NEW AMERICA

Crisis Conversations: Will COVID Kill Work-Life Balance?

August 14, 2020

BRIGID SCHULTE, PANELIST: Welcome everyone to Crisis Conversations live from the Better Life Lab. I'm, Brigid Schulte the director of the Better Life Lab. I am so excited to welcome our panelists today and to all the participants who are here. Today, we are going to be talking about a subject near and dear to probably all of our hearts, which is work-life balance. Is it even possible in a pandemic?

Even before the pandemic, there have been surveys that have found that people think that work-life balance is a luxury. It's an impossibility, that don't even bother talking about it. Yet, the research shows that work-life conflict leads to incredible stress to actually not doing very good work. It leads to ill health, things like a lack of sleep, and insomnia, and obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Not being able to have adequate time for work and adequate time for your life, it's really about the quality of your life.

We're going to be talking today about this really exciting project that we've been very lucky to be a part of with ideas42, and we've got Lynne Curran from Accion, who's been part of the pilots for the project. Let me just briefly introduce our guests and we'll dive right in. We've got Matthew Darling, he's the vice president of ideas42, which is a nonprofit design and consulting firm that uses insights from behavioral science to address complex social problems. He's also a teaching fellow in economic design at Harvard University.

We've got Uyhun Ung, who's a great friend and a senior associate at ideas42. Sorry, Uyhung. We've also got Antonia Volante. She's a senior associate at ideas42 and as I mentioned, we've got Lynne Curran who's a senior vice president for human resources at Accion, which is a global nonprofit committed to creating a financially inclusive world. Welcome everyone.

Matt, I'd love to start with you. Why behavioral science? What we know about behavioral science is that's all about nudges, and creating choice architecture, and you want to stick to your diet, so you put your fruits and vegetables where you can see them in your refrigerator. You want to make sure people save for 401(k)s, then you make it a default rather than making them choose. Why behavioral science for something that I think you all even call a wicked problem, like work-life balance?

MATTHEW DARLING, PANELIST: That's a great question and I'll say, obviously a lot of the work that's been done in behavioral science is around that nutters, is about simple changes to context that you can make in order to change behavior, but also, it can of course be applied to much more complex interventions or complex problems. In this case, particularly, I think so much of the way we think about work, and so many other things is really almost like implicitly uses this classic economics, rational actor model where people are going and they're making decisions based off of the best available information. They're maximizing their incentives, things like that.

When you think about it, and we do a lot of work in that in terms of how people actually design policies and who they're designing it for. When I think about the case of behavioral science with work-life is that, I can think in my own life before pandemic and of course right now after it or during, where I think about--

BRIGID: We hope it's after but we're not there yet, right?

MATT: We hope it's after. It's not after for everybody, but thinking about the cases where I'm making decisions about how I'm going to work and I'll say, "Okay, I got a bunch of stuff done today, but not everything I want to do, so I'm going to get that done tomorrow. It just stacks up and stacks and stacks up, and I never really do a good job of readjusting to the fact that I never quite meet my own expectations for how productive I'm going to be.

BRIGID: That sounds familiar.

MATT: Every time I make a plan and say, "Okay, this is going to take me four or five hours to do. Then it takes 10 to 12, because there's so much that happens on this way of getting from A to B. All those insights from behavioral economics, I think can really be applied to how we think about work because so many times we're going out there, we're designing our own workforces or we're designing our work-life for our fellow employees. We make the persistent mistakes in how we do it. What we're hoping that

we can do through this project and other work is try to make that better. Make so we're saying, we're designing the policy. The actual people who are going to have to live through it.

BRIGID: One thing that's really been so striking to me in this project is through behavioral science, learning about the power of the environment and how you set up your environment can really lead you even to the choices that you make or even the choices you think you have. Uyhung, let me turn to you and talk more specifically about what this project, talk about what you actually have been doing and how you've been using that idea of the power of environment to try to shape cultures? So often we think, well, work-life balance it's all up to the individual. If you just made better decisions, if you just had more willpower, it would be better.

I think one of the things that was so striking and in talking with you throughout this whole project is just how many patterns you found because of the environment. Can you talk a little bit more about that and then about the actual work of the project.

UYHUN UNG, PANELIST: When we started the project, we were really focused on trying to decrease the instances where work-life conflict was happening. Moments where work was really clashing with other aspects of people's lives. Basically, when we were doing this research and trying to design solutions to help decrease those instances, we were just noticing, as you mentioned, Brigid, different subtle cues in our environment that lead us astray in one way or the other.

For example, if we were noticing just how different signals in our social environments, who appears to be working later through subtle signals and emails, or things from your boss, subtle cues like that were shaping people's behavior to maybe overestimate the degree other people were working and subsequently drive them to think that they need to work more as well and whether that was true or not. We were trying to pick up on those subtle environmental cues that drove people to maybe work a little bit more than they would have liked at times they would have rather not, and see if we can tweak it a little bit to minimize those instances.

BRIGID: If I could just jump in here. What we know from the data is that pre-pandemic at any rate, that Americans worked really long hours. You had overworked long hours in white collar fields and you had a very different overwork in lower wage jobs where you didn't have enough work. You would have to cobble together all sorts of different unpredictable jobs, that led to its own work life conflict and long work hours.

Going back to the knowledge environment, we've got these overwork hours and are you saying that some of it is because we are misinterpreting cues that we think other people, particularly people in power, are working more than they maybe are and that's part of what's driving this overwork phenomenon?

UYHUN: Totally. I definitely think that part of what's driving the overwork phenomenon is that, but there are obviously other drivers of this challenge as well.

BRIGID: Talk a little bit more about what you actually did in the project and not only talking about the power of the environment, but this really interesting concept of scarcity and how feeling like you've got scarce time or scarce resources, can also drive work-life conflict.

UYHUN: For the most recent iteration of the project, we were really focused. We were partnering with other nonprofits to try to tackle some of the challenges that they were facing. Some of the challenges they were facing are unique to them, and recognizing we wanted to start somewhere and not boil the ocean. We ended up zeroing in on a few different places where people were having some challenges. Disconnecting on vacations, trying to minimize the amount of time people were spending at meetings so they can actually do their solo work and log off for the day. Trying to think about how emails were chasing people throughout all aspects of their lives and interrupting there.

We did a few interventions to help people disconnect from emails, and just to remind them to log off at the end of the day. We'll get to that a little bit later and also a few different interventions or solutions to help people to remember to take vacation, and take certain steps so they can really disconnect before they hop into vacation rather than letting the work spill into it and constantly be checking in case something happened.

BRIGID: Just on that point, I can't tell you how many years it's been, certainly that's been my personal experience, and when you look at research and survey data, Americans either they don't take vacation or they take work along with them when they do. Antonia, can we go to you now and talk very specifically about the work that you did with Lynne and Accion. Lynne, we're going to get to you in just a minute. Since we're still laying out the contours of the project, what did you come up with for Accion?

ANTONIA VOLANTE, PANELIST: Yes. I think that there's an anecdote that I want to share that I think lays the foundation well for what we did around vacation with Accion. My dad has this principle that he uses that's foolproof for when you have a

housework that you need to do, like an ambient project, like washing the windows, or steaming the carpet, something that you never need to get it done, but it's lingering on your to-do list. He calls this the party principle. He says, if you have these things that you want to do, when they build up, just plan a party, invite as many friends that you can think of for a month later and they will get done. He's like, "I guarantee it, it will get done before it."

My mom hates the party principal, but he swears by it. I think what we were doing with vacation at Accion was trying to find a way to use that party principle. I can unpack that a little bit. We learned when talking with employees and also looking at vacation data what you were talking about Brigid, where there were a lot of people that were like, "Yes. I would like to take vacation, but I just haven't."

When we dug into it a little more, it makes a lot of sense. Going on vacation, isn't just like, you walk out the door, you're on vacation. You have to think about what are your next week gonna look like, you have to tell people you're going to be in vacation, you have to make sure everything gets done while you're out. There's a lot of prep. It makes sense that it's like a thing that people want to do. It's like an ambient thought, like washing the windows, that you do want to take vacation, but it never feels urgent.

Then the more interesting question became, then why do people take it? If it takes work, it's never urgent, when are people actually leaving and taking time off? That's when we realized, people tend to take vacation, it's almost like you take vacation as a consequence of something else that came up in your life. You're going on a trip with someone, or you are going to a wedding. When we talk to people, they talked about their vacations around events that would happen. In my own life, that's totally true. We literally call trips that we go on with other people, vacations. We've almost thought about them interchangeably.

BRIGID: It's like a forcing function. You don't actually go out and choose it. It's like, it happens to you so you have to plan around it. Is that what it means?

ANTONIA: Then you have to plan around it. Yes, that's what I'm saying. In behavioral science, we have these things that are barriers, that are features of the environment that Uyhun was talking about that inhibit you from doing what you want to do. Then there are channels that get you to do what you want to do. It's almost like planning those trips and stuff, that's like a channel for you to do all that admin work. What we were interested in figuring out is how do you create a way to have that channel, to give

people an arbitrary form of an event or something that they can plan around so that they do all of those steps in the meantime.

At Accion, they had been doing a thing that I think a lot of companies do, where they'd send email reminders being like, "Hey, Brigid, you have 10 days of vacation left. Your balance expires at this date. Reminder to take vacation." We use that as an opportunity to enhance it a little bit. We had those emails sent out from a person on the HR team and she also paired the email with a calendar invite. She put it on people's calendars for a Friday or a Monday, two weeks from the day it was sent, and said, "Hey, Brigid, I'm putting a tentative vacation day on your calendar. Use the time to go to a museum, read a book, watch Netflix and feel free to move it. Whatever works for you."

Then really importantly, we copied their manager so that their manager was aware and already started the process. Now, it's a little socially accountable, too. I don't know, that's my thought of the party principle of creating that event for someone to feel like, "Okay, yes, this is something I've committed to." Then all of those little tasks are easier to do. They can follow that after.

BRIGID: It's so interesting. There are other countries where people do not have such a hard time taking vacation. I wonder if it's some of it goes back to the environment again, where in the United States, we have these what sociologists and other researchers were called, the ideal worker norm that the best workers are basically were either in the office all the time, or now in the pandemic, online all the time. It's difficult, since we tend to reward people who never go on vacation. I imagine that's part of the environment that makes it difficult to make that choice.

Lynne, let me go to you. What was Accion experiencing when it came to work, and work-life issues, and health, why did you want to get involved in this pilot project and then tell us what did you learn as a result?

LYNEE CURRAN, PANELIST: Sure. Thanks everybody. It was really great and really exciting to be able to work with ideas42. We had worked with them on some of our programs I had worked in terms of behavioral economics on our financial inclusion work. They were actually the ones that pointed us to this opportunity to work with them, internal to the organization. Work-life balance is really important to Accion. We have a culture where people travel all the time for work. We work in different time zones, so people always are connected, which is why the other intervention we did was also around email.

We felt like people weren't taking enough vacation. They were just, the same thing that we heard from Antonia and Uyhun, that people just weren't taking the time. There's always so much work to do. I have to do this, I have to do that, I have to do the other thing. What we did was we identified people that hadn't taken time off in three months, I think it was, and did as Antonia said. We called it vacation roulette, and we just stuck a random Monday or Friday on the person's calendar and said, "Take this day off, read a book, watch a movie. You don't have to do anything with this day. It's just take a day for yourself."

It was great. We got some responses where people said, "I have a vacation planned next week or next month. Thanks for the reminder. I'm going to pass on this, but really excited that you've reminded me my vacation is coming up." We had a couple of other people who might've moved the day, and one person in particular, who's a senior member of the organization, got the email, we copied the CEO, and the CEO was very good with his senior direct reports. When he was copied, he replied saying, "Please take this day. You need time for yourself." This one senior member, he was like, "I'm going to take that day."

It was really great to see it worked at all levels of the organization. The piece about management is super important. I think that people don't always know when your managers are taking vacation, or what your managers expect you to do in terms of vacation, and often your manager is expecting you to figure that out yourself. When we copied in the manager, it made a big difference.

BRIGID: That's so interesting. Did it also matter, like you mentioned, that there were these messages of support like, "This is okay to do," and they're not violating the culture in a way by taking vacation?

LYNNE: Absolutely.

BRIGID: I do want to go to email, but before we do, let's really address the current moment because I know that this project has been going on for some time, and in a pre-COVID environment. Lynne, let's stick with you. The world has totally changed, work has completely disrupted in the last four or five months. People who can are working remotely. Essential workers are out on the front lines, so many people are out of work. This current COVID moment, how has that changed the way that you work and then how about these interventions? Can you take a vacation in the middle of a pandemic?

I speak for myself. It's something that I've certainly struggled with. You just feel like there's just so much at stake that you can't afford to take this time off. Then you get, like I did this week, where you just hit a pandemic wall. I think the rain didn't help either, but it's really hard to function then. What are you finding in your company and then how do these interventions translate?

LYNNE: It's been really hard. We thought we had a hard time getting people to take vacation before, and work-life balance was so important to us when, from one day to the next, there was no such thing as work-life balance. You're working, surrounded by your family, you're taking care of your family, trying to pay attention to work. Work-life balance went out the window.

We really tried to work with staff and encourage staff, if you need to work on Saturday because you need to homeschool your kid on Wednesday, do it, lock it on your calendar so people know not to contact you on Wednesday. Also if you're co-parenting, and you have little kids, somebody always needs to be with the kid, people started putting their spouse's meeting on their calendar too, so they would know not to get time scheduled there.

Vacation became more and more challenging and we would encourage, and encourage, and encourage it, and people would just put it off, put it off, put it off, because where am I going to go? I can't travel. Around June, I think it was, we made a real push for it and we pushed our management team again to make sure they took a vacation in July or August, and make sure that they made that visible, make sure people know that you're taking vacation. If we can say every member of our senior management team has taken vacation during the pandemic, that's a big message to staff.

We've been working on that. I was speaking with one of our senior managers this morning who was supposed to be on vacation this week and was not, but he claims he's pushed it to next week. I'm making sure that nobody tries to contact him next week. We're thinking about how to use the vacation roulette again. We're going to look at vacation balances through July and based on that, we're really considering doing it again. Especially as it starts to get colder in the US, it's okay, again, if you're going to stay inside to watch a movie to do this, to do that. We're definitely thinking that it's something that we can turn to again.

BRIGID: Lynne, to just ask the question, again, in this country where we value productivity so much, why the focus on vacation? Why do you think that's important

and why was it so important to your organization to actually come up with an intervention to encourage it?

LYNNE: Well, I think it goes back to even what you said when you hit a pandemic wall, and I've done that myself so many times that if I don't take a vacation by this time in August, I've hit a wall and I just disappear for three days without notice. We wanted to avoid a little of that, as well as avoiding the people that don't recognize when it's time to take a break and just keep going, going, going, and they get, as we started it with people get sick, people get really worn out and burnt out.

The senior person that I was talking about, we had been worried about his health over the past couple of years, because he was working so hard. We had real concerns about his health. It was a great example to see that that person this particularly worked for. Especially during the pandemic, if people aren't taking a break they're not going to be able to function at the same level.

If we're going to talk about productivity, you can't be as productive if you're that exhausted and that stressed out. Really convincing people to take the risk of taking a vacation and see how much better you feel. Yes. We know you'll get stressed when you get back, we know, but you will feel better than you feel right now.

BRIGID: That's so amazing. We're the only country that I know of where we actually run commercials or ads encouraging people to take time off, and that was before the pandemic. If I could go back to Uyhun, we didn't have a chance to kind of fully talk more about the idea of scarcity, and Matt, I'd love for you to chime in on this as well. One of the things that really struck me, what Lynne was saying, is that they're really getting people to be very intentional about sharing their time and their calendar. One of the other things that you said, Uyhun, is that you found that email was chasing people through the day or that meetings that were running every which way.

That does strike me, when I talked to a lot of people, when I do reporting about this, it's almost universal. You'll talk to people, they'll be like, "I was busy all day long. I was running emailing and going to meetings." Then five or six o'clock hit, when I should have ended the day, and I realized I hadn't done that one thing I needed to do, and that can drive so much of work spilling over into the evenings and stealing from your life or spilling into weekends. I am as guilty of that as anybody. Uyhun, can you talk about, again, those bigger patterns and how scarcity plays a role into that?

UYHUN: Yes. I think Lynne's notes on why it's important to take vacation actually plugs into the scarcity conversation, too, because taking a vacation, in order to be innovative and creative, and think big picture, and longer-term, to see those things, you have to have a little bit of space to think about those things. It's really hard to do that when you're zeroed-in, in the day-to-day, and trying to churn through all those emails, or just running from one meeting to the next.

I think we started thinking about that scarcity frame after, originally it was, how do we keep these work from interrupting aspects of life? What we kept hearing from people is, "I don't have enough time. I don't have enough time. I can't think bigger picture. I get zeroed-in and I tunnel in on these immediate deadlines that I forget something important."

We were just noticing that when people were feeling short on time, that they really zero in on the most immediate tasks, which is helpful when you have a deadline, having a deadline sometimes helps us focus, but when that's chronic, when all you can think about is your next meeting, the next day, it really hurts people's ability to do some long-term planning, which we also know is important.

BRIGID: What were some of the interventions that you were exploring around that? How do you try to protect time, to think big, or to do that important work so you don't feel like you're chasing your tail through the day?

UYHUN: One of the things that we were really encouraging people to do, and this is for a certain professional context, we were encouraging people to set up blocks on their calendar to just do that longer-term thinking, do that bigger picture thinking, and to really take stock of what they're doing. Because what we found is that without those blocks on people's calendars, people would have others scheduled into them, which crowded out any time that they had to really think bigger picture.

I think that again, is in a certain kind of work context. I think, thinking even bigger picture than that, I think encouraging people to actually have time off, and even encouraging people for other sorts of workers who might be doing shift work, giving them-- some folks are getting a notice for when they have to work, just a day off, or a couple of days before. That really throws people's ability to think longer-term and plan longer-term as well.

I think just a little bit bigger picture, just trying to figure out when is that scarcity situation important, because it helps us focus, but when is it less helpful, because maybe we've gotten a little bit too far, and we need people to give people time to think bigger picture, be creative, be innovative, and also just take care of other things in their life so they don't intrude and take, occupy mental space, when they are on the job.

BRIGID: Matt, to pick up on something that Uyhun said, that a lot of this work was done in the knowledge worker or the professional work setting, how could this translate to, say the essential workers or hourly workers? What could sort of translate into that?

MATTHEW: I think one thing is, and this occurred to me when Lynne was talking as well, one thing we worked so hard on was how do you get the workers to represent what they're looking for to management and how does management represent what they're comfortable with to workers? What was really interesting a lot of time is how often there are people misrepresenting that in either direction. Management who is thinking like, "Oh, we've really communicate to everyone that you can take vacation and that it's not a problem." At the same time, when someone takes vacation, you might just grumble a little bit in that moment.

That's one thing with not all workers, but I think it's something that's really generally applicable. One thing is I've been seeing so much of, and thinking about a lot during this time is reading about people trying to think about their working conditions. That could be nurses who don't have enough PPE, it could be people at the grocery store who are not confident that they're putting measures in place, it can be teachers who are saying, "Hey, we really don't feel comfortable opening schools right now."

Obviously, some of this is about economic power, a lot of is. I'm not saying there's no bad actors in this world, but I think a lot of it is how do you actually convey your mindset and convey your need to other people in your organization, to other people you're working with, and how do you actually get them to act on that? How do you go and say, "Hey, these are the things that we want out of this workplace."

One thing I keep on thinking about with, especially essential workers is that they're the experts in the production processes that they're in, that they're the ones who say, "Hey, this is how I interact with our customers. These are how I I interact with our other staff." Because of that, they're usually the people who are best placed to actually understand

how to change things to make them more safe. It's not clear to me that those needs and that understanding, that information, is going to be heard by the management.

I'm thinking about locally-owned places that I know that have basically said, "Hey, we're not reopening until now. We've actually completely torn out the entire interior of it and everything is like a-- there's glass between you and the customers." Then you see other places where they're like, "Oh, we've installed these shower curtain rods between you," and you're like, well, that's a big difference in how you're being attentive to people and what their needs are.

BRIGID: We're coming down on time. What I would like to do, Antonia, if we could go back to you, Lynne, bring you back in, kind of final thoughts. Here we are in this pandemic, you've gone through this experience. What should listeners-- what can they learn from this, what can they begin to do themselves to survive through this period, but potentially, to thrive when we go back to whenever new normal becomes our new normal? Antonia, you want to start?

ANTONIA: It's a big question, but I think if there's one thing to take away is that behavioral science just provides a framework for thinking about how your situations that you're working in, they aren't always set up for you to do what you want to do and what's healthy to you, but they are going to influence your behavior. It's important to figure out what do you want to do, come up with check in with yourself like, "Do I want to take more vacation? Do I want to stop emailing late?" and try to think about, "What her, about the way my situation is, is preventing me or making it harder for me to do that? Do I need to plan some sort of-- go to a virtual museum two Fridays from now to get me to go on vacation?"

Just think about how you can nudge yourself to do certain things because we can expect our worlds just to be designed for us to take work-life balance. Unfortunately, right now, that's not the case.

BRIGID: Lynne, final thoughts? We'll give you the last word.

LYNNE: Oh, no pressure. Again, this was a really great experience. I think some of the key takeaways have already been mentioned. I think the importance of recognizing what signals management is sending to staff, and what signal staff is really looking for, I think that was a key takeaway from the two interventions that we did. One, we copied managers, and one we didn't, and without even trying, we had a control group and the

test group, and we saw that copying managers and involving managers really made a big difference.

As always, the importance of taking a vacation. One other piece that Antonia mentioned was so many companies send out the, "You have 10 days vacation and you're going to lose them. This is the day you're going to lose them." One thing we realized was, that was pretty much all we were saying in the message. With the help of ideas42, we just had never even thought about it, just to reword that, so that it's saying, "Encouraging you to take that," and the benefits of a vacation, and being a little more friendly about it, also made a big difference.

BRIGID: Thank you all so much for being part of this conversation today. I want to thank all of our guests. I want to thank the participants. We had some lively chat. We'll be following up online. I'm sorry we didn't get to all of the questions. Thank you so much to the New America events team, the Better Life Lab team, to David Schulman, our producer. Next week, we'll be talking about "So, you've hung out your Black Lives Matter sign, how do you build an anti-racist organization?"

We'll have folks from the army, and Project Inclusion, from Google, the head of DEI, and some other really great guests. In the meantime, wash your hands, wear a mask, think about how you design your environment to help you make better choices. We'll see you next week.