



Night shift

Work-life balance has transformed the deal process. Times have changed, says **Jon Moulton** – but they changed earlier in his career, too

I started working for Coopers and Lybrand (then one of the Big Eight firms) in the mid-1970s. Strikes aside, things have changed enormously. When I started my job, the staff manual prohibited high heels – not sure how I remember this, but there was an extensive dress code. The few female staff were wolf-whistled whenever they ventured on to a factory floor.

Articled clerks really only started to be paid anything in the years immediately before I joined. Partners were relatively well paid – less so the lower ranks. There was very little commercial pressure – generally, people worked 40-hour weeks, partners (outside of tax) seemed to do limited ‘actual’ work, while days at the races and games of golf with clients were commonplace. Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the partner I was articled to died from complications of alcoholism.

In my first four years, I never saw one pitch to a new client. They mostly just paid whatever the (primitive) computer system printed out. It was not very stressful.

But then the firms started merging – especially with US firms. This led me across the Atlantic to New York. Back then the Big Apple was clearly the most dynamic financial centre in the world, and it was a shock to the system. The culture was profits first, second and third. My working hours more than doubled – I remember one six-month period without a single day off. A few partners made it very clear that they would happily sign an audit report before any fieldwork was done.

I got used to deal completions at 4am; then, when I returned to the UK in 1981, the UK offices of the big firms – in particular the London offices – had moved towards the US model of nocturnal completions. Lawyers were doing the same.

Late-night completions could generate opportunities for the agile-minded. Twice, I got Scottish banks into completions on New Year’s Eve, or Hogmanay, as they would call it.

Things remained like this until the past few years. Last year, my family office did around 20 completions. None required any of our team at a late-night session. It is an incredible change from previous decades, where most deals would have been finished way after usual office hours. Tough times for vampires.

What caused the change? The steady increase in the technology of deal-doing will have contributed,

but I don’t think that effect was too large. The change mostly took place as the pandemic gripped. People got used to Zoom meetings; masses of stuff was shipped around electronically.

The pandemic also amplified the social pressures that emphasised diversity and work-life balance, and led to a massive increase in use of the terms ‘inclusive’, ‘wellbeing’ and ‘social mobility’.

What works

I encountered the new emphasis on staff happiness when I asked a Big Four firm for a small piece of work on a Friday afternoon last August. A partner called to explain that it was firm policy for staff to take Friday afternoons off in summer. It was not an embarrassed apology, but a gentle admonishment to me for being so unreasonable.

Midnight completions clearly pose questions about work-life balance and wellbeing. And if the world can, as it seems, manage well without them, that’s fine by me. Working on the old principles of business, it would have been expected that letting staff control their activities with little management would give worse effectiveness than if you were served by an orderly, well-managed group. But perhaps these old principles are wrong. Perhaps giving staff flexibility makes them more motivated to generate a better result. Certainly, for less complex, non-time critical tasks this may well be true.

You would also think that giving staff more freedom would overall reduce efficiency and that the profits of the accountants would have suffered – but those profits, and their staff salaries, have in fact been doing very well.

Given the rising tides of work on environmental, social and governance, new regulation and high growth in consulting revenues, driven no doubt by business transformation work, perhaps any loss of efficiency from nocturnal relaxation is not big enough to see.

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