

“These Bosses Are OK with Boundaries”

Some managers want to help staff find a better work-life balance.

BY LINDSAY ELLIS

Hannah Thatcher has hired two employees to her engineering team since early 2020. She says she made clear to them in the interview process that they should take their accrued time off, put work devices away after hours and not be shy about asking for a mental-health day.

“I like to make my expectations pretty clear early on,” Ms. Thatcher said. “Their time off is their time off—and it will be respected.”

Many workers are focusing more of their attention on family and nonwork pursuits, and some job seekers are trying to decipher the buzzwords in job postings for red flags that a role could be a one-way ticket to burnout. Some bosses are telling their employees that it is OK if the job is, well, just a job.

A few employers are pledging to respect work-life boundaries in their job listings, and some managers say they make it a priority to discuss work-life balance during the early stages of the recruiting process.

Ms. Thatcher, a senior environmental engineer for the Washington State Department of Transportation, said her managerial outlook stems from her own early career as a geologist. Back then, she worked 12-hour shifts in an oil field and was on call even when she was technically off.

“It took me a really long time...to realize that weekends aren’t a treat,” she said. “This is what I’d like to do moving forward for other people.”

Ms. Thatcher’s department offers flexible-scheduling options, like working four 10-hour days a week or alternate Fridays off with longer days in between. Before someone on her team takes time off, Ms. Thatcher schedules a handoff meeting so notes on projects, deadlines and deliverables that might emerge in that person’s absence can be addressed.

Trivinia Barber, founder and chief executive of Priority VA, a

staffing agency based near Savannah, Ga., recently posted a job for an executive assistant to an entrepreneur.

“You can expect to be appreciated and respected like never before,” the job description said. Hundreds of applications flowed in, and dozens of candidates excitedly

pressed for an interview because they were impressed by this language, Mrs. Barber said.

Before posting the job with those promises, Mrs. Barber says she grilled the executive, Frank Mocerino, to make sure he could live up to the expectations he was setting. Would he call an assistant at 10 p.m.? 4 a.m.? Would they be expected to bring a laptop on vacation? Have Slack on their phone? The answers to all were “no.”

Mr. Mocerino helped found his company in 2015 to focus on wellness and wanted that philosophy to extend to his employees. Maybe

‘You can expect to be appreciated and respected like never before,’ a listing pledged.

it won’t come as a surprise that his company, the Ohm Store, is an online retailer that sells metal bowls used for meditation and organizes workshops on the practice. He said he sensed that people assumed the role of executive assis-

tant would require work outside traditional business hours.

“They deserve to be done at 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. They deserve to not have to check their phone or computer when they’re having dinner with family, or out with friends, or putting their kids to bed,” said Mr. Mocerino, who is based in Marengo, Ill.

Katie Kirkpatrick, of Sycamore, Ill., ultimately got the job. She said she was seeking a remote position with flexibility so she could care for her daughter, who was recently diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. Initially, she thought the job descrip-

tion was too good to be true, but said she feels assured by the interviews she had with her new boss.

“This is a totally different pace for me,” Mrs. Kirkpatrick said.

Promises of balance are one thing, but candidates won’t know the realities of any given job situation until they start. Some bosses may fail to live up to their pledges, and plenty of jobs—especially in a market where it has been hard to fully staff up—require long hours, extra assignments and responding to client demands outside the 9-to-5.

An analysis of thousands of employee reviews on Glassdoor, the job-posting and rating platform, shows that mentions of boundaries have increased nearly 30% between 2019 and this year. Three out of four comments about how employers treat boundaries were negative, according to Glassdoor.

Ayman Al-Abdullah, an executive coach and the former CEO of the software marketplace AppSumo, said he advises his executive clients to be clear about their expectations early in the interview process. Using terms like “work-life balance” and “boundaries” to woo candidates, while only promoting those who consistently work on weekends, isn’t fair, he added.

“The last thing you want is to bait-and-switch candidates,” Mr. Al-Abdullah said.

In April, Charlene Holder and her husband opened a LaVida Massage franchise in Rome, Ga. As she hired massage therapists, she said she talked about her own experience as a masseuse. One boss, she said, would add extra clients to her schedule at the end of the day, making her hours longer than she wanted, and book prenatal massages, a service she expressly said she didn’t want to do.

One of LaVida’s recent job postings read: “You will be working for someone who knows what you’re putting your body through, who knows your passion for healing, and who will respect your boundaries and honor your individuality.”

When Sharlyssa Duncan was hiring staff earlier this summer for Golden Leaf Studios, her boutique in Missoula, Mont., she let her new team of retail workers know they could—and should—set boundaries at work.

“Their time at the store is time at the store,” Ms. Duncan said. “Private time is private time.”

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