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EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

## Face Time: The New Assembly Line

**In this era of the "knowledge worker," why do so many managers still insist on long office hours?**

Back in the day, Henry Ford put out some fine automobiles and, while he was at it, revolutionized the workplace: He perfected the assembly line, which required workers to arrive at a designated time and work together in a complex, multitask operation. Good going, Henry!

A century later, sophisticated information technologies have given rise to the "knowledge worker" -- a person whose chief contribution to a company is intellectual. In Ford's time, a great day on the assembly line occurred when employees worked *sans* mistakes and accidents. In 2005, a good day is when a brilliant idea comes to mind that will help an organization leap ahead.

It's wonderful, slippery stuff, this knowledge work. Its tools are facile minds that think and brainstorm nonstop -- morning, evening, and suppertime, on the job or off. So, why do we so often manage knowledge workers as though they were assembly line folk?

**CHAINED TO A DESK.** Why do we insist on what, in the current vernacular, is known as "face time"? I define it as the love some managers have for the sight of workers sitting dutifully at their desks hour after hour. Face time made perfect sense for factory workers, who literally had to stay on the line to do their jobs. But today, many of the people who are encouraged, prodded, and shamed into staying at the office from sunup to sundown could work -- probably more productively -- from almost anywhere.

Why? Because the assembly line of ideas chugs on night and day. Knowledge work is 24/7/365, and proceeds whether any one worker is well or unwell, present or absent, alive or dead. In fact, one of the challenges of working in the knowledge economy is the difficulty of taking a vacation. You miss a couple of weeks of work, and you face catch-up frenzy upon return.

So, to hold knowledge workers to the same face-time requirements that Henry Ford used defies common sense. Although companies can use business results to evaluate sales managers, marketing gurus, telecommunications engineers, financial analysts, and most other office types, managers still love to ride herd on their work hours, too. And not just their work hours: Face-time addicts fixate on in-the-office work hours specifically. We all know that our employees jump back on their PCs after dinner at home, but somehow that doesn't count.

It's as though managers say to themselves: "Now that Fran is in charge of the product launch, the plan should be in great shape. Fran has a terrific track record and excellent relationships in the industry. Our weekly one-on-one will keep me up to date on her progress. She's also great about cc:ing me on correspondence with our partners. But hey -- if I can see her in the office every day from 6 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., I'll feel even better about how her project is going."

**A WOMAN'S PLACE.** See? There's very little logic behind face-time addiction. For instance, who knows what you're really up to when your ear is glued to your phone? You could be tracking stock prices or talking to your bookie or wedding caterer. You could be doing any number of things. But, by gum, if your face is visible and your butt is in the chair, whatever you're doing must be work.

Face time for managers has turned into a crutch. It has less to do with managing people well than with making the boss feel better. Even when managers know that people are burned out, sick of one another's company, and grievously in need of a walk around the block -- yo, they still insist on that face time.

I have a two-and-a-half-year-old son. He drinks Mommy's milk, even though he has been eating table food for a long time. I'll go out of town for a week, and he'll be the first one to greet me when I return, looking for a cuddle and a quick nursing session to reassure him that he's still my baby. My husband says: "I can't imagine he's getting much milk, but it makes him

feel better."

It's the same deal with corporate managers who need to keep employees in the office until all hours: There's not much milk there, but it makes them feel better.

**ABSURDITY PREVAILS.** Employees buy into the face-time addiction, too. I remember saying to my boyfriend before we were married: "Pick me up at my office around 1:30." I meant 1:30 a.m. We lived in Chicago, so there were plenty of places to eat at that hour. I loved my job, for sure. But I also loved being an obsessed worker bee and essential to the company's success. Having kids knocked that fixation out of me right quick. But many people aren't so lucky. They go on working ungodly hours right up until retirement. And this is unfortunate, for three reasons:

One, it's unhealthy. Open the wellness section of any newspaper to read about what workplace stress is doing to Americans, and to the cost of health care.

Two, it reinforces the obviously disturbed notion that face time is what counts, even more than business results. It strengthens the absurd idea that more hours in the office will make the business run better.

Three, an unholy alliance of face-time-obsessed managers and face-time-addicted employees will create an environment where any balanced person will feel ostracized.

You think I'm exaggerating? In the booming 1990s, I worked for a fast-growing technology company, where a macho work ethic reigned supreme. The lengths to which workers would go to prove their loyalty struck me as almost sad.

**EXTREME FACE TIME.** One evening, I watched a young man meet the Chinese restaurant delivery person at the side entrance. He returned to his office, opened the container, stuck a fork in the chicken chow mein, turned up his desk radio, and arranged his jacket over the back of his chair. Then, leaving his light on, the dinner on his desk, and his office door ajar, he went to his car.

A carton of food wasted! Well, not in his mind: He had bought himself an extra hour or two of face time, because if a higher-up walked by that open door he'd be likely to think the employee was still working (just at the copier or in the men's room). I wanted to write BUSTED on the plastic fork, but that would have been cruel, and this person was already in a bad way: When an organization's culture goes gaga over face time, everyone suffers.

Am I anti-face time, then? No way. I think teamwork is essential, and time together as a group makes for a wonderful way to move ideas forward quickly. I just don't think it's an everyday essential, like Vitamin C or calcium. Many companies balance face-time requirements and human requirements with something called core hours. They'll say: "We all have obligations outside of work, but we also need to see one another for some period every day. So let's all agree to be in the office from 10 to 3 Monday through Friday, while putting in a full week and getting lots of great stuff done."

**CUT THE CORD.** Core hours are the ticket -- as long as you don't establish them and then start quizzing people about where they were off to at 4:15 last Thursday.

It can be hard, as a manager, to give up the face-time nipple. But you can do it. You gave up your favorite blankie, didn't you? And like most of the rest of America, you've also left behind the assembly line.

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Do you have any great business leadership tips to share with BusinessWeek Online's readers? Send them to [Liz Ryan](#), an at-work expert, speaker, and writer, and CEO of online networking organization [WorldWIT](#)

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