



Is it worth it?

Examining the prevailing 'always-on' culture in professional services, its impact, and what can be done by individuals and the firm's leadership

A Special Report



Is it worth it? The 'always-on' culture of professional services

I'll never forget the story told to me by a Senior Manager who worked for a global professional services firm.

"Funny thing... When I got home on Friday, my children asked me 'Daddy, which country did you go to this week?' and I said: 'Actually, I haven't been anywhere!!' 'Oh, it's just that we haven't seen you all week.'... I'd been leaving so early in the morning and getting back so late at night, that they thought I'd been away!"

What struck me in particular were the contrasting emotions the Manager displayed when recounting the conversation with his children.

I could see his obvious pride at the level of commitment he had displayed to the firm, and his apparent belief that this anecdote was an impressive (and requisite) display of his devotion to the cause. I had little doubt that he hoped his story would be reported to those higher up the hierarchy by the many people he told.

And yet, I could sense his quiet resignation at the situation in which he found himself and his despair that his work was taking priority over everything, with great cost to him and his young family.

From conversations I have had with those working in professional services firms, I know that many will be able to empathise with the conflicting priorities facing this Manager, torn between the expected devotion to his firm and the emotional commitment to his family.

If you work in professional services, you know that you are usually expected to devote yourself almost entirely – including evenings, weekends and holidays if necessary - to your work and clients. This has been dubbed the 'always-on' culture of professional services and it is not a new phenomenon.

According to a survey carried out over a decade ago by Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter, published [in the Harvard Business Review](#), 94% of 1,000 professionals said they put in 50 or more hours a week, with nearly half that group turning in more than 65 hours a week, not including the 20 to 25 hours a week most of them spent monitoring their phones while outside the office. The individuals surveyed further said they almost always respond within an hour of receiving a message from a colleague or a client.

Many working in professional services firms, particularly Partners and Directors at the top of the hierarchy, would likely argue that it is this relentless focus on clients and service that separates the most successful firms – and individuals - from the rest.

However, living up to the 'always-on' expectation comes at a significant cost to individuals – as our opening story illustrated - and to their firms. For a proportion, the relentless workload is unsustainable. Their level of engagement and satisfaction drops, the quality of their client work falls and eventually they start to look for work in a less pressured environment. We see that proportion rising steadily particularly with the 'Millennial' generation.

Is it worth it?

That's the question we ask you to consider in this Special Report. In the dominant 'always-on' culture of professional services, does the cost/benefits equation make sense?

We look at why the 'always-on' culture continues to dominate in professional services and we further examine the impact the 'always-on' culture has on individuals and their firms. Finally, we suggest ways in which firms and individuals might start to move away from the 'always-on' ethic to a more sustainable and beneficial work culture.



1.

Why the 'always-on' culture
continues to dominate in
professional services



Why the 'always-on' culture continues to dominate in professional services

Sarah Green Carmichael, an Executive Editor at Harvard Business Review [has outlined three key reasons](#) why the 'always-on' culture continues to dominate in professional services firms.

1. Technology and Economic Incentives

Carmichael argues that economic incentives and technologies mean people are never out of the office and available to the firm and clients at all times.

As David Solomon, the global co-head of investment banking at Goldman Sachs, [told The New Yorker in 2014](#):

"Today, technology means that we're all available 24/7. And, because everyone demands instant gratification and instant connectivity, there are no boundaries, no breaks."

This idea of 'no boundaries' was backed up by Linh Le, a Partner at Elia management consultants [who told the BBC in 2016](#):

"At home the workspace can be the kitchen or the bathroom or the bedroom. We shift from a work email to a personal WhatsApp to a Facebook picture to a professional text - all on the same tool... You're at home but you're not at home, and that poses a real threat to relationships."

Economic incentives are another driver. In our conversations with firms, 'activity-driven' metrics – such as the billable hour and utilisation – are still the most common form of performance metric used by professional services firms. These 'activity-driven' performance metrics institutionalise the 'always-on' culture. As long as people are rewarded – often with vast bonuses - for quantity of work over quality of work, they have every incentive to work relentlessly.

[Perlow and Porter argue](#) that a vicious cycle has been created in professional services because responsiveness breeds the need for even 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."

2. Managerial Pressure

We have found the prevailing belief in most professional service firms is that to be successful, you must be entirely devoted to the firm at all times.

[Carmichael describes](#) how, in many professional services firms:

"Managers want employees to put in long days, respond to their emails at all hours, and willingly donate their off-hours — nights, weekends, vacation — without complaining. The underlings in this equation have little control; overwork cascades from the top of the organizational pyramid to the bottom."

When researching her article '[Why Some Men Pretend to Work 80-Hour Weeks](#)', Erin Reid (an associate professor at McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business) worked with a global strategy consulting firm and found the prevailing belief among the workforce was that to be successful required total devotion to the cause:

"Many reported 60- to 80-hour weeks, with little control over when those hours were worked and whether they might have to travel. Work was expected to come ahead of other life responsibilities."

Reid describes how, in many professional services firms, the firm's leadership have an expectation of an 'ideal worker':

"Fully devoted to and available for the job, with no personal responsibilities or interests that interfere with this commitment to work—are widespread."

These ideal workers are put on a pedestal and seen as the standard that everyone else should aspire to reach.

She also found that those people who were unwilling to meet the standards set by 'ideal workers' were marginalised and penalised by the consulting firm's leadership.

3. Psychological Needs

Finally, Carmichael outlines how people have their own psychological drivers that push them to work long hours.

These include positive motivators such as enjoyment, pride, reward, a sense of duty and ambition but also negative drivers such as anxiety, greed and guilt.



2.

The costs of the 'always-on'
culture to individuals and
firms and important caveats



The costs of the 'always-on' culture to individuals and firms

Managerial pressure, technology, economic incentives and psychological drivers: it's easy to understand why the 'always-on' culture continues to dominate in professional services. As Sarah Green Carmichael suggests, when these factors are combined they "*produce a cocktail that is simply too intoxicating to overcome.*"

What isn't so easy to understand is how leaders of professional services firms can continue to turn a blind eye to the very real costs to their people and their firms created by this culture of overwork.

At an individual level, professional services employees often tell us they feel 'trapped' in a relentless cycle of responsiveness. They are unable to see a long-term future at their firm where the expectation of working long hours appears unrelenting and unsustainable. They become disengaged and dissatisfied.

Many suffer from '[Sunday Night Blues](#)' and are left with the heart-wrenching choice of deciding between their family and personal life or their work commitments.

Eventually the expectations of work can lead to stress, burn-out, breakdowns in personal relationships, alcohol dependence and heart disease. This quote [from an article by Erin Read](#) neatly - and grimly - illustrates this point:

They [professional services employees interviewed] complained to me of children crying when they missed their soccer games, of poor health and substance addictions caused by how they worked, and of a general sense of feeling "overworked and underfamilied."

[Writing in The New Yorker](#), James Surowiecki highlights research carried out on two investment banks by Alexandra Michel, herself a former Goldman Sachs associate. Michel found that the effects of overwork are cumulative and that:

"Bankers started to break down in their fourth year on the job. They suffered from depression, anxiety, and immune-system problems, and performance reviews showed that their creativity and judgment declined."

Even for the most hard-hearted of professional services leaders, apathetic to the plight of their staff members, surely the potential commercial costs of the prevailing 'always-on' culture cannot be ignored?

Take the costs associated with replacing lost talent, for example. When employees are disengaged and unhappy, staff turnover is likely to rise, along with the costs associated with replacing this talent.

To compound the issue, firms will continue to lose talent if fewer choose to return to work from taking a career break. Many are still put off returning by the work expectations to which they will return and the sacrifices they will have to make to their home life in order to keep up, neatly illustrated [in a recent interview with the BBC](#), by a senior HR Director who had returned to work after having a child:

"Sadly, the year I returned took the shine off for me... Gradually, it became obvious that my employers still needed a lot of face-time. I could see that I was going to be left out of key meetings and opportunities by rigidly sticking to the hours I was paid for... I accepted meetings and calls on my days off. I dialled into calls while my baby was asleep, praying she wouldn't wake up. I worked in any snatched moments I could find. No matter what your hours, there was an expectation that if you wanted to progress, you had to be 'always on'. It just wasn't sustainable."

As the 'always-on' culture proliferates, firms could soon see the costs associated with [presenteeism](#) (productivity loss, poor health, exhaustion) become as high as those associated with absenteeism.

Through our own experience we have also seen how the prevailing 'always-on' culture demotes other essential business activities - such as professional development - down the order of priority to the detriment of the organisation.

[Research has found](#) that being relentlessly connected to work impacts cognitive performance, interpersonal communication, decision making and an individual's ability to manage their emotional reactions – all skills that are critical in professional services.

[As Surowiecki points out:](#)

"Among industrial workers, overtime raises the rate of mistakes and safety mishaps; likewise, for knowledge workers fatigue and sleep-deprivation make it hard to perform at a high cognitive level."

If professional services workers cannot perform at a high cognitive level, it is almost inevitable that this will affect the quality of client work. The question for leaders of professional services firms is, at the point the client states his dissatisfaction, do you simply blame the underperforming staff member or question the wider 'always-on' culture?

Important caveats

There are some important caveats that we should mention here in case you think we are completely out of touch or naïve about the reality of working in a professional services environment.

Firstly, of course there will always be work deadlines and there will always be peak periods or crises when you have to work long hours. However, this should be the exception and not the rule. Too often in professional services, the reverse is true.

Secondly, we recognise that working long hours isn't always a path to disengagement. [As author Ron Friedman points out:](#)

"Anyone who has experienced sitting in an empty office on a Saturday morning can attest, freely choosing to work on the weekend is a completely different psychological experience than being expected to do so."

Again, we would argue that weekend working should be the exception and not the expectation.

Also, as we noted before, there are many people in professional services who enjoy working hard, who relish the adrenaline buzz of working at a furious pace and travelling around the world meeting clients. There is nothing wrong with this, except as we have shown, when it becomes the standard that everyone is expected to follow.

Finally, we also recognise that there are many consultants and professional advisors who are happy to work long hours during the week, particularly when they are away from home at a client's site or in a hotel room, as this enables them to finish slightly earlier on a Friday or to enjoy a weekend without working.



3.

What can individuals and their firms do to mitigate the 'always-on' culture?



What can individuals and their firms do to mitigate the 'always-on' culture?

There is little doubt that the 'always-on' culture of professional services comes at a high cost for both individuals and their firms. From research and our own experience, we outline four strategies below that are available to professional services firms and their staff members to mitigate the effects.

Survival Strategies

1. Require consultants to take planned/predictable time off during a project

Leslie Perlow and Jessica Porter spent four years working with the North American office of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and based on their research, they found favourable results, even within a traditional consulting firm that might have favoured the status quo:

"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."

The full article "Making Time Off Predictable—and Required" with steps for other consulting and professional services firms to follow can be found [here](#).

2. Reconsider your firm's activity-driven performance metrics

Activity-driven metrics – utilisation and the billable hour - are still the dominant measures of productivity and performance in most professional services firms, even though they don't necessarily have any connection to what individuals actually achieve for the firm or the client.

However, one thing these 'activity-driven' metrics of performance do achieve is to institutionalise the 'always-on' culture of professional services.

Where a consultant's performance and subsequent career progression appear to be directly related to their level of output (rather than outcomes), it is little wonder that a culture of long-hours and overwork results. If your firm's performance metrics continue to reward effort over effectiveness, there is no chance that the unrelenting cycle of responsiveness will end.

That's why we have previously argued that [it's time for firms to slaughter the sacred cow of billable hours](#) and [why focusing on value is now the only option](#) for firms. Ultimately, we believe that [firms need to define their performance metrics or they will inevitably define them](#) - and not in a good way.

3. Professionals can either pass 'under-the-radar' or ask for help

In her work with a global strategy consulting firm, Erin Reid discovered that there were two strategies adopted by consultants for coping with the firm's 'always on' expectations.

The first strategy was for a consultant to find unobtrusive, 'under-the-radar' ways to alter the structure of their work such that they could work predictable schedules in the 50 to 60-hour range. Reid defined this underhand strategy as 'Passing' because employees able to maintain this pretence:

"Were able to work far less than those who fully devoted themselves to work and had greater control over when and where those hours were worked yet were able to 'pass' as ideal workers, evading penalties for their noncompliance."

However, as Reid points out:

"Passing is not a good strategy for the organization as a whole: not only does it involve an element of deception between colleagues, bosses, and subordinates, it also perpetuates the myth that those who are successful are also all wholly devoted to work."

The second option for a consultant was to ask for the firm's help in reducing their work hours. Regrettably – but perhaps not surprisingly - it was these consultants who were marginalised and penalised by the firm.

Thus, it appears that, perversely, the best strategy available to consultants is to 'appear' to do more work than you actually do by staying under the radar or 'passing'. We would advise professional services leaders – especially those working in consulting - to [read the full article here](#).

4. Break the 'failure to disconnect' habit using detachment strategies

In his article "[Working Too Hard Makes Leading More Difficult](#)", Ron Friedman suggests that the reason most fail to escape the 'always-on' cycle is they start off with goals that are too ambitious and are therefore unable to sustain a change in their behaviour.

Friedman suggests finding one modest change you feel comfortable implementing such as: leaving your smartphone in another room when you get home (so you're not tempted to respond to emails), programming the emails you send in the evening to arrive first thing in the morning so that you're not dragged into an email exchange through the night or finding an activity/hobby that enables you to reframe your time away from the office in terms of gain instead of loss.

Firms can also adopt strategies to combat technology overload and help their employees to disconnect. Many readers will be familiar with German vehicle-maker Daimler who set up an optional service for their employees [to have all new emails automatically deleted](#) while they were away on holiday, rather than send an automatic out-of-office reply.

In 2012, [Atos CEO Thierry Breton announced plans to ban all internal email](#) after a "Wellbeing at Work" program found that employees spent 15 to 20 hours a week answering and deleting emails. In January 2017, French authorities launched the 'right to disconnect' law to give employees the legal right to avoid work emails outside working hours.



4.

Challenging the 'always-on'
culture – lead from the front



Challenging the 'always-on' culture – lead from the front

The first four suggestions we have outlined above are strategies – tangible rules or steps that firms and individuals can take to mitigate the effects of the 'always-on' culture. Now we suggest ways in which firms, and in particular the leaders of firms, can start to change the prevailing 'always-on' culture of professional services.

1. Rebalance the client relationship

One often unspoken option available to professional services firms is to rebalance the client relationship and to stop treating the "client as king". [We have written a separate Point of View article about it here.](#)

2. Leaders need to set the example and change their ways of working

Many of our clients will tell you that we are unwavering in our belief that the only way people will change their behaviours is if the new ways of working are modelled and shared by the firm's leadership.

Unfortunately, when it comes the 'always-on' culture, the reality in many professional services firms is that leaders are not motivated to change their ways of working. And if the firm's leadership, are not inclined to stop working in the way they have always done, why should anyone else?

The root of the problem is neatly summarised by Ron Friedman and Erin Reid. [Friedman describes how:](#)

"When you're first starting out, working evenings and weekends gets you noticed. It is what differentiates you from less motivated colleagues, yielding early recognition and promotions. In this way, hard work becomes ingrained as part of your identity."

Similarly, [Reid argues:](#)

"Leaders of organizations, who are already invested in how things work, and who themselves likely made many personal sacrifices to advance, may have trouble accepting the possibility that there might be another way to work."

To challenge the 'always-on' culture of professional services will involve Partners and Directors actively changing the way they have always worked and, in a sense, accepting that the way they have worked – or sacrificed – in the past, is not sustainable.

This won't be easy for many leaders to accept. As James Surowiecki argues:

"Habit, is powerful: things are done a certain way because that's how they've been done before, and because that's the way the people in charge were trained...and "I went through it, so you should" is a difficult impulse to resist."

In a sense, we believe that many leaders in professional services firms are guided by the [sunk cost fallacy](#). They have sacrificed so much to get to where they are, they are unwilling to accept that there might be a better way to work. People guided by the 'sunk cost fallacy' would rather continue to work in the way they've always done – even if the costs are substantial - because they want to "avoid feelings of regret" that they may have got it wrong themselves.

Until leaders accept that there might be another way to work, the 'always -on' culture is very unlikely to change. However, some Partners have started to change their behaviour. [In a recent LinkedIn status update](#), a Senior Manager at PwC showed how a Partner for whom he worked had changed her email signature to:

"At PwC we work flexibly - so whilst it suits me to email now, I do not expect a response or action outside of your own working hours."

On a similar note, we believe that leaders of professional services firms need to recognise that the problem might be the culture rather than the individuals who cannot meet the demands of the culture.

By way of illustration, in a recent conversation, a senior well-respected Managing Partner was lamenting the fact that they were losing many good junior staff members and he couldn't understand why because they were paid very well, in a high-status firm, with good partnership prospects:

"The problem is, the younger generation are just not willing to subscribe to our working culture which has suited us very well for many years."

As the quote shows, leaders of firms are still more likely to blame the individuals rather than the culture.

There's one final thing for leaders to consider: Could their attitudes towards working eventually create an existential crisis for the industry?

As anecdotes spread about the work expectations found in certain professional services firms, leaders need to ask whether the industry will remain attractive to talented individuals who might be less willing to make the sacrifices they have seen made by the firm's leaders?



5.

Is it worth it? Is the 'always-on' culture worth the cost to firms and their people?



Is it worth it?

At the beginning of this report we asked, is it worth it? Is the dominant 'always-on' culture of professional services worth the cost to both the firm and its people?

We would suggest the answer has to be no.

Despite all of the negative impacts on individuals and their firms, **there is no empirical evidence that suggests any benefits of 'always-on' culture.**

Research regularly shows that working long hours, with little time off, under high levels of stress with a lack of sleep actually leads to more mistakes, inefficiency, lower productivity and lower quality of work.

[This excellent article](#) by Sarah Green Carmichael has a neat summary of the evidence to back this up and categorically states:

"The story of overwork is literally a story of diminishing returns: keep overworking, and you'll progressively work more stupidly on tasks that are increasingly meaningless."

There are options available to firms to mitigate the effects of the 'always-on' culture but, ultimately, to challenge the prevailing overwork culture will require Partners and Directors to change the way they behave, set the example, mandate the desired behaviours and new ways of working. We are well aware that this may be difficult but we challenge leaders of firms to accept that being 'always-on' really isn't worth it and to change their behaviours accordingly.

We believe that professional services firms who are able to adapt their culture will find that they have a more engaged, committed, productive and satisfied workforce. They will have more freedom to undertake crucial professional development and business development. They will have the pick of top talent in the industry and critically, rather than disappointing clients, they will produce better work of greater value.