Technology is blurring the natural border that has traditionally separated a person's work schedule from family time: clock-out time. Arriving home no longer means the workday has necessarily ended.

Many employees keep working during what is becoming the “third shift,” which entails a schedule that starts at ten o’clock at night and ends at one in the morning. This new shift is the most efficient one because there are fewer interruptions and, as one of the basic theories in time management states, interruptions make the work pile up. After stopping each time it is necessary to start over again and refamiliarize oneself with the subject. If technology becomes our ally at night for working in an interruption-free environment, during the daytime it is one of our main enemies: receiving incoming calls anywhere through our mobile phones and constant email messages via our laptop, Blackberry or Treo, makes it difficult for us to concentrate on a task and complete it in an effective manner.

The discovery of the advantages of this third shift is causing many professionals to take more and more of their work home. In fact, many times an employee feels guilty for having abandoned his or her post at work and then at home recovers the lost time tenfold.

Although there are few studies on the subject, it seems that in practice flexibilization involves an increase in number of hours devoted to work.

Labor unions—first in the US and later in Europe—will eventually discover that the much-yearned-for flexibility is translating into a greater amount of hours worked and thus they will attempt to put limits on the malleability of the workday. There are currently voices speaking out saying that the new gadgets and mobile networks are becoming a sort of electronic ‘leash’ that allows bosses to control their employees from a distance.

In the face of this new situation, we should impose our own limits. Although few know how to do so, something which fosters work addiction phenomena, it is in fact possible to set

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**Highlights**

1. A recent study on Microsoft by the British polling firm YouGov claims that the increase in flexibility has translated into a rise in productivity and employee morale as well as a drop in stress levels, absences and personnel turnaround.

2. The study adds that many companies suspect that their employees are abusing the flexible workday and suggests that companies and employees should take a more active role in the use of technology in order to avoid the practice of never-ending workdays.

3. The time spent by British professionals working during their days off saves their companies more than €5 billion each year, according to a study published by the Chartered Management Institute in June 2006.

4. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has stated that Latvia and Sweden are the countries with the highest number of companies with employee bases of over 10 people that offer flexible workdays, followed by Finland and Great Britain.
limits. One good way of doing this is to consider work and technology itself as time thieves. How can we defend ourselves against a thief? First of all, by setting up barriers. For instance, establishing commitments that force us to leave work at a certain hour, such as meeting a friend or having to go pick up the kids at school.

Another defense against thieves is pepper spray. Saying "no" on time acts as a repellant substance. Perhaps due to the extroverted social customs prevalent in Spain it is more difficult to give a negative answer than in other countries, something which could be interpreted as an antisocial attitude. But having clear objectives in both the professional and familiar realms will help us separate between the commitments we can accept and the ones we need to resolutely reject.

As experienced tourists know, thieves tend to choose their victims more among those who exhibit signs of wealth and less among those who do not. In other words, it is preferable to reserve our leisure activities for the family realm. This prudence is also difficult to put into practice in a country with such deep-rooted social customs as Spain, but if we fail to do so we run the risk of ending up like that employee who dreaded retirement because all of their friends were also coworkers.

And finally, one must know how to unplug. Sometimes we forget, but all devices come with an OFF button and we’ve got to use it once in a while. The human mind does not have a similar mechanism for unplugging from work but there are various methods for doing so. For example, we can devote a certain amount of time to sitting down and focusing on other issues, something which will enable us to make better use of our free time. Meditation should not be a practice done exclusively by monks. As professionals we also need to incorporate it into our lives in order to be capable of casting away our worries and enjoying our free time. Give it a try during your next vacation.