

# Employers step in to prevent worker burnout

December 3 2013, by Danica Kirka

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In this Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013 photo, Quirky CEO Ben Kaufman, center, oversees his employees at company headquarters, in New York. Kaufman created a staff "blackout week" once each quarter in which no one besides the company's customer service representatives area allowed to work. The company shepherds inventions to the marketplace. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

Volkswagen turns off some employees' email 30 minutes after their shifts end. Goldman Sachs is urging junior staff to take weekends off. BMW is planning new rules that will keep workers from being contacted after hours.

This surge in corporate beneficence isn't an indication that employers are becoming kinder and gentler: It's about the bottom line. After years in which the ease of instant communication via e-mail and smartphones allowed bosses to place greater and greater demands on white-collar workers, some companies are beginning to set limits, recognizing that successful [employees](#) must be able to escape from work.

"Industry is now responding," said Cary Cooper, a professor of organizational psychology and health at Lancaster University, who says the imperative to be constantly reachable by iPhone or tablet is taking a toll on the work delivered at the office. "Employees are turning up, but they're not delivering anything."

After seeing colleagues lose their jobs during the Great Recession, workers are more inclined to come in to work, even when sick, surveys show. After hours, physical presence is replaced by the next best thing—a virtual one. Many employees fear switching off, instead deciding to work on vacation, during dinner and in bed with the help of smart phones, laptops and tablet computers.

People also have more data than ever to process—whether they ask for it or not. Information overload cost American businesses just under \$1 trillion in employee time lost to needless emails and other distractions in 2010, according to Jonathan Spira, chief analyst of the New York research firm, Basex.

The cost of replacing employees who leave in search of better work conditions is also a concern. A study from the Center for American Progress put the cost of turnover at just over a fifth of the employee's salary for people making up to \$75,000 a year. That goes up exponentially for top managers, with turnover costs as high as 213 percent of salary for very highly paid positions.

After worrying about trimming staff numbers during the recession, employers are focusing on how to keep those who are left from burning out.



In this Nov. 26, 2013 photo, Shirin Majid plays with her daughter, Ella Townsend, 9 months, at their home in New York. Majid, who works for the Internet startup Quirky, is home during her company's quarterly "blackout" week break from work. Quirky's CEO, Ben Kaufman, makes the whole company stop working and take breaks so they don't burn out. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

## **JOB SAFETY**

One strategy, which Goldman Sachs has been trying, is to make people feel less at risk in their jobs. That's not easy in most companies, much less so in investment banking, infamous for its competitive environment and grueling work hours.

To keep junior analysts from burning out in the attempt to prove their worth, the bank has decided to start hiring first-year analysts as permanent employees, instead of taking them on as contract workers. It is also encouraging them to not work weekends.

"The goal is for our analysts to want to be here for a career," said David Solomon, global head of investment banking at Goldman Sachs. "This is a marathon, not a sprint."

Work conditions in banking came under scrutiny after an intern at Bank of America Merrill Lynch in London died from an epileptic seizure that may have been brought on by fatigue. The case prompted the bank to review work conditions for junior employees.



In this Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013 photo, Quirky CEO Ben Kaufman looks at a wine and bottle opener his company markets, in New York. Kaufman created an employee "blackout week" once each quarter in which no one besides the company's customer service representatives area allowed to work. The startup

company shepherds inventions to the marketplace. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

But it isn't just the junior staff. Last month, Hector Sants, a senior executive brought in to help London-based Barclays bank overcome a costly scandal, resigned after a leave of absence due to stress and exhaustion. The chief executive officer of Lloyds Bank, Antonio Horta Osorio, took time out in 2011. The CEO AkzoNobel, a Dutch paint and coatings company, did the same last year.

"The HR people now talk about regrettable turnover. We cannot afford to lose our best people because we have fewer people," said Cooper, the professor. "We will lose them to companies with better work/life balance, where they don't have to work 19-hour days."

## **INFORMATION OVERLOAD**

Though technology has helped boost worker productivity over the past few decades, it has come with related costs, like stress.

Technology, for example, is eliminating the downtime or slack that used to be built into the day—such as the time one took going to the library to do research that can now be completed online, says Edward Tenner, author of "Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences." Those minutes used to act as a buffer that prevented people from working constantly.



In this Nov. 26, 2013 photo, Shirin Majid, left, holds her daughter, Ella Townsend, 9 months, as she does a video phone call with her parents, Pirzada and Patricia Majid, from England, in New York. Majid, who works for the internet startup Quirky, is home during her company's quarterly "blackout" week break from work. Quirky's CEO, Ben Kaufman, makes the whole company stop working and take breaks so they don't burn out. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

Though physical exhaustion in traditional enterprises was bad, conflicting mental demands can be more problematic, Tenner says, particularly in the United States, where professional workers often don't have union contracts or the same legal overtime protection as hourly workers do.

"So it's as the Red Queen said in 'Through the Looking-Glass,' it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place," Tenner said.

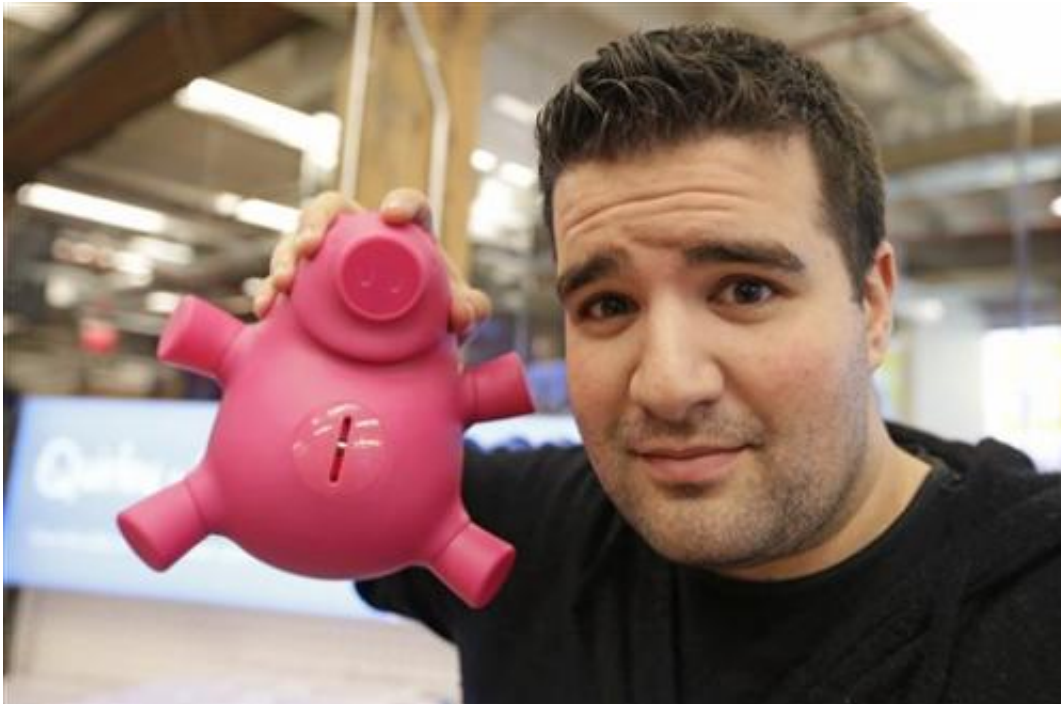
Companies haven't yet come to grips with how bad it is, said Spira, the analyst. Information overload has decreased people's ability to manage thoughts and ideas. Fixing it means changing company culture—such as the idea that dozens of people need to be cc-ed on a given email.



In this Nov. 26, 2013 photo, Shirin Majid, left, watches as her husband, Will Townsend, plays with their 9-month-old daughter, Ella Townsend, at home in New York. Majid, who works for the internet startup Quirky, is home during her company's quarterly "blackout" week break from work. Quirky's CEO, Ben Kaufman, makes the whole company stop working and take breaks so they don't burn out. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

"Almost every organization is burying its head in the sand," said Spira, the author of "Overload!: How Too Much Information is Hazardous to Your Organization."

It is hard for a company to control the amount of technology used in the workplace and at home since it is so integral to modern life. Volkswagen addressed the issue in a blunt, if effective, manner—by deactivating some workers' email accounts once their shifts were over.



In this Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013 photo, New York-based Quirky CEO Ben Kaufman holds a smart piggy bank his company markets at company headquarters, in New York. Kaufman created a staff "blackout week" once each quarter in which no one besides the company's customer service representatives area allowed to work. The startup company shepherds inventions to the marketplace. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

Rival BMW plans this week to unveil new rules to foster a management culture that "values the limits of work hours and reachability." The company declined to offer specifics, insisting that employees should learn the details before the media.



## TOUGHER MEASURES

To get everyone, from intern to CEO, to not overdo it with the work hours, some companies have resorted to bolder measures.

Quirky, a New York based start-up which shepherds inventions to the marketplace, has instituted a "blackout" week once a quarter during which no one except customer service representatives are allowed to work, lest employees be tempted to check e-mail.

"We all dropped pencils together," said CEO Ben Kaufman, who figured he could bring the idea of re-invention to his own company. "People were getting burned out. They needed to see other things besides their desk."



In this Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013 photo, New York-based Quirky CEO Ben Kaufman holds a flexible power strip his start-up company markets at company headquarters, in New York. Kaufman, whose company shepherds inventions to the marketplace, created a staff "blackout week" once each quarter in which no one besides the company's customer service representatives area allowed to work. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

And having the message come right from the top was important for Shirin Majid, the company's 39-year-old head of digital marketing, who laments not having enough time to spend with her husband and 9 month-old daughter, Ella. In 17 years of public relations work, she has yet to take a vacation devoid of that dreaded phone call from the office.

But not last week. No one could call from the office—since no one was at the office.

"If you know that your boss is checked out, you're going to relax a bit and not worry that you're going to get an email," she said. "You can just have a nap."

All that blackout-inspired creativity is working out for them so far: General Electric just invested \$30 million.

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