

Trouble at the Office?

Stephen J. Adler

The workplace special report you are about to open marks a milestone at BusinessWeek: It's the first issue created in collaboration with our readers. In surveys and blogs on BusinessWeek.com, in responses on LinkedIn, and in a poll conducted with YouGov and the Washington firm RT Strategies, nearly 4,000 readers identified their top concerns at work and then discussed in depth how they tackle these problems. This project, nearly four months in the making, has been enlightening for our writers and editors and, no doubt, for those who contributed comments and essays. We are confident that you, too, will find value in the collective wisdom assembled here. From time management to dealing with toxic bosses and generational tension, readers clearly yearn for more balance and harmony. And since two topics that generated intense conversation involved how to negotiate a stultifying bureaucracy and how to stay entrepreneurial in an era of uncertainty, it seems apparent that while BusinessWeek readers are serious about improving their work lives, they are just as serious about doing excellent work. To help our reader/editor tag team wrestle with workplace conundrums, we also solicited advice from leaders and luminaries such as Jim Collins, Anne Mulcahy, and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. We think you'll find this report surprising, instructive, and illuminating, and that it will help you improve your work life.

Rainn Wilson on Office Jobs from Hell

Michelle Conlin

Rainn Wilson, who graces our cover, plays everybody's favorite workplace irritant on TV's *The Office*. Now starring in the film comedy *The Rocker*, Wilson had plenty to say about real-world offices.

On his worst job ever:

I worked at an insurance broker in New York. They gave me "lead cards" that had the name of the person in charge. Like: "Kissinger Associates. Contact: Henry Kissinger." And the phone number.

Why office drones take themselves seriously:

I think it's too many hours under fluorescent lights under pressure.... It's kind of a form of torture. They should take prisoners of war and subject them to a 60-hour workweek at an insurance company in Omaha.

On work-life balance:

I never go home. I'll see my son when he hits puberty. Seriously, you have to make at least one day sacred. Sunday is family day. Nothing gets planned on family day.

On time management:

I'm always having trouble answering e-mails, so I created a file called "write back!" Anytime I get an e-mail I have to reply to, I stick it in there. I haven't actually written back to any people, but they are all in there.

On his most toxic boss:

I was the assistant to the assistant special events coordinator [at a New York charity]. He looked at me and said: "I'm working here because eventually I'm going to work for the NFL." And then, without a trace of irony, he told me: "If I say jump, you say 'how high?'"

On dealing with generational tension at the office:

In a lot of cultures the elders are so well-respected that they're eventually roasted and eaten by the young. That's what I would suggest in the office. The meat might be a little tough.

Which company he would most like to work for:

It would be fun to work for Apple (AAPL)....But I am waiting for Bill Gates to acknowledge the fact that he is my father. I'm suing him for paternity.

Advice for those struggling to make it in their dream careers:

Give up immediately. Move to Phoenix and go into real estate. Seriously, there's a big difference between living your dream and living in denial. You have to [know] where the universe is telling you to go.

Good to Great Expectations
Jim Collins on getting to the next level



Collins says a not-to-do list is more important than a to-do list Ray Ng

For Jim Collins, the Stanford Graduate School of Business lecturer-turned-management thinker, "the workplace" is a pleasant office suite set amid the Rocky Mountains in Boulder, Colo. Managing generational tension amounts to shepherding a team of smart, curious students who help him with the research projects that have led to blockbuster books like Built to Last and Good to Great. And dealing with difficult bosses means stepping outside to do some rock climbing in the mountain air if he gets frustrated with himself.

But the author of Good to Great, the world's best-selling guide to taking companies to the next level, still has plenty of insights for those of us stuck in gray-walled cubicles where the "scenic view" is often the parking lot of a drab corporate campus. Management Editor Jena McGregor asked Collins to translate some of his popular concepts to today's workplace. Here are edited excerpts of that conversation:

One of the big concepts in your book is "first who," or that the most important thing is getting the right people "on the bus." But for cubicle dwellers who can't trade in their boss or their co-workers, what should they think about doing?

The idea of a personal board of directors came to me when I was in my 20s. I drew a little conference table on a sheet of paper with seven chairs around it and wrote names on them of people I admired. I pasted it above my computer and would look up and in my mind poll the personal board when I was wrestling with tough questions. If I was really stuck, I might talk to some of them. It's sort of like a group of tribal elders that you create for yourself.

How many of the leaders running the companies in Good to Great had any kind of work-life balance? Is it possible to run a great company and also have a great life? The bad news is, about half the CEOs didn't really seem to have a life. They defined a great life as building a great company. A lot of people who do extraordinary things are not balanced. I'm not even convinced that the idea makes sense [since] there's a certain neurotic obsession with doing exceptional things. But here's the good news: It was only about half. So I draw the conclusion that it's a choice.

But haven't BlackBerrys and globalization made such choices nearly impossible? The imperative is to manage our time, not our work. This is why the whole question of balance and finishing our work is insane. There are only 24 hours in a day, so what difference does it really make if you work 10 hours or 14, given that there are a thousand potential hours of work? The real question is the incredible rigor of what goes into the hours you allocate.

As I look at the most effective people we've studied, a "stop-doing" list or not-to-do list is more important than a to-do list, because the to-do list is infinite. For every big, annual priority you put on the to-do list, you need a corresponding item on the stop-doing list. It's like an accounting balance.

You've got to admit, though, that technology has made it harder today. I don't think it's obviously harder today at all. Technology helps, not hurts, as long as you have the discipline to turn these things off. You don't report to your BlackBerry.

What we know about people who are really effective is that they think. The key is to build pockets of quietude into your schedule—times when you have an appointment with yourself and it's protected. I have on my calendar "white space" days. I set them six months in advance, and everyone around me can see them. It's not that I'm not working, but absolutely nothing can be scheduled on a white space day.

You talk in Good to Great about leaders needing to confront brutal facts. But organizations loaded with bureaucracy are the exact places where truth doesn't rise to the top. What do the best managers do to break down that bureaucracy?

How do you create a climate in which the truth is heard? The first thing is to increase your questions-to-statements ratio. Have someone track it and see if you can double it in the next year. The leaders in our studies asked lots of questions. They were Socratic. By asking questions, they got the brutal facts, as well as lots of insights and ideas.

What can people who aren't in leadership positions do to better navigate bureaucracies? I think about how the leaders we studied handled this before they were in charge. If you look at [former Gillette CEO] Colman Mockler or Ken Iverson before he became CEO of Nucor (NUE), what did they do? They were focused on what they could control. That is Job One. But they were also really good at figuring out the three to four people in the organization who really mattered and became very good at presenting to them evidence and arguments that were persuasive.

If you produce exceptional work, your ability for influence is very high. Most people, even in bureaucracies, are hard-working, well-intentioned people trying to do good things. If you ever wake up and say the majority of people here aren't that, then for sure it's time to jump.

You manage a team of student researchers. Any secrets you've discovered to managing Generation Y?

I don't understand this generational tension thing other than that I think the tension is great. You should find a way to have young people in your face all the time. Wrestle with it. Revel in it. Learn from them. My view is, we ought to get those people into positions of leadership as fast as we can.

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