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## Managing 24/7 expectations

By Cindy Krischer Goodman

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Carl Juste / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Suzette Espinoza Fuentes, right/forward, assistant PR director for the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, controls after-hours work demands by developing a strong team who pitch in for each other. Espinoza is photographed with her team, which includes Crystal Brewster, left, Morgan Stockmayer, Claudia Tuck, Andrew Goldberg, right/rear outside the Ziff Ballet Opera House.

Suzette Espinoza Fuentes loves her job handling publicity for The Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. She gets to highlight performers and build interest for theater. But she also checks her email inbox in the evening before slipping under her covers and answers phone calls at kids' birthday parties on the weekends.

"It is not that it's expected," she explains. "I do it out of a sense of responsibility."

Like most American workers, doing our jobs well no longer means checking out at 5 p.m. The race to get work demands completed each day and stay up with customer needs often keeps us attached to our computer screens or cellphones at all hours.

People are getting these after-hours intrusions from all angles — from their boss, their colleagues, their customers, says Wayne A. Hochwarter, a professor of management at Florida State University. "I find it to be extremely stressful and sometimes it's just excessive."

Miami PR agency owner Tadd Schwartz has resigned himself to the new dynamics: "It's about wanting to show the client you are there to service them. They clearly see the value in knowing that if a matter is important I'm going to be responsive regardless of the time or day."

But do all jobs have to be 24/7? Can you control after-hours work demands without getting fired or

losing a customer?

The question looms large with today's workplace dynamics. Most employees feel lucky to have jobs and are putting in more hours with slimmed-down staffs. But job satisfaction is at a low point and most of us are desperate for better work-life balance.

For employees, there are ways to better manage expectations and cut back on intrusion on your

personal time.

- Communication is crucial. People who can manage expectations for after-hours work are the ones who manage their boss while at work, says Hochwarter. “Let your boss know you will work as hard as you can to make him look successful while on your 40 or 50 hours. Tell him ‘if you need me and it’s an emergency, I’ll be there. But time away clears my head and makes me a better employee on Monday.’ ”

Sometimes, a boss or customer doesn’t realize a phone call on a Saturday morning is perceived as invasive. Hochwarter suggests employees guide a manager’s behavior by letting him know your weekend obligations — announce that you coach Little League on Saturday mornings or spend the morning at the gym.

Conversations with co-workers are important, too. Tell your co-workers they don’t need to copy you on an email on the weekend or late at night unless it’s crucial to your work responsibilities.

- Discuss expectations. Work with your manager to be clear about the policies covering off-hours. Maybe you’re answering an email at 10 p.m., but your manager doesn’t expect you to be on call at all hours.

Two out of three employees reported that they receive emails from their bosses over the weekend and one in three said they are expected to reply, according to Right Management. If you have been replying, it may have sent the message that you don’t mind the infringement on your personal time. If you are going to pull back, be clear with your manager or customer about how you now plan to handle after-hours work.

- Share the load. Get to know your colleagues. If you build good relationships with them, it will be easier to spot areas of overlap and share the burdens. If you see another team member struggling with something, offer to assist. Then when you are under pressure to stay late, chances are co-workers will help you in return.

That’s the way Espinosa Fuentes at the Performing Arts Center handles her job demands. “When someone physically can’t be here at night or on the weekend, someone else will jump in and take care of it,” she explains. She also has developed a sense of trust with her staff. If they send her an email after hours and don’t get an immediate response, they’ll move forward regardless. “I know I can count on them to handle it and handle it well.”

- Ask for help prioritizing assignments. In the legal profession, the technology that makes us available 24/7 has lawyers working at all hours. In a new National Law Journal survey of more than 5,300 law firm associates, the lawyers reported having their most demanding year since the downturn began — with after-hours demands adding the equivalent of two extra weeks of work. Of course, the poll revealed the lowest associate satisfaction score in almost a decade. Tae Shin of Roetzel & Andress in Fort Lauderdale and Orlando says law partners, often in different offices, don’t realize how much an associate has on his plate. “Sometimes you just have to let [the partners] know and ask them to help prioritize your assignments.”

Bosses can also take steps, including:

- Rethink your behavior. Do you really need to assign work on the weekends or forward an email that doesn’t require immediate action? If waiting until Monday doesn’t make a difference, then wait. If you send an email, let your employee know if he or she has to respond right away. “Companies should have formal policies when it comes to intruding on people’s non-work time.

Don't send things or make calls related to work that don't need immediate action," Hochwarter says.

- Publish policies on after-hours coverage. If you expect staff to check email at regular intervals on weekends, make it part of the job description and orientation. Schwartz says he's clear with his staff: "I expect them to check in a few times after-hours, when they get home or before bed. They have relationships with the clients and know what's considered urgent. If it's urgent, deal with it. If not, deal with it the next day."
- Practice self control. Entrepreneur Charles Intriago, co-founder of the Association of Certified E-Discovery Specialists, is consumed with his newest business. But he has learned to practice restraint. "I know I've got to limit the emails I send to staff at night and on the weekend. I'll compose an email and save it to send at a reasonable hour."

Today, businesses still hesitate to hire new workers, but they aren't afraid to stretch their full-time weekday workforce over seven days. For now, your employees may be putting up with the pressing tasks you assign them at all hours, but when the market rebounds, they're likely to bolt.

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