

An Alternative to the “Always On” Ethic

January 2011 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- ✦ Great client service does NOT require you to be always accessible, 24/7.
- ✦ Taking time off can actually improve the quality of work by sparking new, more efficient, processes.
- ✦ The "always on" mentality encourages people to just work harder and longer, without considering how they could work better.
- ✦ Your job consists of your work for your customer, AND the improvement of your own work processes.

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.

Having worked with my share of lawyers and accountants, I know that this is received wisdom, direct from the mountain and carved into tablets. But is it true? According to a recent report in the *Harvard Business Review*,

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.

What I love about this story is the lengths to which BCG went in order to find a better way of working. They didn’t blindly accept existing standards; they challenged the status quo in an effort to find something better. In so doing, they identified waste in the way that their (very expensive) consultants were spending time, and they systematically tried to find new, more efficient, ways of doing their work. The benefits are huge:

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. 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 mindset. 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.

Think about the way your executives, managers, and supervisors spend their time. Think how they — how **you** — feel compelled to be "always on." Is it possible that there's a better way to work? That perhaps those extra hours you're working each day and each week aren't really adding value to your customer? That your 24/7 responsiveness is habitual, but not required?

That, quite frankly, it's laziness that keeps you "always on," because it keeps you from doing the hard work of figuring out how to work better?

I know, I know. You're probably thinking that if you tried something like this ("Sorry boss, I'm no longer available on Tuesday evenings. Leave a message, and I'll call you back."), you'd end up on the street corner with a [Blackberry Stress Toy](#), looking for a new job.

Well, it wasn't an easy sell at BCG either. Ironically, the firm had the opportunity to try different ways of working because they had been hired to help a client improve its work processes. This enabled them to position the experiment as their own attempt to do what they were asking of their client — namely, engage in process improvement.

However, I maintain that if it can be done at BCG, you can do it too. It'll require hard work to sell it, but you might find huge benefits to your customers, your employees, and your organization. Remember, your job consists of your work for your customer, AND your improvement work.

Don't accept the status quo. Remember that improvement of your own processes is part of your job.