

The Rise of 9-9-6 Remote Work and Why It Is a Burnout Trap



Remote work was meant to promise balance. No commute, flexible schedules, more time with family. But in some corners of the workforce, a troubling culture is spreading: the so-called “9-9-6” schedule – working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week. Once associated with the hyper-competitive tech sectors in Asia, this practice has started to appear among Canadian and North American remote employees who feel they must always be online, available, and proving themselves.

For HR managers, this is not a productivity hack. It is a recipe for burnout, presenteeism, and eventually turnover. The challenge is recognizing it early and reshaping your culture so that employees do not feel they must sacrifice their health to be seen as dedicated.

How 9-9-6 Shows Up in Remote Teams

In a physical office, extreme schedules are visible. If someone stays until midnight, managers notice. In remote and hybrid settings, long days are easier to mask. Employees may simply log into Slack early, answer emails late, and quietly stretch their hours until “always on” becomes the norm.

HR leaders are now seeing patterns like:

- Employees replying instantly to messages well outside standard hours.
- Remote workers logging in on weekends to “get ahead” of Monday.
- Project timelines creeping shorter without formal agreement.

On the surface, managers may applaud the dedication. In reality, employees are running down their batteries.

Why 9-9-6 Leads to Burnout

The science is clear. Extended work hours beyond 50 hours per week increase risks of mental health decline, cardiovascular disease, and workplace errors. The **World Health Organization** reported in 2021 that long working hours contributed to **745,000 deaths globally from stroke and heart disease in a single year**. Studies from Statistics Canada show that nearly **one in three Canadian workers reports high levels of stress** tied to workload and extended availability.

Burnout is not just individual. Organizations that normalize overwork see rising absenteeism, higher disability claims, and costly turnover. In fact, Gallup research shows that employees experiencing burnout are **63 percent more likely to take a sick day** and **2.6 times more likely to be looking for another job**.

Remote workers are particularly vulnerable because the boundaries between home and work blur. Without a commute or set office hours, shutting down feels less natural. The “I’ll just do one more email” mentality becomes a 12-hour day.

The Compliance Angle

Employers in Canada cannot ignore the legal side. Every jurisdiction has employment standards laws that set daily and weekly maximums for work hours, mandate overtime pay, and require rest periods. For example:

- In Ontario, the **Employment Standards Act** sets the standard workweek at 44 hours, with overtime pay required beyond that, unless an averaging agreement is approved.
- In British Columbia, daily hours are capped at 8 before overtime applies.
- Federally regulated employees are generally entitled to overtime beyond 8 hours per day or 40 per week, with exceptions for certain categories.

When employees work 9-9-6 schedules without authorization, employers risk violations, even if the employee “chose” to work extra. Courts and labour boards have consistently ruled that if an employer benefits from the work, they must pay for it. This makes proactive management not only about wellbeing, but compliance.

What HR Can Do

Change the Culture of Availability

The most effective lever is cultural. If leaders send emails at midnight, employees learn that “real commitment” means being online all the time. HR can coach executives and managers to model healthier boundaries. Encourage scheduled sends, visible vacation, and recognition of output, not hours.

Make Overtime Rules Explicit

Remote employees need clarity: when is overtime authorized, how is it tracked, and what are the rest requirements. Many remote workers assume “flexibility” means overtime rules don’t apply. HR must demystify this and ensure time tracking systems capture actual hours worked.

Invest in Tools That Protect Boundaries

Technology can help. Some organizations implement “quiet hours” in collaboration tools, shutting off notifications after certain hours. Others use nudges that alert employees if they consistently exceed standard hours. These tools reinforce boundaries without micromanagement.

Train Managers to Spot Burnout Signals

Managers are the first line of defense. HR should train them to look for signs such as delayed responses that spike late at night, missed deadlines due to exhaustion, or irritability in team calls. Encourage managers to ask open questions about workload and to redistribute tasks before employees burn out.

Encourage Feedback and Safe Reporting

Employees must know they can speak up if expectations feel unsustainable. Anonymous surveys, pulse checks, and open office hours with HR create channels to surface concerns before they escalate.

Case Examples

- A Vancouver fintech startup faced attrition when half its developers reported working 11-hour days. HR introduced weekly workload reviews, capped meeting times, and enforced two consecutive days off. Within six months, voluntary turnover dropped 40 percent.
- At a Toronto marketing firm, employees began informally competing to be the last one online. HR intervened by creating a recognition program that rewarded efficiency, not hours logged. Productivity actually rose after hours were normalized.
- A federally regulated transportation company learned during an inspection that dispatchers were consistently working past their scheduled shifts without recording overtime. The company was ordered to pay back wages and implement stricter scheduling controls.

Conclusion

The “9-9-6” approach might appear as ambition or hustle, but for HR managers it is a red flag. Burnout, compliance breaches, and turnover are inevitable if extreme schedules become normalized. Remote work can offer flexibility and balance, but only if HR leaders actively protect boundaries, enforce labour standards, and foster cultures where output matters more than being “always on.”

HR managers have the opportunity to turn this into a competitive advantage. Companies that build healthier remote practices not only reduce legal and health risks but also strengthen retention, engagement, and employer brand. Employees want flexibility, not 72-hour workweeks. It is HR’s role to make sure they get the right balance.