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by Laura M. Giurge and Kaitlin Woolley

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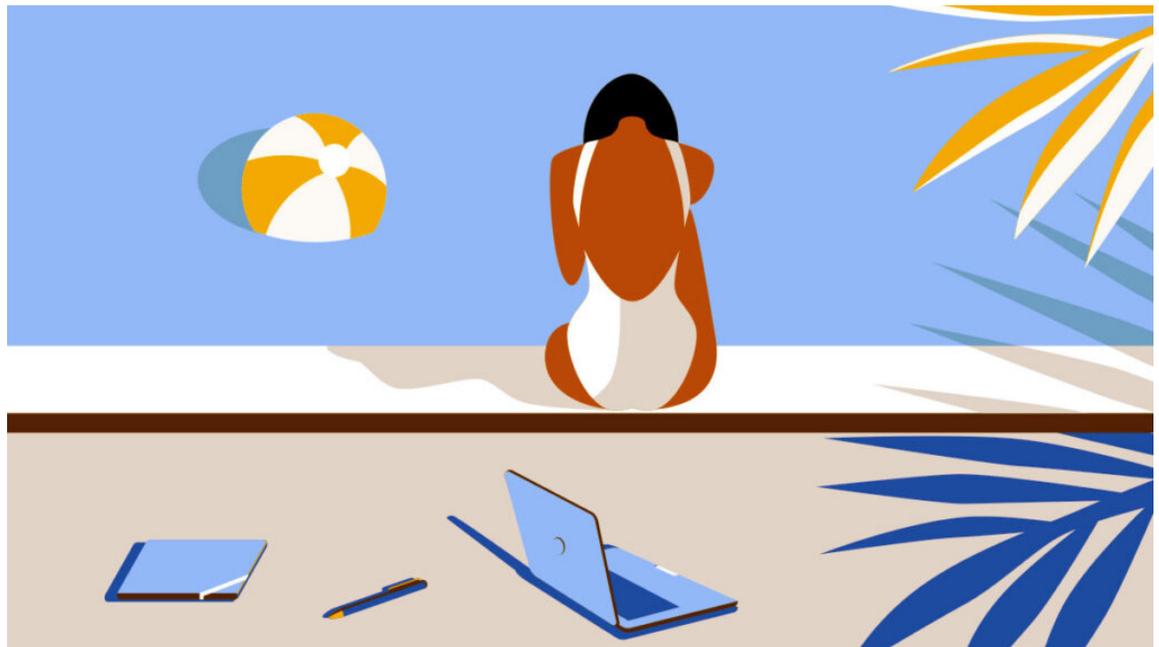


ILLUSTRATION BY ARIEL SUN

How — and when — we work is fundamentally [changing](#). Data from the [2018 American Time Use survey](#) indicates that 30% of full-time employees report working weekends and holidays, and even when people officially have time off, that doesn't mean they [stop working](#). Moreover, the recent global shift to remote work due to the Covid-19 crisis could further exacerbate the situation: as the formal boundaries that separate work from non-work become even more [blurred](#), employees may feel conflicted about what time is — and isn't — meant for working.

Many people assume that [flexibility in when we work](#) should boost motivation. Being able to set our own schedules should empower us to coordinate our days to maximize productivity at work, which would suggest that people might actually be more motivated when they work on weekends and holidays. In addition, [research shows](#) that keeping yourself busy (as opposed to doing nothing) can make you feel productive, and thereby make your work feel more meaningful, suggesting that working at a time when others are not could actually boost motivation.

However, our research finds that the opposite is often true. Spending weekends or holidays working undermines one of the most important factors that determines whether people [persist](#) in their work: [intrinsic motivation](#). People feel intrinsically motivated when they engage in activities that they find interesting, enjoyable, and meaningful. Our data shows that working during leisure time creates internal conflict between pursuing personal and professional goals, leading people to enjoy their work less. Yet, in doing this research during weekends and holidays ourselves, we also uncovered a solution to this problem: reframing time off as “work time” can help people maintain intrinsic motivation for their work.

How does working during time off affect intrinsic motivation?

To answer this question, we analyzed [data](#) from a nationally representative sample of 1,298 U.S. employees. Employees indicated whether they worked some weekend days or worked only Monday through Friday. In this dataset, intrinsic motivation was captured with statements such as: “the work I do is meaningful to me” and “my job lets me use my skills and abilities.”

We found that on average, people who worked some weekend days felt less intrinsic motivation for work. Given that this was correlational, it is possible that there are other factors that might influence how intrinsically motivated people feel, such as working in a lower-level position. That said, we did control for many potential confounding factors, including household income, education level, weekly work hours, and general life satisfaction, and found that the relationship between work time and intrinsic motivation held consistently.

To further examine the relationship between work time and intrinsic motivation, we ran four additional experiments with both adults working on the weekend and students studying during school holidays. Across all studies, we found that working during time off reduced people’s intrinsic motivation for their work.

For example, in one study, we interviewed students studying in a campus library during a federal holiday. We either reminded students that it was a federal holiday (“Today is February 17th, President’s Day”) or not (“Today is February 17th”). When students were reminded that they were studying during a time that others had off, they found their study materials to be less engaging or enjoyable — that is, they felt less intrinsically motivated to study.

Why does working during time off undermine intrinsic motivation?

Similarly to how many people think of Monday as the “true” start of the week, people generally categorize their time as either for work or for leisure. When they engage in work during time that they think of as leisure time, such as the weekend, they experience conflict between their expectations and reality, and as a result, they find their work less engaging and less meaningful.

What should you do if you have to work during time off?

Unfortunately, in many roles, occasional work on weekends and holidays can feel unavoidable. So, what can you do to stay motivated when you have to work during time off? In our research, we found an intervention strategy that helped students studying during Spring Break and employees working on a Saturday maintain their intrinsic motivation: re-labeling time as “work time.”

For example, in one study, we told one group of people working on a Saturday, “People usually use weekends to catch up or get ahead with their work” and told another group, “People usually use weekends to relax and take a break from work.” Our data suggests that even though both groups were working during time off, the first group felt more interested and engaged in their work goals because they were thinking about the time as time to work (versus time to relax).

Does working during time off undermine all work motivation?

One caveat to note is that intrinsic motivation isn’t the only kind of motivation that inspires people to work. People also work because of extrinsic motivation (i.e., to receive a salary, support a family, etc.). And while working during time off has a negative effect on intrinsic motivation to work, across our studies we found no evidence that it impacts people’s extrinsic motivation. While goal conflict associated with working on weekends or holidays undermines our capacity for finding work inherently meaningful, it doesn’t change the value of getting paid or having job security. Nevertheless, research by Kaitlin Woolley and Ayelet Fishbach shows that without intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation is often insufficient to keep people content and doing their best work.

The takeaway is clear: Whether we enjoy the work we do is shaped not only by the type of activities we engage in, but also by *when* we engage in these activities. If you have to work during time off, try to reframe it mentally as work time to help you maintain your motivation. Managers can also support their employees by encouraging them not to work during time off, as our data suggests that working during time off can undermine intrinsic motivation and thus reduce the effort that employees put into their work. Understanding how to stay motivated has always been important, but as the pandemic forces many employees to work remotely and burdens them with additional demands on their time, these strategies will be particularly crucial to ensure you and your team stay as productive and engaged as possible.

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