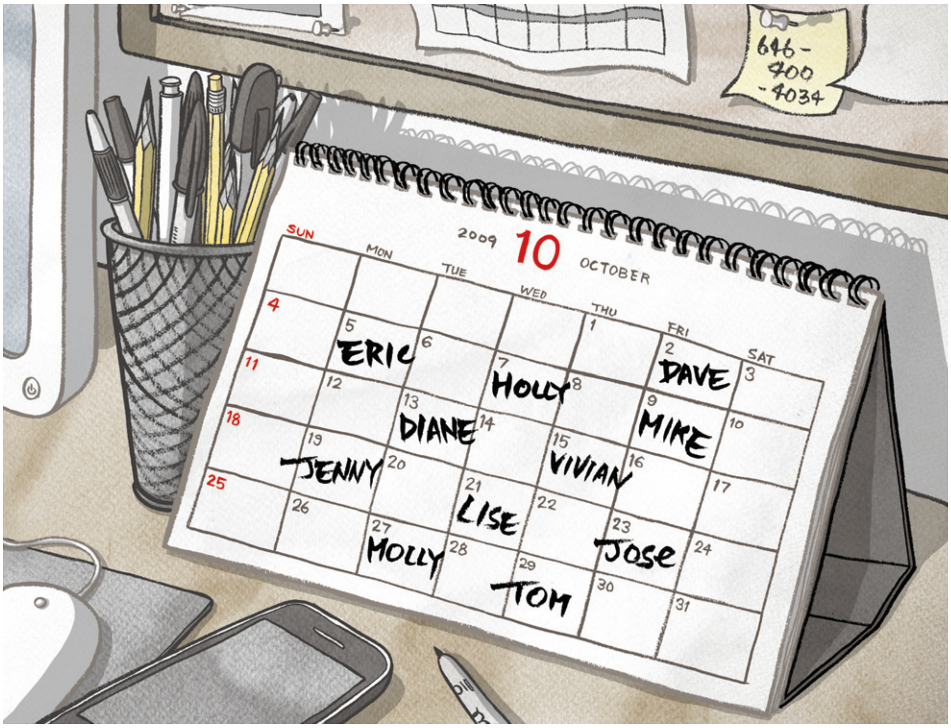
To understand how effective predictable time off can be (in good times and bad), let's look at the experiments we conducted at BCG.

Rethinking the Unthinkable

The demands of consulting projects vary a great deal depending on multiple dimensions, including the scope of work promised, the type of relationship with the client, and the travel required. So in our first experiment, we made sure that our test was rigorous. We deliberately chose a team of four consultants who were working with a new client that BCG very much wanted to cultivate. The project involved a lot of daily interaction with the client, leading the consultants to believe that their presence at the client site four days a week was imperative. We imposed a requirement that everyone on the team take one full day off a week. Since that meant everyone was now working 80%, we added another consultant to the team to ensure that the client would still have the equivalent of four full-time people on the project.

At first, the team resisted the experiment. The partner in charge, who had been very supportive of the basic idea, was suddenly nervous about having to tell her client that each member of her team would be off one day a week. The project manager was also concerned: He was responsible for the team's final output, and he feared that the experiment might affect the quality of the team's work. However, both reluctantly agreed to give the experiment a try. Their reasoning was that since their firm had been hired to help the client improve its work processes (of the sales force, in this case), they could position the experiment as their own attempt to do what they were asking of their client – namely, engage in process improvement. They assured the client that they would call off the experiment if there were any cause for concern. The client was receptive.

This first experiment tested predictable time off at an extreme level because consultants were required to take off a full day, in the middle of the work week. As a partner put it, "Forcing a full day off was like tying your right hand behind your back to teach you to use your left hand. It really helped the team overcome the perception that they had to be on call 24/7." Once we were able to demonstrate that taking full days off (working 80%) was possible, the next challenge was whether people working full time could have predictable time off and still achieve similar benefits for themselves and the organization.



> “My project manager pushed me out of the office to make sure I took the time off, even though it was a busy week.
> **I came back really refreshed.”**

In our second experiment, we required each consultant to take one scheduled night off a week, during which he or she could not work after 6 PM – not even check or respond to e-mails or other messages. (This didn’t mean that consultants were expected to work all other nights; rather, it meant they were to have one scheduled uninterrupted night off every week, no matter what was going on at work.) We again chose a challenging project: This team was working on a postmerger restructuring for a demanding client. The project required on-site interaction with members of the client organization in multiple locations, necessitating a great deal of overnight travel. But this time, we made no change in staffing.

Again, we met with resistance from the consultants, even though the time off in this experiment was outside the client’s normal working hours. The general practice among consultants on the road is that they work very hard while away from home, but then they hope to have a reasonable day on Friday when they are back in the home office, and they want the weekends off. As a project manager summed up the skepticism surrounding the night-off experiment, “What good is a night off going to do? Won’t it just force me to work more on weekends?”

In both experiments, participants felt conflicted between their commitment to the experiment and what they felt they owed both the client and their teammates. They were also concerned that involvement in the experiments wouldn’t reflect well in their performance evaluations. As a consultant confided during the first week, “If you are making promotion decisions, and you look at someone who has been staffed on a project where she is really cranking it out and working long hours, and you compare that to someone who is getting a day off, it is hard to believe you are not going to promote the person who appears to be working harder.”

As a result, consultants involved in the experiment worried that they were putting their careers in jeopardy. Moreover, they either worked and felt guilty, because they were in violation of the experiment, or they didn’t work and felt guilty, because of the stress they thought they were putting on their teammates.

As time passed, their anxiety gradually subsided. Several weeks into the experiment, one consultant effused that his night off was phenomenal. “My project manager pushed me out of the office to make sure I took the time off,” he said, “even though it was a busy week. I came back really refreshed.” Before long, the consultants didn’t need to be pushed into taking a little time for themselves.

In the five months following our initial experiments (which occurred in sequence over the course of a year), 10 more teams began experimenting with taking a night off. At the start of the experiments, participants were asked to rate the following statement: “I feel respected for setting boundaries.” The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the first month, those on the experiment teams gave the statement a 3.7 ranking. In month five, they rated it at 5.2 – demonstrating their slowly rising level of faith in the concept.

At the same time, 100% of people working on an experiment team and 76% of people in the rest of the office wanted their next case to be on a team experimenting with predictable time off. Compared with those not participating in the experiments, people on time-off teams reported higher job satisfaction, greater likelihood that they could imagine a long-term career at the firm, and higher satisfaction with work/life balance. (See the exhibit "Early Signs of Progress.")

Beyond the intended work/life benefits, the participants reported more open communication, increased learning and development, and a better product delivered to the client. "It's a way to open up a conversation that everyone on your team wants to have, which is 'How can we work smarter? How can we work together more often, and how can we make sure we deliver without sacrificing work/life balance?'" one project manager told us. "The experiment not only allows you to talk more, but it forces you to do so weekly. In the end, the process creates efficiencies and promotes work/life balance – without sacrificing anything on the client side."

Let's look now at what enabled our experiments to deliver these benefits.

Lesson 1:
Impose a strict time-off mechanism

To get hard-driving consultants to agree to take time off during an assignment – not just when there happened to be a break in the work but at predictable times – we had to establish a mechanism that made it clear to everyone how time off must be taken: either a full day or a full night each week for everyone on the team, which was scheduled at the start of each project. All the team members knew for any given week which day or night they were to take off. Some teams opted to have each person take the same day or night each week (for instance, one team member had Monday, another had Tuesday, and so on). Other teams tried alternating the particular day or night off for each team member. On all teams, people spread out scheduled times off across the week to ensure coverage at work. Once the schedule was set, individuals were encouraged to make changes to accommodate personal events if they could do so without causing too much trouble for the team.

Admittedly, this arrangement didn't satisfy everyone. Some people in the day-off experiment, for example, would have preferred to come in late every morning instead. Most people would have preferred additional time off at home to a free night on the road.

Ultimately, the goal is for people to be able to take the type of time off that best suits their personal needs. To get to that point, however, the feasibility of taking time off and the potential value of time off must first be recognized. Initially, everyone must take off the same type of time. Otherwise inequity (or the perception of it) can creep in. For example, is an hour in the morning the same as an hour at night? Is a Friday night off the same as a weeknight off? It quickly becomes quite complicated to assess the relative value of time off when it is freely selected. If everyone takes the same type of time off, people's fears that they aren't pulling their weight will be reduced. Team members will also be more attuned to protecting their own and their teammates' time off. And when the time off takes the same form for everyone, it's easier to track.

In the end, the people in our experiments generally managed to take their time off. In the first experiment, 90% of days off were taken in the designated week and 68% were taken on the scheduled day (or another day when the change was solely for personal reasons). In the second experiment, 98% of nights were taken off in the designated week, and 86% were taken on the night scheduled (unless the change was solely for personal reasons). As a result, people came to recognize that the 24/7 mentality could be broken and began to appreciate the value of doing so.

Lesson 2:
Build dialogue into the process

In each of our experiments, we used explicit tactics to generate conversation around the time-off goals in particular, and around work processes more generally. The team began with a kickoff meeting in which the partners on the team emphasized the importance both of achieving the time-off goals and of team members' being open to and engaged in experimentation around work processes. After that, the teams had a weekly check-in to discuss how the experiment was going.

The check-ins consisted of three parts. One part involved a review of the calendar. Team members would discuss whether they had taken their time off as planned during the past week, and whether they expected to be able to take it in the week ahead. When people hadn't taken their time off or thought they wouldn't be able to, team members questioned one another about what was going wrong and how to improve the situation.

The second part involved a pulse check, where each person was asked to rate and talk about four questions: (1) How are you feeling? (2) How much value are you delivering to the client? (3) How satisfied are you with your learning? and (4) Is the current operating model sustainable for you throughout the project?

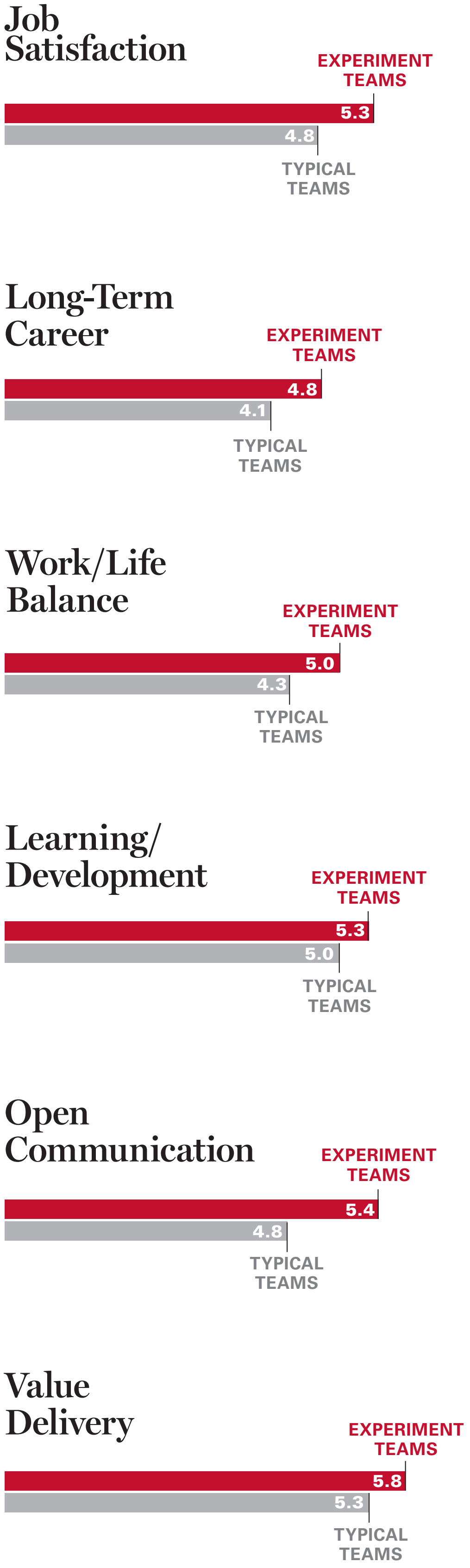
The third part of the check-ins was a discussion of "tummy rumbles" – items people submitted anonymously in advance, comprising anything that was making them uncomfortable.

The weekly check-ins resulted in a far greater emphasis on how work was being done than on what work was being done. As a project manager noted, "In a typical team meeting, you'd probably spend 95% of the time discussing the content, and maybe only 5% of the time actually looking at the process. Because of the experiment, we probably spent more like 30% of the time talking about the process, and 70% of the time on the content."

People were initially skeptical about spending so much time looking at work processes. But in the end, most teams found it helpful. The check-ins not only allowed teams to engage in explicit conversations about achieving their time-off goals, but they also sparked valuable discussions – involving the whole team – about priorities, expectations, and problems people were facing. By contrast, in typical, nonexperiment teams, consultants generally start talking about problems only when they are already overstressed and less able to think rationally or do much about them.

Our experiments emphasized open dialogue around a particular collective but personal goal: enabling individuals' time off. Because conversation was started on a focused, concrete topic, individuals could raise a small issue, see how it was received, and then choose whether to say more depending on the response. In the process, they gradually built trust and respect, enabling them to feel comfortable raising an increasingly wide range of topics. Team members learned about one another in more holistic ways, and they came to appreciate one another as human beings as well as business colleagues. And, in the end, they became

Early Signs of Progress



AFTER ONLY five months, consultants on teams experimenting with predictable time off perceived their work situations more favorably – on every dimension – than peers on nonexperiment teams. We asked consultants once a month to rate statements about their work situation on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). We saw statistically significant improvements across the board in the scores of teams that were scheduling regular days or nights off, demonstrating their growing faith in the time-off concept.

all the more willing to speak up about their issues, both work-related and personal.

The discussions revealed not only small issues but large potential problems. "We were doing a major transformation piece, and the reaction from the client was critical for making it work," recalled one partner. "During an experiment check-in, consultants started raising concerns about the client's level of buy-in to our work. We came to realize that this was not an issue with just one member of the client organization; it was a pattern that each of the consultants was seeing in their contacts with the client." The team changed its approach accordingly, redoubling its efforts to get the client's buy-in.

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Lesson 3:
Encourage experimentation

Beyond creating a safe space for open dialogue, we found it imperative to encourage people to experiment with new work processes. Ways of working that would have previously gone unquestioned were suddenly fair game for reconsideration.

One core process that was called into question had to do with how team members' work was allocated. In management consulting, projects are typically done by teams, but the team leader usually divides the work among the team members, who have personal responsibility for their part of the project. To achieve the time-off goals – especially for a full day off when consultants had daily interactions with the client – this fundamental assumption about how work was done had to be revisited. New ways of "teaming," where individuals more closely shared responsibility for work and, therefore, could more easily cover for each other, were needed.

Various teams experimented with different ways of teaming. For instance, those in the day-off-a-week experiment tried assigning primary responsibility for each piece of work to one person but also allocating secondary responsibility to another one or two people. To ensure effective handoffs and hand-backs, this team instituted a team blog. Each evening, every member would post an account of the progress made on his or her own work – for example, progress made while covering for someone else, or even hallway conversations with clients that might have an impact on the work in general. This nightly report helped to break down the silos that usually kept people focused on their own work, and it elevated the discourse of the team as a whole.

Teaming let consultants share expected spikes in the workload and pitch in when demands arose unexpectedly. It also increased the exchange of knowledge and support among team members. "Think of all the times on cases you would love to grab another consultant for four hours, but you can't because they're so busy," one consultant explained. "Now people have more time for it because cooperation is built in." Consultants learned a great deal from one another as a result.

The work became better integrated because people were interacting better and more often. Inevitably, this led to improvements in the quality of work delivered – benefits that were certainly noticed by clients. As one noted, "This new way of working [gave BCG] a big advantage…[the consultants] were much more informed about what was going on with other modules, and people were more informed about the whole project."

Lesson 4:
Insist on leadership support

Individuals won't willingly engage in these experiments unless they are able to suspend their disbelief. For that to happen, people need to know that there is value in trying; that they will be respected for participating; and that they will bear some responsibility for the success or failure of the experiment.

One of the reasons we had such a high level of engagement from the consultants in our experiments was strong support from the senior partners. They set the tone, making it OK to talk about issues as they related to work and personal life.

Such legitimization, of course, required more than a few statements from the top brass. BCG's partners and project managers needed to model the desired openness. For instance, the partners were encouraged to be more transparent when they were taking personal time. "It was helpful to know that the reason the partner missed a meeting was that he was taking his daughter on a college tour," one consultant noted. "That helped me see that these issues are important to him." Another consultant added that at a kickoff meeting, the senior partner said that work was very important to him but not the most important thing in his life, and he didn't want to have to be embarrassed to say so. The consultant reported, "I had never heard a partner talk like that before. My work is really important to me, too, but it is not the most important thing in my life. [His openness] made me comfortable to admit that."

Partners were required to attend the kickoff and weekly check-in meetings. It's often hard for a partner to prioritize spending time with the team when other important things, such as client meetings, are being postponed. But both the partners and the teams appreciated the increased involvement. As one partner put it, "A lot of these things, communicating with our teams, actually attending the team meetings – it's not that complicated, but it's easy to let them slide if you're not focused on them." Another partner added that the time-off experiments and the new processes brought him "closer to the content of the case than I've been in years."

To help the leadership team make these adjustments, we acted as facilitators during the first two experiments. We helped the partners understand the signals they were sending and encouraged them to support the experiments in both word and deed. We attended the weekly check-ins and followed up with each team member, to ensure that people were getting the support they needed to take their days or nights off and that team members were communicating openly with each other when issues arose.

During the next 10 time-off experiments, internal consultants at BCG were taken out of client service work to serve as full-time facilitators. They performed the same role we had in earlier experiments, attending weekly meetings, conducting regular check-ins, and prompting team members and BCG leaders to challenge assumptions and try new ways of working.

The Boston office of BCG, where the research originated, is now exploring changes in its formal reward system. It is piloting review forms for junior members of the firm that measure how well they communicate personal commitments and how well they plan and deliver against project needs while maintaining those personal commitments. It has also started to add questions to their upward-feedback forms to measure how well each senior member of the office models having a sustainable career and how well he or she respects the personal commitments of his or her teams.

Such explicit support for the predictable-time-off initiative provides a shield as the teams navigate between the firm's old norms and its new goals. A consultant who perceives unnecessary travel can raise the issue with his project manager by saying, for instance, "In the spirit of the time-off experiments, do we all really need to be on site at the client every day next week?" Once this question might have been seen as a lack of commitment at BCG; now it is safe, even encouraged, to question decisions about how work is done.

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It's important to recognize that our experiments are not about reducing professionals' commitments to their work and clients. We understand that the success of professional services firms depends on hardworking people who value the intensity of the work and are committed to their clients. They relish being in the thick of things, with all the learning and adrenaline buzz that engenders. What professionals don't like is the bad intensity – having no control over their own work and lives, being afraid to ask questions that could help them better focus and prioritize, and generally operating in ways that are inefficient. Still, professionals accept the bad intensity without hesitation, believing it comes with the territory.

This only perpetuates a vicious cycle: Responsiveness breeds the need for more responsiveness. When people are "always on," responsiveness becomes ingrained in the way they work, expected by clients and partners, and even institutionalized in performance metrics. There is no impetus to explore whether the work actually requires 24/7 responsiveness; to the contrary, people just work harder and longer, without considering how they could work better. Yet, what we discovered is that the cycle of 24/7 responsiveness can be broken if people collectively challenge the mind-set. Furthermore, new ways of working can be found that benefit not just individuals but the organization, which gains in quality and efficiency – and, in the long run, experiences higher retention of more of its best people.

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