

The non-stop society and its consequences

The round-the-clock hustle and bustle

New York was formerly known as the city that never sleeps. Today the whole world is switching to continuous operation. The non-stop society creates round-the-clock hustle and bustle. One of the consequences: sleeplessness.

Continuous operation is not an all-embracing phenomenon yet. "And it will also never be. Especially in rural areas or small towns the rhythm does not change so quickly", assures Professor Dr. Dietrich Henckel from the German Institute for Urban Economics. "But more and more sectors of society are incorporating the non-stop idea", says Henckel.

Telephone hotlines are accessible 24 hours a day. Petrol stations provide not just autos with fuel for mobile existence at any time. In the fitness centre people sweat best at night. Online banking side-steps the restrictive counter opening hours of the financial institutions. The flat rates ensure uninterrupted connection to the Internet. Television stations no longer know the word "closedown". The railways advertise permanent mobility with their overnight trains. The "global players" take advantage of the opportunity that somewhere in the world is always precisely the best working time. Strawberries in winter or gingerbread in summer — the retail trade provides everything.

Starting in June the federal government also wants retail businesses to stay open until 8 p.m. Everything goes — all the time. This is the rule of the game according to which the non-stop society functions. The nights in which only Berlin was continuously opened are long since a thing of the past. The hedonists can dance the night away everywhere. Ecstasy is the "hello & wake-up" drug of people who turn the night into days.

Working hours in excess

But in the meantime it applies more and more: Non-stop — also in the job. Like computer specialist Sven Hallwass, fewer and fewer people are bound to fixed regulations. If he extends working hours in excess, he has to write a statement to the works council. Hallwass is employed by a major company in the metal industry.

A representative study on behalf of the North Rhine-Westphalian Employment Ministry shows: 70 percent of companies exceed the contractually stipulated working hours. In the course of his research, Henckel determined particularly in the New Economy the feeling for working hours has been lost. "Often the bosses didn't even know how long a particular employee was active in the office. They frequently estimated and thus arrived at 50 hours per week." In the meantime, 8.5 million employees are at least occasionally officious on weekends. The number of Sunday workers has increased fourfold in the EU within the last 20 years. In particular, freelancers and self-employed take advantage of the opportunity to work when they want to. In the home office work can be postponed at any time.

Characteristic for Henckel: "Night doesn't turn into day everywhere, but the perimeters of our time structures are fraying." The percentage of those employed — for whom eight hours are not a working day, and who can no longer count on the five-day week — has increased within the past ten years from 42 percent to 51 percent. The old time rules have had their day, especially in the business service occupations. The time clocks end up in the museum, the "now and then" now even offers a long night. In return, annual working time accounts are entering into collective labour agreements.

This offers freedoms: Lars Nacke, who hires out trade fair furniture for a medium-sized business enterprise, accumulates overtime for a very personal “miles & more project”. During the hectic phases of important exhibitions he works more than 16 hours a day, is also available at night and of course on Sundays for the trade fair constructors. The “overtime” flies by. Literally. He gladly takes advantage of the cheap offers of the airlines for short trips during the week. Bookings are made early in the morning or late at night. There’s less traffic in the network — but the organisers are still accessible. However, continuous operation also involves risks: Sleep researchers like Regensburg’s Jürgen Zulley speak about the “civilisation-conditioned corrosion of time” with regard to shift work. 80 percent of those concerned complain about sleep disorders. The risk of cardiac diseases is also increasing. Moreover, the average German nowadays sleeps two hours less per night than his fellow countryman 100 years ago.

Harnessing time

The workaholic finds the drug of his/her choice with more ease in the “overtired society”. The barriers for the work maniacs – such as office closing hours – come down. Seminars teaching improved time management are in great demand. The clock does not structure the day, and the calendar does not structure the weeks and months. Time has to be harnessed individually. But societal disadvantages also emerge: Leisure time becomes asynchronous. The common rhythm of working time and leisure time disappears. Living together falls out of timing. Whoever has to co-ordinate appointments with friends or in the family is aware of the problems. That’s why Henckel advocates a common societal time arrangement, and if possible, wants to keep Sunday free from work. “In this way we create an opportunity for contemplation and for relaxation, find rest in the rhythm of life.”

The critics of the non-stop society warn of the further consequences of the “always-and-constantly” lifestyle: Major mishaps such as the reactor accident in Tschernobyl or the shipwreck of the Exxon Valdez took place at night. Technology is uncoupled by the rhythm of time, human nature doesn’t want to cope with this. Even after years the performance level of night workers saps somewhere between two and five o’clock in the morning. And the culture of life is also changing. On Saturdays Papa belongs to the boss again, and no longer belongs to the children. The alarm clock – not the church bells – rings on Sundays. And so unusual coalitions are created: “Left-wing trade unionists and the churches are pleading together for the free weekend”, reports Henckel. Because even God doesn’t work non-stop. After six hard days of work during the creation of the world he treated himself to a creative pause.

Hermann Kewitz

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