



AFTERNOON PT

Key for an Army Flextime Battle Rhythm

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WITH MULTIPLE COMBAT TOURS putting Army families under great stress, commanders are seeking better ways to help. They encourage Soldiers to spend time with their loved ones, but they must balance the requirements of reintegration with compressed pre-deployment training. This is a notoriously tight rope to walk. Morning physical training (PT) determines when Soldiers report for work. Close of business comes when—as a member of a team, squad, or platoon—all the work is finished. There is a more productive way to approach this routine and preserve the cohesion of the unit: make PT an afternoon ritual. If commanders simply shift the physical training time from morning to afternoon and empower company-grade leaders to send Soldiers home when the work is done, the Army will have a flextime schedule that works with regimentation. Soldiers will get the opportunity to spend more time with their families, pursue personal interests, and generally improve their quality of life, with reduced stress, less commute times, and better health.

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The Golden Standard

Physical training is a golden standard, and for good reason; it is one of the most critical standards the Army enforces. Its numerous benefits include—

- Camaraderie.
- Leadership training.
- Improved health.
- Physical conditioning.
- Mental and physical toughness.

The problem with *morning* PT isn't the program—it's the timing. Soldiers lose time and productivity as a result of an additional round-trip commute that splinters the morning between commutes and personal hygiene. The

PHOTO: Soldiers at Fort Dix engage in early morning physical training. (DOD, Keith Dillon)

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Army's current garrison "battle rhythm" prevents a time-flexible work schedule and all its empirically demonstrated benefits.

In an effort to provide employees more family time, decrease commute times, increase worker productivity, improve retention, and adapt to sweeping societal changes in family structure over the past four decades, companies and state organizations are increasingly implementing time-flexible work schedules. Referred to as flextime, these schedules are agreements allowing employees to adjust when and for how long they work, as long they accomplish the total number of hours required for the work. These kinds of schedules are designed to help employees cope with work-family pressures.¹

Current Research

One of most important changes to family structure has been the number of working women who are also mothers of children under the age of two. In 2002 this number was 66 percent, up from just 18 percent throughout the sixties. Families caring for an ailing parent will range from 30 to 50 percent by 2010 as the baby-boomer generation retires.² This number will inevitably affect the military. Military families are more diverse now than they were before, but the military workplace still functions based on a family model where only one family member works. The Army has tried to adjust to these demographic shifts over the years, but its garrison battle rhythm is for "stay-at-home" moms representing an increasingly rare family structure. Research conducted by the Military Family Research Institute reports that in 2005, among active duty enlisted members, 46 percent of spouses were employed in the civilian labor force and another 14 percent are service members. Ten percent of those spouses who were not employed were seeking employment. These numbers mirror totals from the civilian sector.³

There is extensive literature among occupational health researchers concerning flextime schedules and the data is compelling—flextime betters productivity, reduces stress, improves employee morale and retention, and lowers absenteeism.⁴ Employers

are taking notice. In 2005, 44 percent of companies offered employees a time-flexible work policy, a seven percent increase from 1998.⁵

Recent data from the U.S. National Study of the Changing Workforce show that flexible work schedules help employees deal with fissures between work and home life by reducing their stress levels. The reduced stress provides significant benefits to the overall health and productivity of workers.⁶ Companies that have family friendly work policies have marked increases in their stock performance and profitability. In data collected between 1986 and 1995, companies with flexible work policies had an average annual rate of growth three percent higher than the benchmark S&P 500 index. Firms that didn't have flexible work policies underperformed the S&P 500.⁷

The Army Day

Since the Army is regimented and standardized, it is assumed the Army day is nearly universal and personal observations and experiences of the reader are about average. This premise will depend on the reader's personal experiences of an average Army day to make comparisons with the ones established in this paper. There will be differences, of course. Some posts start PT at 0600, others at 0630; the workday may start at 0900, 0845, or 0830, but these differences are insignificant to the overall design of an Army flextime battle rhythm.

For the purposes of this discussion, time is important for its *aggregate availability* for two key tasks: accomplishment of pre-deployment training objectives and building strong Army families prepared for multiple deployments. Since 1977, researchers have recognized time management is as much about the external influences as it is about work; to manage time correctly, you have to look at it holistically. One study suggests that "spillover has become the accepted concept in the domain of work-life interaction. It is understood that the connection between work and life is bidirectional... Experiences at work can greatly influence our lives away from work, and experiences and conditions outside of work can influence how we do our jobs."⁸

One ignores either one to the peril of the other, as IBM learned: “Based on responses from almost 42,000 IBM employees in 79 countries, the survey found that work-life balance—of which flexibility is a significant component—is the second leading reason for potentially leaving IBM, behind compensation and benefits. Conversely, employees with higher work-life balance scores (and therefore also higher flexibility scores) reported significantly greater job satisfaction and were much more likely to agree with the statement ‘I would not leave IBM.’”⁹ Many Soldiers and Army spouses can relate to that assessment. Flexible time schedules are the best way to balance work-family pressures.

The common experience. A typical day for an Army staff sergeant (apart from field training), a company supply sergeant for example, officially begins at 0550 when he falls-in for accountability and morning PT. He lives off post with his wife and two children. He sets his alarm for 0430 but doesn’t roll out of bed until 0445 after he hits the snooze button several times. He leaves no later than 0515 every morning to deal with congestion getting onto post; his commute runs about 20 minutes.¹⁰ After PT, he travels back home. He pulls into the driveway at 0720 and, if he is lucky, his children are still waiting for the bus and he says goodbye just as it turns onto their street. His wife is dressed for work and just finishing her hair as he steps in to take a shower. The extra thirty minutes talking without kids is worth the extra forty-minute round trip commute. His wife leaves by 0800. He stuffs several pop tarts in his mouth, washes it down with a glass of milk and departs at 0820. He needs the extra forty minutes since everyone else is squeezing through the post gates, too. He shows up at 0845; the first sergeant calls a formation at 0900. The plan of the day delivered, he gets organized and starts focusing—around 0930—on the mission. He breaks for lunch at 1130. After a big, heavy lunch, he is fighting stress-related fatigue with several cups of coffee. His productivity drops as his body’s metabolism slows down. Mental energy begins to ebb. This typical staff sergeant has

been up for over eight hours, and he’d take a nap if he could. He has at least four hours to accomplish several key tasks before he can go home. At about 1500, he gets some extra assignments he could have finished earlier in the day if he’d known about them; he vents. He is going to have to work later than he planned. He pulls into his driveway just past 1800, an average day. It’s been nearly 14 hours since waking. His wife picked the kids up from day care. They watch some television but he snoozes sometime before 2200. His wife, exhausted, drags him to bed. The alarm goes off at 0430.

If this staff sergeant were on the clock, he would have a seven and a half hour day, not a bad deal—unless you account for the time he and the Army don’t use. His breaks comprise three-and-a-half hours of his day. His commutes an average of eighty minutes a day. In total, there are approximately 290 minutes a day that don’t contribute to either mission accomplishment or family; to put it another way, for every hour spent at work the sergeant spends 38 minutes not working. After a 12 to 14 hour day, he finally begins to focus on his family. This model is as enormously inefficient as it is common. It doesn’t account for lost concentration and stress-related fatigue that robs productivity. The Army may accomplish more by 0900 than most people do all day, but this catchy former recruiting slogan fails



U.S. Army, SPC Ben Watson

CPT James G. Repshire, left, along with his teammate, LTC Robert J. Neitzel, team up to push a tire nearly four miles up and down hills, during a customized morning physical training session at Fort Bragg, NC, 23 April 2009.

to tell the whole story. When Soldiers are forced to waste time, they also have to disassemble with “face time,” hiding their resentment at the military’s systematically gross inefficiency. They generally go home primed and ready for friction.

An alternative narrative. Consider a platoon sergeant who has the freedom to conduct afternoon PT. This sergeant first class starts work at 0700. He wakes up around 0530, usually before his alarm goes off. He makes coffee and his wife wakes the kids up at 0600 so they can get ready for school. The family eats breakfast together. He leaves his house at 0630, traffic is light, and he arrives for work in time. He briefs his platoon and tells them that with a little extra hard work they can finish their tasks and go home early. They start work. At noon he and his squad leaders back brief the platoon leader. The platoon is nearly complete so the platoon leader decides on a working lunch. While he briefs the company commander, the platoon eats lunch. This sergeant first class and his platoon have had a five-hour block of solid and productive work without the interruptions of a morning PT schedule. At 1335 they finish their tasks. Two Soldiers leave early for appointments. The others change into PT uniforms in the next 15 minutes and conduct an hour of PT. At 1500 the commander releases them; all tasks have been accomplished to standard, ahead of schedule. He feels great; his body is releasing endorphins after the work out and he feels relaxed. He takes care of some additional paperwork without any significant distractions because his Soldiers are gone. The commute home isn’t during peak hours and he picks the kids up from day care at 1600. He is home a little earlier than his wife and starts warming up dinner. The family spends an enjoyable evening together.

Granting that these two narratives are hypothetical, the meaningful difference is that, with this scenario, PT concludes the day. As a mission goal, it therefore encourages efficiency as it also motivates.

The benefits of afternoon PT. The difference between morning and afternoon PT is readily apparent: for every hour at work, the platoon sergeant spends 13 minutes not accomplishing mission goals or being with his family. Lunch is the one major break in his day; there are two commutes instead of four. The bulk of mission essential tasks are completed when he and his platoon are fresh early in the morning. The total amount of work time before

the end of business is seven and a half hours, the same as with morning PT, but the platoon sergeant returns home an hour and a half earlier. This simple comparison clearly shows afternoon PT is a more productive use of a Soldier’s time. However, the benefits of afternoon PT multiply with other factors, so Soldiers don’t just get more time, they get better use out of the time they have.

It halves commute time, adding the remainder to the Soldier, his family, and his pocket book. Half as many energy-inefficient rush hour commutes equals half the cost Soldiers pay just to get to work.

It multiplies the benefits of physical training. Army work is stressful and by the close of business this has created a toxic brew of noradrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones running rampant through the bloodstream.¹¹ Without strenuous physical activity after work, Soldiers walk through the front door of their homes loaded and primed for conflict or exhausted and disengaged from family. Families and spouses bear the brunt of this pent-up stress, and while Soldiers are decompressing from work, the quality of family time is adversely affected. It is well documented that stress at work carries over to spouses and children.¹² The best way to beat stress at the end of the day is to exercise. Strenuous physical activity removes damaging stress hormones and gives the Soldier an endorphin rush (i.e., the “runner’s high”) that is as effective at creating feelings of well-being and happiness as anti-depressants.¹³ Afternoon PT creates a decompression zone before Soldiers are sent back to their families. Instead of sending leaders and Soldiers back home charged for conflict with other family members, Soldiers go home recharged and relaxed. It helps move Soldiers from a stress-charged work environment into the different emotional climate of the home.

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If Soldiers do have to work late, afternoon PT makes them more productive during the longer hours by increasing oxygen and blood flow to the brain and reducing accumulated stress. It recharges the batteries for home life and for those leaders and Soldiers who have to work late to accomplish the mission.

Afternoon PT improves the safety of physical training because it would always be conducted during hours of visibility—regardless of the season. Also, people are more alert and body temperatures are highest, so muscles are flexible, warm, and muscle strength is greatest.¹⁴ These factors all contribute to a lower chance of injury and can increase the performance of Soldiers on the Army Physical Fitness Test. During the summer months it helps Soldiers acclimatize to conducting strenuous activities when temperatures are higher.

On some posts, afternoon PT parallels the work schedules of civilian support agencies and would enable timelier and better coordinated support.

The benefits of flexibility. Flexibility is a necessary ingredient and benefit in any kind of flextime schedule. Nancy McMillan, a workforce diversity specialist at Eli Lilly and Company says—

Flexible work schedules, such as a compressed work week, offer employees a sense of control over their daily work. This flexibility greatly eases the burden of busy employees as they try to juggle their work and home lives. Creating a work environment with this level of employee control and engagement lifts morale and in turn elevates productivity. Today, our employees tell us that flexibility is the single most important aspect of our work-life environment.¹⁵

Unlike business flextime, where the decision of when to arrive and leave work is determined by employees, Army flextime would ideally depend on company grade leaders to make that call.

In the civil sector, this is called “informal flexibility” or “as-needed flexibility,” and it has the same positive benefits as formal flex-time scheduling. The Army entrusts junior leaders to make decisions based on their assessments during combat deployments; it is critical that when Soldiers redeploy these junior leaders are still empowered to make those decisions in a training environment as well.

Informal flexibility depends on an organizational culture that is transparent so that time-off isn’t seen

in the context of a reward system.¹⁶ A culture of flexibility includes the following attributes:

- Formal and informal arrangements to handle work-family needs as they arrive.
- Rewarding results instead of “face time.”
- An environment where flexibility is viewed as part of the management philosophy.

Obviously the Army is already here in many ways. The Army is a flexible organization and already has a working culture that could rapidly adapt to a flextime system.

An afternoon PT program enables company leaders to accomplish mission-critical tasks first and then do PT as the last training event in the day. When the mission for the day has been completed to standard, leaders can choose when to start and finish PT. When Soldiers get the opportunity to leave work early, it increases their productivity. The Center for Work and Family reports, “Seventy percent of managers and 87 percent of employees reported that working a flexible arrangement had a positive or very positive impact on productivity.”¹⁷

This freedom and flexibility to deal with family pressures and work pressures has significant benefits to the health of Soldiers. According to the Stress Institute of America’s latest figures—

Stress is costing U.S. employers about \$300 billion per year in lost productivity, healthcare, and replacement costs. Stress is the leading cause of unscheduled absence and is linked to higher turnover. Stress is also a major factor in productivity loss due to ‘presenteeism’ when employees come to work too stressed to be effective. Flextime schedules repeatedly demonstrate the capacity to lower employee stress.¹⁸

Health, especially mental health, is an important concern for the Army as it deals with the high level of stress on families and Soldiers.

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Diane F. Halpern, leader of the Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children at Claremont McKenna College and a former president of the American Psychological Association, reports that—

The stress of a job does not depend on the nature of the job as much as it depends on whether workers believe that they have the ability to control the stressful aspects of the job. When employees can make decisions related to the way in which they work, they are able to devise coping strategies that can mitigate the effects of stress.¹⁹

Empowering junior leaders to make decisions about how they manage their Soldiers' time will reduce the stress on the force. With an Army flextime schedule, leaders and Soldiers will find it much easier to balance the other needs of life.

All this is not to say that stress is inherently bad and should be eliminated entirely. Stress is a part of life, a part “type A” personalities thrive in. It can motivate and energize people to accomplish things, and it is also inherent to combat operations. A flexible work schedule allows Soldiers to deal with stress more effectively.

Starting work at 0700 makes possible the synchronization of the Soldier's schedule with the schedule of his family; he can help get his kids off to school. Soldiers who only have one car may find it easier to drive the other spouse to work; this could prevent spouses from sleeping in the car for an hour while the Soldier finishes PT. It sends Soldiers home with more time to prepare for children's extra-curricular activities, and affords them ample time for community activities that usually start in the evening.

An improved work schedule may also contribute to greater retention just as it does among commercial businesses. This is a major concern to the Army. Secretary of the Army Pete Geren stated, “There's no doubt it's a lot of pressure on the Soldier while he or she's at home, a lot of pressure on the family. Our Soldiers have stood up and continued to hang with us as a nation, they continue to re-enlist. But we all recognize that this is not a state that can go on forever.”²⁰ Managers at six major U.S. firms have reported that their flexible work arrangements enhanced retention. In a 2000 National Work/Life Measurement Project study, “76 percent of the 151 managers surveyed at Amway, Bristol-Meyers

Squibb, Honeywell, Kraft, Lucent Technologies, and Motorola indicated positive effects on retention.”²¹

Objections

There are some objections to this plan. The most imposing bugbear is tradition—the Army has enshrined morning PT into an inertial creed. As an institution of military tradition, it is more than three decades old. But the original conditions that made morning PT appealing have clearly changed. The current Army schedule is stuck in a model from the Cold War. The institution has yet to adapt itself to newer societal trends in working families. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are crippling any arguments from tradition, making them as counter-productive as they are aesthetically pleasing. The Army must continually transform to changing and challenging conditions, and family-related stress is a serious and potentially devastating sea change for an all volunteer force. As the deployment cycle puts increasing strain on families and Soldiers, the Army must be progressive enough to adapt to these pressures. The potential return to Army families is considerable enough that afternoon PT and Army flextime schedules present serious arguments against mere tradition.

Some people really enjoy morning PT and consider this an essential part of the day. Some fear losing the early-morning jolt that gets the day started. Others like working out twice a day and would be loath to give up their individual afternoon PT session to the lock-step formations and schedules of group PT. The obvious rebuff to both of these is you can do PT in the morning on your own—an easy change.

Still others will argue that there will be problems getting people from work to the PT field or that there is too much time lost when people change uniforms. It does not take long to change from a work uniform into PT gear, and PT is conducted immediately next to the workplace, as it is for most units, there is no

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problem here. This is obviously unit-dependent; units have the authority to change their own battle rhythms to accomplish PT the right way and with minimal interference to mission accomplishment.

Another concern is that flextime would lead to discipline problems as units would struggle to balance valid family needs with the requirements of the mission. The Army should be up to this leadership challenge. In a study of how hourly managers dealt with the flexibility of their employees, it was found that scheduling and being fair and equitable to the needs of employees and the needs of the business was the largest challenge managers faced.²² In an asymmetric operational environment, Soldiers and leaders are often trusted to make the calls about mission completion. Missions can change as soon as Soldiers roll out of the forward operating base. The added complexity of a flextime schedule can make leaders practice in garrison what they will practice deployed—flexibility.

Another concern is that units may skimp on PT to go home early. Undoubtedly this could be an issue, but it is incumbent upon leaders to enforce standards and ensure physical training meets them. The statistical research does not indicate there will be any significant discipline problems as a result of a flextime policy. Eli Lilly discovered “no difference in supervisors’ performance rating for employees on the different type of schedules, leading the company to conclude that greater flexibility produces greater job satisfaction without a consequent trade-off in employee performance.”²³

Army Flextime Battle Rhythm

Afternoon physical training is the key to an Army flextime battle rhythm. As long as the Army continues to emphasize morning PT, the garrison schedule will change little. The plan outlined in this paper is simple, executed quickly, and cost-effective. The compressed operational tempo of the Army shows no sign of slacking in the coming years, and any changes which conclusively provide benefits to families, Soldiers, and the Army should be implemented without delay. Strong empirical evidence confirms flextime works; the findings from corporations are nearly unanimous. Flexible work schedules have had a proven positive impact

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on productivity, retention, and morale. Research specifically tied to the Army and to afternoon versus morning PT should be conducted. However, lengthy analysis is unnecessary. Leaders who test afternoon PT will know quickly if it works—just as they did in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In a world where the counterinsurgency fight is company-centric, Army flextime represents company-centric personnel management. Complicated and sophisticated plans from headquarters higher than brigades are simply not needed. Informal flexibility and other working arrangements can be implemented and executed at the company level. All that is needed to effectively implement this plan Army wide is a recognition and intent from senior leaders to become flexible. The removal of mandatory morning PT is the key through which flextime can be implemented.

The Army as a whole must prepare for future mission requirements. A flextime schedule for the Army would represent a significant change to the structure of the day, but not to the overall culture of the Army. Combat operations emphasize flexibility and empowerment of junior leaders to eradicate inefficiencies. In garrison, a daily battle rhythm with an overextended lunch hour and twice as many commutes as necessary presents similar inefficiencies. Commanders returning from deployments must balance work with refit, allowing Soldiers the maximum amount of time to reintegrate with their families and rest while meeting training objectives. With the compressed time lines units currently face, leaders balance all the competing demands on their Soldiers’ time with difficulty. Every inefficiency, large and small, must be squeezed out of the Army day if units are to meet the demands on family. Readiness is at stake. **MR**

NOTES

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Answering the Village Elder in Qandahar Province

**We'll get it done, although I don't know how.
I know we promised stuff to eat and wear.
Remind him that we're working on it now —
What generators we said we'd repair**

**I know we promised stuff to eat and wear,
But half our unit's fighting in the hills —
What water pumps did we say we'd repair?
He has to wait until the fighting stills,**

**'Cause half our unit's busy in the hills.
One truck can't bring both mortar rounds and seeds.
He has to wait until the fighting stills.
I understand his problems and his needs —**

**One truck can't bring both mortar rounds and seeds!
Tell him again: our trucks can't risk that road,
I understand his problems and his needs —
Christ, how did they manage before we showed?**

**Tell him again! Our trucks can't risk that road —
He repeats himself, it's all in my notes.
Christ, how did they manage before we showed?
Apologize again for those dead goats.**

**— He repeats himself, it's all in my notes.
Remind him that we're working on it now,
Apologize again for those dead goats,
We'll get it done. Although I don't know how.**