

Help for coping with a demanding situation

Miami Herald Posted on Tue, Nov. 30, 2010

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Last week, I had a conversation with a law firm partner who told me he expects his employees to respond to his e-mails regardless of what day or time he sends them. He believes anyone who works in a service business should expect to be on call 24/7. "The world today is time focused and client oriented," he told me. "You need to be on 24/7. If you are not, someone else will. That's the reality of the world we live in today." I thought about it how I would handle it if this guy was my boss. It's never been easy to juggle the demands of a job with our personal needs. But in today's economy, with so many companies cutting back and laying off, it can be particularly daunting to ask your boss to stop sending you e-mail at midnight.

Q: *My boss sends me e-mail late at night. How can I get him to stop without getting fired?*

A: You might want to make a policy for yourself, something you can live with. For example, agree to open e-mail up to a certain time of the night or respond late on only certain nights of the week. Then, map out a conversation with your manager explaining your policy. If you are a valued employee and the feedback from clients is good, this conversation is much easier. "Explain that this is the policy you are proposing to use for three months, why you think it's a sound business decision and use business language," suggests Alexa Sherr Hartley, an executive coach with Premier Leadership Coaching.

Q: *My company has a work-at-home policy but my supervisor wants everyone in the office all the time. Is there anything I can do?*

A: Smart employers know that allowing employees to work from home can save money on office space and help with retention. You are fortunate if your company has a policy on the books. But if your direct supervisor is not allowing it, this might be the time to go to human resources to gain some insight into who is using the policy and how it is working out. "Ask for guidance on how to approach your boss with your request or how to avail yourself of the policy," says Kevin Vance, a labor lawyer with Epstein Becker Green. You might want to start small by proposing a test period, maybe one day a week, and then prove yourself by being super productive on that day.

Q: *My hours are getting longer and longer and I find myself doing the job of more than one worker. This has been going on for more than a year. I don't think asking for more money is an option but I'm starting to get resentful. How should I handle this?*

A: If you are a salaried worker, there is no legal requirement that you get paid for the additional hours you are putting in. (If you are hourly, you are entitled to overtime.) In this economy most people feel fortunate to have jobs. Nothing in the law prevents employers from getting most out of employees and working them long hours. However, Magali Jarrin, president of Greater Miami Society for Human Resource Management, said HR directors are becoming worried about employee burnout and most are looking at ways to recognize employees for their contributions. She suggests bringing up your concerns with your manager, but doing it carefully during a positive conversation.

Q: *Is there an ideal way to tell my supervisor I'm pregnant? I'm worried about the reaction because I want to take maternity leave and we're understaffed right now.*

A: The best way to deliver the news to a manager is by detailing how you plan to handle the time off to minimize disruption. "Remember they are thinking about it as just something else to deal with," Hartley says.

Q. *Because I work such long hours, it's hard to keep up with friends. But checking Facebook a few times a day helps me feel like I'm staying in touch. Can I get fired for spending work time on Facebook?*

A: It's tempting to log on to Facebook during the day and to rationalize that it should be OK because you are putting in more than your 40 hours. But in many companies, you can be fired for spending time on Facebook or other social networking sites. "During working hours you are supposed to be devoting time to your job," says Paul O. Lopez, director of the labor and employment practice at Tripp Scott in Fort Lauderdale. While it is better practice for a company to have a written policy, Lopez explains, whether or not it is in writing, you can be fired.