

Best Buy toys with letting folks work whenever

Flex work has taken on a new meaning as Best Buy rolls out the greatest work idea for Generation X since earbuds. ROWE stands for "results only work environment," which for Xers translates to no more time clocks.

It's the idea that you pay for what you get — no time sheets, no banker's hours and no more having to sit there and count the ceiling tiles until 5 o'clock.

For someone like me, who is either a full-steam-ahead or a take-a-nap kind of person, this sounds like a great idea.

Think about it. File a story; take off for a three-hour lunch.

Edit some copy and make a dash for the parking garage before the terribly boring meeting. I might just consolidate the workweek to two 24-hour days. Bring on the Mountain Dew.

As part of an experimental work program, Best Buy's corporate headquarters near Minneapolis allows nearly 60 percent of its employees to come to work when they want.

Employee productivity has increased an average of 35 percent in departments covered by the program.

No doubt the ROWE model is controversial. Like anything that is new, it is not without its flaws, said Billie Blair, head of a California organizational development firm, Leading and Learning Inc. and author of "All the Moving Parts."

"But at many companies, the most innovative new product may be the structure of the workplace itself," she said.

Working when and where you want — authorized or not — is not a completely new idea; just look at your local Starbucks. But is this a whole new trend for the work force?

In reality, no big business has truly dismantled the time clock and cubicle as aggressively as Best Buy.

The official policy for this way of working is that people are free to work wherever they want, whenever they want, as long as they get their work done, Blair said.

The pros, Blair said, are numerous, and include overcoming challenges, reducing turnover and increasing employee morale.

"Best Buy has transformed the workplace culture in a remark-

ably short time," she said. "But it cannot be ignored that the risk is great, as ROWE can unravel into chaos just as rapidly."

While we gain flexibility, what are we giving up?

Collaboration and creativity would definitely suffer.

While working only when you want would definitely cut back on time spent in meetings — no one would be there to debate the movie of the week for 10 minutes before the meeting — we would lose the little face time we had with a co-worker.

And not everything can be measured in pretty, quantifiable units that we can base pay on — think consulting and services, brainstorming sessions, etc.

How many of us would work when we knew no one else would be in the office?

And what about customer service?

Best Buy's next step is to roll this out to its retail operations. Can you imagine trying to find help in the computer section the day after the new Xbox comes out?

Internal and external customers depend on companies to be reachable at certain times.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the workaholics among us might never leave.

One of the biggest concerns about results-only work environments is that the difference between employees' work and personal time would become even more blurred than it is already.

This has the potential to create more stress for them, said some analysts.

Many critics claim ROWE increases productivity only because so many workaholics are working such longer hours.

"But in the end, it appears we have found something that holds great promise and will mature through many stages," Blair said.

She mentioned a more enlightening aspect of this experiment: This was an idea that percolated from the bottom up.

It was initiated and followed throughout the ranks before reaching the chief executive.

"Many in the field like me have long argued that such bottom-up innovation is exactly the kind of thing needed to reinvigorate an outdated business model," Blair said.

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