

■ CAREER ■

The lives of office-goers working UNCONVENTIONAL HOURS

When thinking of a job, the first phrase that comes to mind is the term “nine-to-five”. You clock in at nine, get some work done by lunch, and procrastinate all afternoon to scramble out the door around five to beat the evening rush. Sometimes, the nature of your job makes you work before and after this enforced window, for example, nurses, doctors, actors, and other service workers who must work irregular hours due to the demanding nature of their professions. It is still quite rare to see office-goers work non-standard hours, or so I thought.

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One thing the pandemic has done is normalise hybrid work schedules. So, it's not uncommon, even in Bangladesh, to see office-goers work in person three days of the week and spend one or two days working online from home. In a similar vein, remote work has also been normalised over the last half-decade, with more and more people flocking

like migratory birds to warmer (and cheaper) destinations, such as Bali, Thailand, and the Philippines, to both work and enjoy the summer weather.

Add a pinch of globalisation to the equation, and you have people from all over the world working different time zones, be it working New York City (NYC) time in Amsterdam, or London hours in Sri Lanka, there's a plethora of office workers stationed in countries different to their

employers, churning out Outlook mails, PowerPoint decks, and passive-aggressive Microsoft Teams messages intercontinentally at all hours of the day, twenty-four seven, three hundred and sixty-five days.

Irregular working hours have long been ingrained into the lives of people working in the informal economy. Domestic and agricultural workers, as well as informal service and industrial workers, are seemingly in a loop

of unconventional and irregular hours, with little to no structure to their work schedules.

However, with the increased presence of multinational corporations (MNCs) as well as the rise of Bangladesh as both an outsourcing and freelancing hub, irregular hours have started bleeding into office jobs as well. Whether it be a major bank, a manufacturing company, or a more niche start-up, Bangladeshi office goers are increasingly finding themselves working schedules beyond the norm.

Work seeping into everyday life has become an alarming trend, with many claiming the traditional 9 AM to 5 PM has been replaced by endless work days with emails and tasks being sent off at all hours of the day.

“The nature of my work often meant that I had to clock in early to get a head-start on the day

and leave late in the night before following the same cycle again the next day,” says Maiesha*, a former analyst at a reputed multinational tobacco manufacturing company.

“With my team also working beyond their scheduled hours, I often felt pressured to also go above and beyond to deliver, leaving very little time to myself when all is said and done,” she elaborates.

While these schedules manifest in a variety of work times and durations, they usually tend to follow American, European, or Asia-Pacific (APAC) times, translating to the same eight hours of work but anywhere between 8 AM to 4 PM, 2 PM to 10 PM, and even 6 PM to 2 AM, to name a few. Depending on role and scope, many people have rotational schedules, periodically cycling through different slots instead of having a fixed one.

“I have been working on a rotating schedule for over a year now, and while I'm happy with the job and compensation, changing my

sleep schedule constantly is quite exhausting,” says Raidah Rehma, a contract operations analyst at Optimizely. She further elaborates by saying that having to adjust to a new schedule monthly has undeniable impacts on energy levels, sleep, and overall job performance.

Here's the kicker, many offices operate from Monday to Friday, instead of the typical Sunday to Thursday in our country, in order to keep operational alignment with foreign offices. Working on the weekend can lead to both feelings of isolation and being out of sync with everyone else, putting a significant damper on social lives. “Not only do I have different weekends from most office goers, but I also work night shifts,” explains Fatima*, who works at a local tech company. “This makes it difficult to make plans, especially on local weekends, and I often find myself saying no to a lot of social events I would otherwise have gone to.”

Another obvious downside of working unconventional hours is maintaining a work-life balance. Aligning with teammates working different hours globally and locally means that you may have to be available beyond scheduled times to get work done. “Not all my co-workers have the same hours, so for more collaborative tasks, I often have to work off-hours to accommodate them,” says Fatima.

She also adds that even when she tries to work only during her hours, dependencies lead to delays in outcomes and overall performance, putting her in a lose-lose situation.

While having to forego weekends and work various times throughout the day is typically a deal-breaker for professionals, there lies a hidden advantage for students. Mahiat Shan, a senior at North South University (NSU), currently also working as an executive partner manager at a fast-growing global fintech firm, finds the non-linearity in his schedule as a strategic advantage, allowing him to balance work with academics. “Considering the rate of human progression in global tech and interconnectedness, waiting till graduation to join the workforce is a thing of the past,” he explains.

Elaborating further, he says, “As an undergrad tackling demanding executive roles, I've made it a motto to advocate for student-friendly employment policy frameworks across Bangladeshi corporations to better position ourselves in the global markets. I appreciate organisations for taking progressive steps to address this within Bangladesh's rigid policy infrastructure,” he concludes.

However, with every cloud, there's a silver lining. It goes without saying, but most MNCs and start-ups offer above-market pay, culture, perks, and benefits, which does soften the blow of having unconventional hours.

Furthermore, hybrid work arrangements also help save time wasted commuting and offer some respite, flexibility, and control in planning your workdays. “With my schedule, I do often get to spend quiet mornings and free evenings, and being off while others are working does help in finding some tranquillity amidst the hustle and bustle,” comments Raidah.

Fatima shared similar sentiments when she said that she can get chores done faster; hospital and bank visits and passport office trips are done much faster without having to worry about falling behind.

Throughout our lives, we were taught that working 9 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday, is as integral to modern work life as Excel is to Financial Planning and Analysis. However, systems are changing, and the culture we have lived in before the pandemic has largely given way to a culture driven by individualism. What used to be a largely centralised working environment has branched off into jobs that are remote, hybrid, and completely diverted away from each other. Yet, it remains interconnected. And with these timings and roles increasing in number and prominence, it does make you wonder how drastically office jobs will change by the end of the decade.

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SHIFT WORK SLEEP DISORDER

Research shows that irregular work schedules can negatively impact your health. Health experts classify this condition as “Shift Work Sleep Disorder (SWSD)”.

A study published in the PLOS One journal found that irregular work schedules can take a serious toll on health. Researchers noted that morning shifts are generally healthier for employees compared to working at night.

The journal defined a “standard” work schedule as starting no earlier than 6 AM and ending by 6 PM. In contrast, unconventional schedules often begin around 2 PM or later and finish near midnight.

To understand the long-term effects, researchers tracked 7,000 people over three decades, from ages 22 to 50. They examined how different work patterns influenced sleep, as well as physical and mental health. The results showed that people who consistently worked non-standard hours developed more health problems. Even participants who began with stable schedules but later shifted to irregular hours in their 30s faced higher risks of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, and other health complications.

These problems often stem from chronic sleep deprivation and poor sleep quality. In fact, health experts classify this condition as “Shift Work Sleep Disorder (SWSD)”.



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