

## Section Six: Hours That Come with the Industry: Faces of Flexibility

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As workforce culture continues to change, the term *flexibility* seems to be taking on dual meanings when it refers to jobs. Employees might use the term to describe a desire for more [work-life balance](#)—perhaps a schedule that accommodates longer work days but shorter work weeks or one that doesn't require a physical presence at the workplace every day. But flexibility also often means an employee needs to be available for jobs, meetings, or tasks that come up or change at the last minute, if that kind of variability is inherent in the type of work they do or the role they fill in the business. The type of flexibility that prevails can really depend on the industry you work in.

Hours considered unpredictable in other contexts may just be the norm for certain industries and for many smaller businesses in which employees may also have management or administrative responsibilities. These situations require employees and employers both to be somewhat flexible; for example, employees may be asked to change their schedules at times to come in when needed, but they are also given the option to turn down extra shifts without penalty if they cannot come in. While some degree of variability in hours is inherent to certain types of work, the amount of control employees have over their own work hours is often what distinguishes flexibility from unpredictability.

In this section, *Invested* talked with six employees across several industries with variable schedules and different types and levels of flexibility. They share their experiences, how they've adjusted to their individual situations, and what they've learned from them.

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*“It just didn't happen, taking time off unexpectedly. If I had a scheduling conflict for whatever reason, it was my responsibility to find a different way to make that other commitment work outside of the work schedule.”*

**Rachael Collins** works as a *sous* chef at Juliet, a fine-dining restaurant in Massachusetts. The following interview was conducted on August 8, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: pastry assistant, executive pastry chef, prep cook, sous chef*

*Current job shift/hours: full-time, mid-afternoon to late evening, scheduled days off*

*Schedule at current job received: two weeks in advance*

*Schedule format/accessibility at current job: electronic, via email and scheduling app*

Q: In previous jobs, have you experienced different kinds of hours, longer hours, more difficult scheduling, or last-minute scheduling?

A: In a lot of fine-dining restaurants where the majority of *sous* chefs and prep cooks work, the hours start in the middle of the afternoon and continue into the very late hours of the evening or very early hours of the morning. At my current restaurant, we value our employees' time and we are normally finished by 11:00 or 11:30 in the evening. That might seem late to other people, but for the restaurant industry, it's an early night, which allows us to use public transportation and find safe, appropriate means to get to and from our homes.

In my previous positions, our restaurant was open until 11:00 or 12:00 at night, and that forced us to sometimes use public transit if it was available or take our own vehicle or a taxi, a Lyft, or an Uber to get home. And with the wages that we're earning, that eats away at the income we can take home and use for the things that we absolutely need. So, very long work hours. Even still, it's not uncommon for me to work a 12-hour day. You're constantly on your feet. The breaks are at a minimum, and you work through that day to make sure that all of your tasks are completed on time.

But you also don't know when you're going to be working that week. That was my experience in previous restaurants. Some days I might have a Monday and a Tuesday off back-to-back, which is great—I could schedule an appointment and know that I'm going to have that day off. But more times than not in the previous restaurants where I've worked, we had no control over which days we would be working or the time that we would be leaving work in the evenings, and that didn't allow for scheduling of preventative care. I don't have a child, but my coworkers did, and they couldn't schedule childcare effectively. All those scheduling inconsistencies really affected our lives outside of work.

Q: When your current workplace does scheduling now, or when it was done for you in your previous roles, how is it usually done?

A: In the past, the schedule was printed out and posted somewhere within the kitchen or in an office. A lot of times, we would have a week or a week-and-a-half notice, but there were always those instances where the schedule would come out a day or two before that new schedule was supposed to take effect. Now, at my current workplace, we know our schedule two weeks in advance. It is emailed to us, and it's also available through an app that we can access from our phones or computers. We have very consistent scheduled days and shifts, so I know that, say, every Wednesday I'm going to work a specific set of hours, which allows me to take the time that I need outside of work to do the things that I need to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Q: What would happen typically if there were a day when you had to call out last minute, or even with some notice? Do you get some time off, and would you be paid for that? Would you ever be in danger of losing your job if you had to take a day off unexpectedly?

A: At my current restaurant, the repercussions wouldn't be very drastic. We do have a small team, but we are very flexible with how we work with our team about needing to leave early or not being able to work on a given day. Everybody pulls together as a team and makes sure that employees can take the time off that they need. But on the other side, where I've worked in other restaurants, which is more of the norm in our industry, you were shunned for needing to take a day off to care for yourself if you felt

that was necessary. And when you returned to work again, you would get kind of mistreated for a while, to kind of teach you a lesson, before you were again fully accepted to work that shift with the rest of the team. It just didn't happen, taking time off unexpectedly. If I had a scheduling conflict for whatever reason, it was my responsibility to find a different way to make that other commitment work outside of the work schedule.

Q: Were there instances where people would have to come in to work even if they were sick, just to be sure they could keep their job?

A: Absolutely. There are so many times, I can't even count, when I've come to work very, very ill. I previously worked in the healthcare field before switching over to the restaurant industry, so I know the importance of taking care of yourself and keeping your germs to yourself. But in the restaurant industry, it's generally understood that you will [work through your illness](#). The only reason you don't show up to work is if you're in the hospital and physically unable to come in to work. I forget the percentage, but it's in the high 90s, of restaurant workers that have reported coming to work sick. The joke in our industry is that you don't go out to eat on New Year's Eve, because everybody in the restaurants is required to work whether they're sick or not. And as hard as we try to keep the cross-contamination from happening, it still happens, and our diners still get exposed to whatever virus we might be carrying.

Q: What happens financially for you when your hours aren't predictable or you get a last-minute schedule change or you can't get enough hours? How does that impact you financially in terms of planning for your bills, being able to pay for transit, and things like that?

A: Again, in my current position, having flexibility with the types of shifts that I'm working allows me to do those extra things that I need to, but it also reassures me that if I'm working 40 hours by the end of that week, I'm going to get paid for those 40 hours. We also have paid vacation in my current workplace, but in other restaurants, if you weren't actually there working a shift, you didn't get paid at all. Missed hours mean less money, which means I don't have the money I need to pay for public transportation that week or part of the next month, and I don't have enough money to put food on my table. In fact, we restaurant workers use public food-assistance programs at twice the rate of any other industry to provide for our families.

Q: Are there any positive aspects of working flexible hours?

A: That doesn't really apply to us, because if our restaurant is open seven days a week, there's seven days of work to do. And even though you might be able to put in a 10- or a 12-hour day one day a week, that doesn't prevent you from needing to work those other days to complete prep work or cook the food for our guests.

Q: What would you suggest to restaurant owners as the best way to mitigate the effects on their employees of unpredictable scheduling? What would help people to be more stable in their jobs and their income and also more productive at work?

A: You know, I've really found recently at the current position that I'm in that having a schedule two weeks in advance really does allow us to plan for those other things that need to happen in our lives. And when you put that consistency into our scheduling—knowing so many days in advance, every Wednesday I'm going to work this shift, every Friday I'm going to work this shift—it creates a better life for us. We can plan things outside of work. We're not always worried about when we might have to work last minute. So for other employers that are out there—I know, because I've done scheduling for our team, that it's possible to prepare a schedule two, three, or four weeks in advance. But it's about pushing yourself to create a schedule that's cohesive for your team and your restaurant and that makes sense. For the employer, it's easier to have that schedule two or three weeks in advance, creating that schedule once a month or twice a month versus every single week. It takes less time. It's better for us. It makes sense.

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*“This job is my passion, so it’s totally worth the ridiculous hours that I have to work and staying late or coming in on the spot to do something for somebody. It’s extremely worth it. I’m much happier than I was before.”*

**Liliana Jimenez** works as a dance instructor and studio co-director in Massachusetts. The following interview was conducted on August 3, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: healthcare industry*

*Current job shift/hours: full-time, weekdays 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., Saturdays highly variable, Sundays 12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., plus additional session hours as needed*

*Schedule updates at current job received: regular hours fairly consistent, but additional classes and sessions scheduled as they come up*

*Schedule format/accessibility at current job: in-house software system, accessible by computer, changes made via email*

Q: What is your work situation now?

A: Currently I work as a dance studio director in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the hours are all over the place. It varies month to month. For example, the past three months I have been doing one-on-one sessions more because clients have more time available in the summer. We're also teaching our classes late in the evenings and have been having extra rehearsals because we're preparing for a big festival here in Boston that's coming up next month. And on top of that, I decided to take on another job to teach in Lynn as well. That's not exactly typical for me, but seasonally, my schedule can change a lot.

Q: Do you have a normal set schedule of hours and then it adjusts from there?

A: Yes. My typical schedule runs from 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. every night on weekdays. Saturdays tend to be very erratic. The first two Saturdays this month, for example, I am booked from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. So I don't have a weekend—that doesn't exist for me. And Sundays, I am there normally from

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12:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., depending on the situation. So weekends are long, and weekdays are more relaxed days for me.

Q: What does your schedule include besides classes and one-on-one sessions?

A: We have special dance events that we hold every month, but for this month we just added another one, so now it's two Saturdays that I have to book. We love to provide for the community but, again, it's just that the schedule gets very crazy, trying to balance everything.

Q: Have you had any jobs in the past with very regular or very variable hours?

A: I used to work at a hospital, and I preferred the night shift. It is not a typical preferred shift for most people, but I'm not a morning person, so it worked out very well for me. Normally, people who do nursing and nursing assistance have to do rotational shifts, but I got lucky because someone quit and they had a permanent shift for nights, four times a week. Consistent hours like that is a very rare situation for that kind of job. But a lot of people don't like to do night shifts, like I said. At the time, I was also starting to work at the dance studio—so I was working nights, and then I would sleep maybe four hours, and then I would go to the studio.

Q: In your current job, how does scheduling usually work? Do you have situations where your boss will call you and say, we've changed your schedule and we need you to come in now? How much notice do you usually get for changes like that?

A: It depends on the situation. I work as a co-director with the owner of the studio, but he's the one who cuts the checks. We also have a manager who helps us organize the administrative side, and she sets up appointments for me. We had to have a discussion about scheduling because there were instances when I might get a call that I had a newly scheduled appointment in Cambridge in an hour, for instance, but I might be in Lynn or somewhere else, and I wouldn't be able to make it in time—so I needed a little bit more notice. Although we addressed the issue, there was a good period of time that some of the scheduling would just be on the fly, and it was very stressful. I'm an organizer, I like to plan my day and that's how I like my day to go, so if someone interrupts the flow of the day, it might be disturbing something else I had scheduled—a meeting that I had or a practice or a one-on-one session.

Q: It sounds like your work schedule significantly impacts the rest of your life, but that you also like some of the flexibility of being able to work shifts that are more comfortable for you. How do you balance that? Is it something you like—having that flexibility—or are there times when it becomes burdensome to have to change a lot?

A: I do love the flexibility, but I do suffer a little bit in terms of a personal life. It's hard for me to meet up with people that I want to hang out with if they have a stable job or a nine-to-five job. For me, I can really only go out at 11 in the morning! By later into the night, I'm so tired from working that I don't even want to go out; I just want to go home and sleep and that's it. My weekends, as I said, are nonexistent, and even when I do get a Saturday night off, I just want to be home and relax. So I do suffer

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a lot on the personal-life side. I'm trying to find a balance to meet up with people, be social, and be available—but it takes a toll, for sure.

Q: How does having variable work hours affect your ability to manage your bills, save money for the future, and things like that?

A: It is very difficult to manage, since there's no stable check and health insurance isn't included. I have to do everything related to my job on my own; I pay my own taxes and get my own health insurance, and that's probably the only thing I really don't like about my current job situation. It's been very difficult to save money. But I have recently started picking up the pace, and I know I have to just be patient since it's a small business, and my work will hopefully pay off in the future.

Q: Does it sometimes help to have the ability to work more hours to earn extra money? Is that a plus in your current situation?

A: It is a plus for sure. Last month I earned probably the most money yet because I had a lot of clients who wanted to do one-on-one sessions. So that worked out for me and I was happy to do it, but I know that's not going to happen consistently every month. So when that happens, maybe I'll pay off a credit card that I needed to pay or just settle whatever bills I can settle so I can live a little bit more comfortable life. But I don't take vacations; it is really hard to take a vacation with my schedule and on my budget.

Q: If you could make your hours more regular, would you choose to do that?

A: No, I think I would work and fight to find a way to keep the flexibility, for sure.

Q: Does a more flexible schedule help to free you up for anything else—taking classes, for instance?

A: It does and it doesn't. As a dancer, you never want to stop training. It's difficult, because all the adult-level classes are at night. It makes sense, market-wise, because many adults taking dance classes work nine-to-five and can barely make it for a 6:30 class, so they love their classes from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.; that's their ideal time and I get that. So in those terms, that's difficult, but in the sense of the business side, having daytime hours free on weekdays gives me more freedom to study up on the business more and work on it on the administrative side, and that works out really well for me.

Q: Do you want to run a studio eventually? Would you say that this kind of work is pretty typical for how folks get to that level?

A: I would love to run a studio eventually. It's a tough market, though, because there are not that many studios overall. There are a few studios here in Boston for Latin dance, specifically. In terms of running a studio and really building it, it's very difficult. Working with this company, we've worked together to really build our client base. It would be scary for me to leave and start over because I know how much work it is to build it right back up from the start again.

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Q: Are there other teachers at the studio? Do a lot of the teachers have a second job if they're doing this kind of teaching?

A: There are two other instructors—the co-director, he also teaches, and we have a new person who teaches part-time, but she's also in a graduate program. It's very typical for people to have a second job. We have performance groups and the company dance team, and everyone on the team has a second job. But they come here every day, to the studio.

Q: If your studio were required to have everyone work on a regular schedule with set hours, would that be difficult for you all to comply with?

A: I think it would be a little bit difficult because maybe a requirement like that would make it hard to do either more or fewer hours; that's not what a lot of the teachers want, so then they might go somewhere else where they can get the hours they want. Good instructors like our new teacher are hard to find, and you want to keep them. And if the students are happy with that instructor, they're going to stay because of that—so if the instructor leaves for a different studio to get the hours they need, their students are going to follow them there.

Q: You mentioned that at one point you were having difficulty because there were a lot of last-minute schedule changes. Did you and your coworkers set up a system that made it easier to manage that and create less conflict?

A: No. I literally have an "I just show up" attitude—just tell me when to come and I'll be there. My boss changes the schedule every three months, so each session of classes is three months. The seasonal schedule makes sense for us. For the summer, for example, we may cut some classes because clients go on vacation, and that totally makes sense; our attendance drops a little in the summer. Fall and winter really pick up, and it makes sense to add more classes. I expect that in the fall there will be more classes, so that means more hours for me. But they might add something new and then I'll have to teach it. There's no system for it. It's just kind of preparing for it and getting a heads-up when changes occur.

Q: What happens if you get sick or you want to take some time off—can you do that? Would that be paid time off? How do you handle people being away with such a small staff?

A: My boss is really awesome—he knows I pretty much work every day. When I worked in the hospital, I could be really sick and I'd still come to work. But my current boss is very flexible—I just have to ask for time off if I need it and he'll let me have it. It will be paid time off.

I can tell you that we recently had a rare experience where my manager, the instructor, and my boss all decided to take vacation the same week. They didn't know that they were all taking the same week off, and maybe a few days before, they realized what happened. And I said, you know, it's okay, I've got this; but I'm kind of nervous inside, having to run everything by myself in the studio. So there's a situation where it's just me, and I have to run three or four classes every day—somehow, I have to teach all of

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these classes. The first day that I was running it by myself, I hired an outside instructor to come in to help me, and then he forgot that that day he was hired for something else. This is when it can be super, super stressful and erratic, and I think I worked a ridiculous number of hours that week. So it can be that kind of situation too, where I just have to take on everybody's role suddenly.

Q: Do you like working on a schedule like the one you have now, and do you expect that you will continue working like this?

A: I love working like this. I did find myself really bored at the hospital; it was just the same thing, same routine every day. Maybe one or two nights were a little crazy, but I really didn't feel that I had a purpose in that job, and I felt like I was just walking in every day and that's it. But this job is my passion, so it's totally worth the ridiculous hours that I have to work and staying late or coming in on the spot to do something for somebody. It's extremely worth it. I'm much happier than I was before.

Q: When you have a particularly busy week, is there a point at which you earn overtime or are compensated in some way for that extra work?

A: Sort of. I have to keep track of my hours, and if I work extra hours or if there is an event that requires a lot more from me than expected, then my boss will pay me for it. It's basically, "Here you go—I felt like you did more than what you had to do." So those are nice surprises where I felt like I worked hard, but I wasn't expecting some kind of extra cash in my pocket. He's a very good boss; we're really good friends, and it works out. We're very supportive of each other and we're both passionate about this, and we just try to help each other out when it's needed.

Q: Clearly, you like a lot of things about the flexibility in your job. What types of things can you think of that would improve the aspects of it that aren't that great?

A: I think it would help if we could develop a system to keep the flexibility in balance, so that there would be fewer last-minute changes that could disrupt somebody else's time with me or a session I have planned. We're working on it. Communication can always be improved with any workplace.

Q: If there were an app or some other kind of real-time system for scheduling available to you, do you think that would help in your particular studio?

A: I think that would be amazing, yeah. That week that everybody was gone, for example, I had to ask if some outside instructors were available, and all I could do was just text or call them repeatedly on the phone, so there's not a cohesive system for that for us. And even the fact that everybody didn't know they were taking the same vacation—if there were a system where everybody could just see the conversation and tag people, it would be great.

We use one of the software systems that a lot of businesses use, and that has been a great organizational tool for us in terms of the students and the retail and the business side, but in terms of scheduling or rescheduling our time, our system still needs a little bit of work. For example, I wasn't



available next Thursday, and I discovered a way to put that in the system, but I wouldn't have known how to do that unless I looked it up, and that still doesn't notify my boss or the manager that I'm not available that day. It doesn't make any notification. But my boyfriend works for a company where they use a kind of scheduling app with different topics and different groups. That would be great for us because sometimes my manager will email me and her email ends up in my spam folder or I don't receive it. So an app system with notifications would definitely be super beneficial.

Q: Is there anything else you want people to know about what it's like to work on a variable schedule in your particular job?

A: I honestly love what I do and feel very blessed. This job has helped me grow into this leadership position that I didn't ever think I could achieve; working at the hospital, I don't think I could ever have gotten to that kind of role. And now I've been able to take on the role of really being a boss and a role model to people of all ages, and I would not change that. It's worth all the craziness and the erratic hours, and maybe even the questionable pay every month. It's still worth it for me.

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*“You have to get used to it if you're going to be in this business. You learn as an apprentice that you can't spend all your money because next week you might only work three days or four days. You've kind of just got to manage your money, or you're in trouble.”*

**Michael Fay** works as a union bricklayer in Massachusetts. This interview was conducted on September 7, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: same industry, and clam digging*

*Current job shift/hours: 7:00 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.*

*Schedule over the course of the year: off work in the winter season*

*Schedule format/accessibility in current job: by phone or email*

Q: What is your job and what do you do in that job?

A: My current job is a union bricklayer, and I lay brick all day. I've worked in the industry for 31 years.

Q: Does the company you work for typically contract out with companies?

A: I usually go through the union hall, but I've been with this company for seven years, so they keep me going. I usually work from March to January and have January and February off, because it's too cold to lay brick.

Q: What does a typical work week look like for you, schedule-wise?

A: It depends on the weather. It's usually 7:00 to 3:15, and then sometimes there's overtime, but very rarely.

Q: And you'd say that's pretty typical for the industry?

A: Yeah.

Q: Are there experiences that you've had where your job assignment will change at the last minute or you'll have very short notice?

A: Yeah, all the time. It depends on the job situation. Sometimes you'll run into problems where something isn't set up right and you can't continue the job, and you'll call the boss and they'll say, "Go to this other job for the rest of the day." I do stuff like that all the time. And weather is a big issue. When it's a really rainy day, for example, I have to show up anyway, because I'm the foreman. If it starts raining, we just call it a day and show up again tomorrow. But you kind of get used to it—if you're going to be in this business, that's how it is. It's not going to change.

Q: When that happens and you aren't working your usual full hours, do you still get paid for those hours?

A: Not typically, no—you usually get paid just for the hours you work.

Q: Do you feel like you can usually make up the time?

A: You usually make it up somewhere, in overtime or something like that. Some weeks you work 24 hours, some weeks you work 50 hours. It balances out in the long run throughout the year.

Q: How do you usually get your schedule?

A: We just use our cell phones and email to find out when we are working. I'll call my boss—like, on a rainy day, I'll say, "It's raining; what do you want to do?" If he has work on other jobs that are inside, he'll send some guys there, and if not, then you go home. You get put on each job for a certain amount of time. Like, I'm a bricklayer, so I'll be put on a job for a certain amount of brick work, and once that's completed I'll go to another job. There will be cement finishing or something that I don't do left on the first job, and they'll bring someone else in to do that.

Q: Do you ever come in on a job that's half started, or that you're taking over for someone else?

A: Sometimes. The company or the owner of the building won't be happy with the contractor, so he'll throw them off, and we'll come in and pick up midstream and continue the job. That happens sometimes.

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Q: In the instances when you work more hours or a job goes over the scheduled time, do you get overtime or some other kind of compensation?

A: Yeah, we get double time, so that's where we make up the money from days we don't work. But that doesn't happen a lot because they don't want to pay the double time.

Q: How does it impact the rest of your life to have unpredictable hours, or maybe be off for a season?

A: You have to get used to it if you're going to be in this business. You learn as an apprentice that you can't spend all your money because next week you might only work three days or four days. You've kind of just got to manage your money, or you're in trouble. After being in the business for a while, you've got to just use your head a little bit, plan for some down time here and there.

Q: And you're able to take some vacation?

A: Oh yeah, I can take vacation. I usually take vacation when I'm laid off in the winter. But I also do a lot of side work, like I'll do people's stairs and chimneys and walkways. You make up the money difference there too.

Q: And if you get sick during your usual work time, do you have sick days?

A: Yeah, we do—not too many, but we do.

Q: Do you get to be involved with deciding what your schedule will be?

A: Yeah, I am. If I want to take some time off, I have to give them some notice because they'll have to bring in someone else to run the job, and I've got to show them the blueprints and stuff. I can't just say on a Friday, "I'm taking next week off," you know? I've got to give them a couple weeks' notice and they're usually not happy about that. So I try not to do that, but if something happens, you know...

Q: Do you find, since you've been in your industry for a while, that when newer, younger people come in, they're not used to this kind of schedule?

A: Well ... you want an honest answer? What I'm finding is that a lot of the younger guys that are coming in, they're used to relying on technology, and they're kind of lazy. They want to be on their phone all day, texting their friends, and you can't do that in this job. So if they can't get used to the schedule, you just have to say, "You're laid off. We can't use you."

Q: So what do you think is the most difficult thing about working on this kind of schedule?

A: Honestly, I like it, myself, because I'm an early bird, so I get up at 4:00 in the morning and I'm home by 4:00 in the afternoon. Then in the summer I can go out on my boat, do side jobs, a bunch of different

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things. So it's good as far as that goes. But in the winter, you get up and it's dark, and you go home and it's dark, so you can't do much else around your work hours. But I like being outside, getting fresh air.

Q: Are there any things that you think might make it easier for folks in your industry to maybe deal with the off-season, or the hours, or jobs being canceled?

A: Not really. You've just got to prepare. When you're making good money, you can't just go spend it. You've got to put some away for rainy days, so to speak.

Q: Is there anything else you wish people knew about the way you work in your job?

A: Go to college! No, you know, I like what I'm doing, but it's hard work, and after doing it 32 years, I'm tired. So, you know, I can't wait to retire.

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*“Having less personal time means a lot fewer things getting done, of course—and there's always something to do on your own house or your own property. But as the employee, if the boss says to be there, you have to be there. And, of course, the more you work, the more money you make.”*

**Bob Anderson** is a home remodeler in Massachusetts. This interview was conducted on September 22, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: construction and remodeling*

*Current job shift/hours: 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., average of 48 hours per week, plus side work*

*Schedule at current job received: hours remain roughly consistent, but work site locations change*

*Schedule format/accessibility in current job: by phone*

Q: How long have you been working in your current job, and how long have you been in your industry?

A: I've been working in this industry for 25 years now. I've worked for probably 10 different main employers. I've been with my current employer for 10 to 12 years.

Q: Have you had unpredictable hours in the types of jobs that you've worked in the past or in your current job? In what way are the hours unpredictable?

A: Let's see—at one point, I did work for myself. I had a siding company, and as for unpredictability, there are so many factors. You could have issues with the owner or the customer. They may not want you there on certain days or hours. You may have a job that needs to get done by a certain time, so you'll have to stay a little late—stay extra hours, extra days. If you use subcontractors on a job, you have

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to schedule them as well. If you have an electrician available one day and you can't do that particular part of the job that day, you've got to rearrange things to move it up. So there are many factors.

Q: Have you had variable schedules when you've been an employee for somebody else?

A: The most recent employer has been pretty stable. We've been able to work pretty good hours, very stable. However, with the recent rush in the industry from the economy being good, there's a lot of work, so they expect you to do a little more—extra days and extra hours. That might include weekend hours as well as maybe an hour or two extra a day. And as far as juggling different jobs, of course, you could be in Arlington one day and somewhere else the next day. Even if you're working for someone else, there could be issues with their subcontractors and their customers—anything can happen. So that makes it a little difficult.

Q: Does your employer give you a reason if your shift is ever rescheduled or your work is changed on a particular day?

A: Yeah, they'll let us know what happened. They'll tell us that we need to get a certain job done or we have to go here this day because the only availability to be on site working on that job is that particular day.

Q: If you have to work longer hours on a particular day than you anticipated, are you compensated extra for those hours?

A: Yes.

Q: What effect does your schedule have on your ability to plan for your own personal responsibilities and financial responsibilities?

A: Well, having less personal time means a lot fewer things getting done, of course—and there's always something to do on your own house or your own property. But as the employee, if the boss says to be there, you have to be there. And, of course, the more you work, the more money you make. Having a side business as well, though—I do my own finish work and other things on the side—that takes up a lot of time. So there just aren't enough hours in the day, to be honest.

Q: In a given week, do you know your schedule in terms of the number of hours that you're going to be working in advance?

A: In advance? Not particularly. We can anticipate, because as I stated before, with the economy you are pretty much guaranteed a 40-hour workweek. Right now, we can also almost guarantee a five-day week. And we have other employees working with us, some of whom are up to 60 hours a week at this point. But yeah, that's barring any out-of-the-way issue where they say, all of a sudden, something came up and you can't go work on this job for a given reason. Then you lose that day or you reschedule something else—so, having a side business, I just move the hours on over to the side business for myself

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in that situation. But the more flexible your customers are, if they know you're going to show up but it doesn't matter as much when you do a particular aspect of that job, that makes things smoother for the schedule.

Q: If you're already working 40 hours a week and your boss asks you to work additional hours, do you have the option of saying no?

A: Yes, it's not a requirement.

Q: What would you say is the most difficult thing about the hours that you work in your current job?

A: The most difficult thing, I'd have to say, is the standard hour that you start and stop working each day. If it could be a little bit more flexible—say, in the summertime, when you have more sunlight, if you could start earlier and leave earlier, then you could put more time into other projects. We're on pretty standard time, so, you know, they like to have us 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.—very stringent. That makes sense, because it gives the homeowner time to do their thing and know when we are coming, but for us personally, if there could be a little more flexibility in the range of hours, that would definitely help.

Q: Do you think there are positive aspects of the hours that you work?

A: Well, one thing is, you can count on it: if it's 8:00 to 4:30 every day, then you know exactly what time you're going to be home and what time you're going to start, and you can anticipate the timing of your commute and things like that. So that's one advantage.

Q: So it sounds like most of the scheduling challenges that you've talked about are challenges that are either due to the economy or just the nature of the industry. Would you say that's correct?

A: Absolutely. That's it—the nature of the industry and, again, certain personal things—but not much else fluctuates and it's a pretty stable industry overall, I would say. The scheduling, again, it can be tricky when things change at the last minute, but I think recently—and especially with my last employer—it's good to know and anticipate that you generally have the same hours, so you can work the rest of your day around that.

Q: You mentioned that the economy is good right now and there's a lot of work, so it's never a question of not getting enough hours at this point. Have you ever had jobs in the past where that was an issue?

A: During a bad economy, oh yeah, absolutely. Personally I really haven't been affected; I've been very fortunate to have a lot of good contacts and a lot of work thrown my way. But there was one particular time when there was no work, and that was really bad. We were lucky to get 24 or maybe 30 hours a week. There was a time in the 1980s like that, where it was a really bad economy. Again, I guess it all depends on your clients, your contacts, and the people you know. When you put yourself out there, if your name is dependable and you have a business base, then I think you could survive a lot of that. But,

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yeah, that was one difficult period. Generally though, I haven't really seen it; I feel I've been very lucky that way.

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*“So, it’s just the type of company you work for, I think, that allows you to have a life. This particular bookstore really caters to that and is really into flexibility. They’re understanding about scheduling their employees.”*

**Lisa Foley** works as a staff member for a large retailer in Massachusetts. The following interview was conducted on August 11, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: other retail, food service, office jobs, temping*

*Current job shift/hours: part-time, up to 20 hours per week, 8 a.m.-4 p.m., no evenings or Sundays*

*Schedule at current job received: two to three weeks in advance*

*Schedule format/accessibility of current job: electronic, via scheduling app and email*

Q: Tell me a little bit about the job you have now—the type of job that you’re doing. Does it have unpredictable hours or have you ever had jobs in the past with unpredictable hours?

A: Yeah, it’s retail. So retail is, by nature, unpredictable hours. I think there are some cases where you can get solid hours. But for the most part, when you’re hired, the expectation is that you be flexible to work when they need you on the schedule, because obviously you’re working with other people who are also doing part-time hours, so they’re scheduled flexible as well. I’ve worked in food service and that was always—you had to be flexible. So I would say in any type of retail or food service, that’s generally the norm.

Q: What are your hours like in this job and in some of these other jobs where you’ve had unpredictable hours? For example, were shift assignments changed at the last minute? Were you called into work at the last minute? Were you sent home sometimes if the workload was light in any of these jobs?

A: Yeah, back in the day, when I was doing food service, I think that was mostly when you would find you’d be “on call,” and they would either call you in if they needed you or not. So basically you would have that day with the expectation that you probably would get called in, so you would arrange your schedule thinking you might be—but you might not be. So I would think of my day as, “Well, I have to work today,” just in case I did get called, because you’re on call, so you’re expected to go in if they need you. And a lot with food services, if it’s a slow day, they’ll cut people early. This was back years ago when I did food service, but I think it’s even the same today: if it’s a slow shift, they’ll start cutting people early, but they usually ask, do you want to get cut early?

Q: From your experience, just from the jobs you’ve had, when you were sent home early or if they didn’t call you in on an “on-call” day, did they give you any kind of compensation?

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A: No. Nothing. If you were cut early or if you were on call and not called in, you weren't compensated for it. That was just the way it was. I've found it's kind of the choice of the employer. Say, the job I have right now, we have meetings—sometimes we'll have an all-store meeting. They'll pay us for the time for going in for that. Not all companies are like that. You'll come in for a meeting, but they won't pay you for it. This company as well—we've had closures because of the weather, and we've gotten paid. But that's kind of at their discretion. It's one of the nice things about this company, because I know that's not standard across the board.

Q: So with jobs with unpredictable hours, you don't really have a sense of how many hours you're going to get each week—or do you in your job? Are you guaranteed a certain number of hours?

A: No. I have had weeks where I've worked one day; I've had weeks where I've worked five days. I'm part-time though, so it's never usually more than 20 hours a week. The week that it was one day was kind of a surprise. But in the applications that we use on the phones, people are able to post shifts that they either want to switch with somebody or they don't want to work that day, so somebody can pick it up—and I wound up at least picking up two days that week. So it was good to have that, at least. You can also ask for more shifts—you can tell your manager, "You know, I don't have a lot of shifts this week. If somebody calls in sick, call me." And they'll usually do that for you as well.

Q: What effect, if any, does your unpredictable work schedule have on your ability to manage or complete your responsibilities or duties at work?

A: Well, this particular job—it's not bad to do my scheduling simply because they do the schedule two to three weeks in advance. In the past, I've worked at places that did it every week. I think it's really considerate to do it this way. It's a lot easier to try to judge—especially if a doctor's appointment comes up or something social comes up, I'm able to go back to them and change my shift or I'm able to post the shift to see if someone will take it. So it's really easy with this job to arrange. And in my particular case, I only offer to work 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., so I don't usually work nights. I've been there almost a year, so they know that's where I fall now. And I know that I'm almost always going to work on a Saturday because they let me have Sundays off—for football! (laughs) So, it's just the type of company you work for, I think, that allows you to have a life. This particular bookstore really caters to that and is really into flexibility. They're understanding about scheduling their employees. I've never run into an issue.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about that scheduling app that they use?

A: It's called Dayforce HCM. When I've worked for temp agencies—they have payroll and things like that online, where you submit your time card and stuff. This is the first time I've actually had an app that has the schedule, so it's really great. It's very easy to use. That's how I tell them when I'm available for shifts; that's how I tell them when I'm not available; that's where you would pick up another shift or where you'd post your shift. Everybody gets emails about this. It automatically will go into your Google calendar where your schedule is. And it works really well!

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Q: And the managers are all tied in, so you get approval?

A: Yeah, exactly. If I want days off, it goes through there, and they approve it. And you'll see right away that they approved it.

Q: And have you been using it ever since you started working at the bookstore? Have they had it all along?

A: Every day. I don't know how long they've had it, but since day one for me. And they definitely encourage you. They're like, "Download this as soon as possible. This is how you get scheduled." They don't post anything in the office. And it tells you what department you're working in as well, so you know exactly where you're supposed to go. But that's kind of flexible: when you get in, depending on whether somebody calls in sick, you may need to cover another department.

Q: Getting back to some of the other aspects of unpredictable work schedules, what effect, if any, does having an unpredictable work schedule have on your ability to plan or meet your own financial responsibilities—say, your monthly bills?

A: That can definitely get problematic. But, again, you're working retail, so that's kind of par for the course. You know, one of those weeks where I just was scheduled for one day—there was no rhyme or reason to it; it just kind of happened, and it happens to everybody. That does get to be a problem because you don't know how much money you're going to make. But, yeah, that's just something you have to expect and work with. And when that happens to me, I usually try to pick up extra hours the following week to try to make it up monthly.

Q: What effect, if any, does the unpredictable work schedule have on your ability to advance your own career? You know, education or other things you may want to do in the future. Does it have any impact?

A: Again, with this particular company, they have allowed me to have my nights, so it's all about what company you're working for. Some companies are just really into being very good with their employees that way; some companies don't care. So I'm lucky right now that I'm working for a company that definitely does care. Especially if they knew somebody was starting to go to night school—we have a lot of kids that go off to college and come back—they welcome them with open arms during the holiday season and during the summer. So it's about the company really.

Q: Does the unpredictable nature of your job have any impact on your well-being or your health?

A: Yes. And again, it depends on your employer. If you have hours that don't agree with you or if you get too many hours, that's going to impact your health. It just depends on your personal situation. That all falls on the company—whether the company allows you to work around your health or work around a disability. In my case, I have a disability, which they're aware of, and they totally work with me on that. They've always been very accommodating. Sometimes I get dizzy spells, and they're very understanding. They've let me go home a couple times just because I wasn't feeling that great because of the stuff

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that's going on with me. And they don't give me a hard time about that. Yeah, that's pretty much for everybody.

Q: Have you ever worked a job with generally stable hours?

A: Yes!

Q: And how would you compare that experience to your current job?

A: Well, obviously, it's better in some ways because a lot of those stable-hour jobs are Monday through Friday, so you get your weekends. It's really apples and oranges because it's just a completely different outlook and culture and everything else, and usually those jobs are office-setting jobs. So it's better in some ways and not in others. And really any of this is going to depend on the employer you're working for and how much they want to help the employee—how much they want to invest in their employee and in making their employee happy.

Q: So what would you say is the most difficult thing about working unpredictable hours?

A: The paycheck—definitely not knowing how much it will be. That's one thing you don't know until the shift's posted. But, at least in my case, I've got two to three weeks to either try to get more hours from another employee or at least plan for it and know, OK this week I'm not going to be making as much money as the week prior. At least there's that. Back in the day when I worked in food service, you didn't know and those employers definitely did the week-to-week thing, and you would find out on Friday what the next week was going to be. That's definitely a downer.

Q: Do you think there are positive aspects to having variable work schedules?

A: Yeah. Of course, there are positives and negatives to both sides. Flexibility is good to have.

Q: What do you feel would be most helpful to workers like you to make hours more predictable. Besides using a scheduling app, what other kinds of supports or options might help to lessen any negative aspects of unpredictable hours?

A: Yeah, I think they make it as easy as they can on us by the consideration of having the app, and then also scheduling out like they do, with you knowing what your schedule is going to be two weeks ahead of time. So I think that's probably a huge thing—to have easy access to your schedule. I mean, if we had the day off and the schedule got posted, we'd have to go into the store to look at the schedule or call somebody at the store to find out the schedule. This way, that doesn't happen.

Q: Finally, is there anything else that you wish people knew about what it's like to work a job with unpredictable hours?

A: It's funny because I didn't realize that it really is pretty much the company that you work for. So I would say that the biggest thing is the company being willing to accommodate its employees' needs with things like giving them some control over their schedules or by scheduling shifts somewhat in advance so employees can plan their lives. Giving employees this type of information to work with makes their lives more predictable.

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*"I've learned over the years of doing this that I have a specific productivity clock, and I don't think I would be as productive in a traditional nine-to-five."*

**Jennifer Wright** is a marketing consultant and freelance writer in New Hampshire. The following interview was conducted on September 20, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

*Previous jobs: social media specialist at her university, part-time receptionist, and other marketing positions*

*Current job shift/hours: flexible, sets own hours; around 40 hours per week*

*Schedule at current job received: N/A*

*Schedule format/accessibility at current job: electronic, via email and project-management software*

Q: What is your current job and what do you do in this job?

A: I work as a marketing consultant and freelance writer. My main job is in social media consulting for a digital-marketing agency, and then I have side projects that I do as I find clients, mainly doing writing and marketing consulting.

Q: Do you enjoy this work? Do you think you're going to continue working in this industry?

A: Yeah, I definitely enjoy the work, and I plan to continue working for an agency as long as I can because it gives me a lot of flexibility in trying out different aspects of marketing, rather than just being stuck in one specific area—like Facebook ads, or PPC (pay-per-click) ads, or email marketing. I get to do a little bit of everything. And then the other freelance on the side gives me the ability to add on work when I have time.

Q: In what ways are the hours of your work variable? Are there any particular aspects of doing freelance work that require you to be a little creative with your scheduling?

A: I'm now on a retainer with my agency, so I work pretty much 40 hours a week with them, but that can be a little less or a little more some weeks, depending. Basically, I'm paid a set fee every month. I set my own time, as long as I end up meeting the deadlines and all my work gets done. Then for the clients I take on, I work with them directly to set deadlines, usually giving them suggestions on when I think we should finish tasks, like getting their Facebook set up. They agree to the deadlines, and we work toward that.

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Q: Do you work weekends and evening hours?

A: It depends on what's going on because in social media, things can go wrong pretty much at any time—so it's good to have Slack on my phone, where my colleagues can message me anytime and say, oh, by the way, there's a crisis happening on Twitter, so you might want to check it out. But, in general, I do work on weekends, just because I prefer to—because I like doing things like errands during the week. But if I want to, I can get all my hours done mainly during the week. And then sometimes I do work evenings; a lot of my colleagues work in California, so at 8 p.m. here, they're usually still working.

Q: How are your individual projects or jobs scheduled for the agency that you work with? Do they use any type of scheduling software or apps to give you your jobs?

A: We use Basecamp to set up projects and tasks. A lot of the time, I'm setting my own tasks and even setting tasks for other people who work there based on the products that we want to launch and the routine tasks. Every week we publish a blog, and I know the 20 or so tasks that go into that, so I assign those out and make sure they all get done on time. I track my hours using Hubstaff, mainly so the agency can budget accordingly, because obviously they're charging their clients money for us doing their work, so they need to know how much time we're actually spending on it.

Q: What's good about using project management software? What are you able to do with it that makes your job easier?

A: The project management software I use, Basecamp, allows you to talk to everyone else on your team and basically set up tasks, add documents. It has a scheduler, but we don't use it too often, except to say that we're going out of town. The main reason we use it is because you can see the whole conversation as to how we got an idea started, what ended up happening after this project ended, and why it ended, and then no one is confused—like, did that email we wrote actually get sent out, or is it still waiting to be published?

Q: How do you schedule the freelancing jobs that you do yourself? Do you use any apps or other technology?

A: For my side freelancing jobs with clients, I keep track of my hours in Toggl, which is something that I've used for a while just to make sure that I'm charging enough for my work, because I tend to charge based on project rather than based on hour. That way, I can make sure I'm still getting a decent rate hourly. Other than that, it's a lot of just emailing and talking about when the deadline is and sending in the work on time. A lot of freelancers do use Basecamp on their own, but it's a paid product, so I don't need that right now—I don't have enough clients to need it myself.

Q: How do you typically manage the additional jobs that you take on the side to make sure you meet all your timelines? Do you ever have to collaborate with anybody and, if so, do you have to coordinate schedules with that person?

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A: For the additional jobs, I'm really big on to-do lists, so I keep track of everything I have to do in Wunderlist, which lets you break it down by task and have subtasks and deadlines and see everything all in one place. That keeps me on track personally. For my side projects, I tend not to have to collaborate too often. Then for the agency, I do work with people, so I mainly focus on highlighting all the tasks I have for the day that impact someone else. If I have to write a first draft and then pass it on to someone, I make a note of that on my to-do list for the day and make sure I get that done first. I tend to work late nights—just because I prefer working late—so I don't want to send someone a draft to edit at 11 p.m. and then say, oh, you have to do this right now!

Q: Have you ever had a situation where one of your additional freelancing jobs required you to take a meeting or otherwise get something done during the time that you were scheduled to work on agency projects? If so, how do you accommodate for that?

A: Neither is really a set schedule. I have a weekly meeting for the agency that I have to be on, but other than that, it's pretty much whatever I want; I could do 20 hours on Monday and Tuesday and be done for the week if I wanted, so long as the work was done. But the main problem with having an agency job and having clients on the side is just the same as with any job—that is, they don't know what else I'm doing. For example, if my agency is launching a product and we have huge time crunches, the clients I have on the side don't know that's going on, so they might ask me to have a phone call and go over something that I know is a lot lower priority. It's trying to balance when one job is getting hectic and others are not as hectic, but they still all want your attention.

Q: What effect, if any, does your variable work schedule have on your ability to manage or complete your work within the established timeline?

A: At the agency, just because so many things come up last second—like if we suddenly decided we wanted to publish this extra blog—we sometimes have to drop everything and get that project done. The things we do on a routine basis, like writing social media posts, can fall to the wayside sometimes, so making sure we're able to keep the routine things going despite anything that comes up can be difficult.

Q: What effect does your variable work schedule have on your finances, your home and family life, or your well-being? How easy or difficult is it for you to schedule other responsibilities that you have at home around your work hours?

A: In terms of finances, I only count on the agency for my income, just because now that I'm on a retainer for that, it's steady income. For side projects that I take on, that's basically just like getting bonuses, so I don't budget my money around that; that way, I don't come up short, which is nice. For scheduling my responsibilities around work hours, I guess the main thing there is just having a little self-discipline. Because I *could* go hang out with my friends every single day of the week and just say, oh well, I'll get this work done later, and later, and later—and then suddenly, it's Sunday and I have 15 hours left to do for the week. It's just knowing how much I can do in a week and saying no, even though

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I don't have set hours, and then also explaining that to family and friends. If they're physically at work, it's obvious that they're busy working, but I could be sitting at the table talking to you one minute, and then look at my computer and be working the next minute. That overlap is a little difficult for people to understand sometimes.

Q: So what would you say is the most difficult thing about working on a schedule like yours?

A: I guess just not knowing when something is going to come up, and that's the case in pretty much all social media and digital-marketing gigs now. Everything is so 24-7. A ton of our clients are overseas, and if they're in India and they want a reply right now, it doesn't really matter that it's a totally different time here. You need to be able to respond if it's urgent. Just being able to deal with that, and also being able to turn off sometimes because I don't like having my phone by my side all the time, can be a challenge. It's about balancing and, when it's possible, detaching.

Q: Are there positive aspects to working as a freelancer with the ability to take on additional jobs beyond your steady agency work?

A: There are a lot of benefits. I've basically been working this type of schedule since I was in college, so I've gotten used to it over the years, and it's been great because I can actually travel while I work. As long as I have my laptop, I can do 40 hours from any country or city, so I do travel quite a bit. I can take on extra projects to supplement my income—so if I want to save up for something, I can try to get a few more side gigs to raise more money. Setting my own hours is nice. If I want to take a long weekend, for example, I just work a bit extra earlier in the week, and then I have the weekend and Monday and Tuesday, possibly.

Also just managing my own time is great. I've learned over the years of doing this that I have a specific productivity clock, and I don't think I would be as productive in a traditional nine-to-five. I'm sure I could make it work, but I know that in the morning, I like doing the types of tasks I do all the time, like writing tweets. In the afternoon, I like having meetings, because I'm pretty tired by then and meetings help me stay alert and focus. Then from maybe 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. is when I'm the most productive, and that's when I do my high-level thinking, a lot of analysis. In late evening—like 11 p.m. to 1 a.m.—I'm really creative, so I like to do all my writing then. If I were in an office from nine to five, I would have to find a way to be creative from nine to five. Forcing yourself to be creative on demand is very difficult, and I don't think I would give as strong a performance because I'd be trying to do these high-level analyses while trying not to fall asleep at my desk! Being able to do it later in the day means I can do a better job and do it faster.

Q: Have you always had a variable work schedule or have you ever had a nine-to-five job before, and what was that like if you did?

A: Let's see. In college, I did have one nine-to-five internship for the summer.

Q: And how did that compare?

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Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

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A: I definitely was not as big a fan. I did very similar work as what I do at the agency, but it felt like I had to force myself to do things that my brain wasn't ready to do at that time of day. Then I'd feel energetic after work hours, but wasn't able to apply that energy to my work.

Q: So you enjoy the arrangement that you have now and think you will probably continue with this?

A: Yes, definitely. Travel is really important to me, so being able to travel is a big reason for why I got into this.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the type of schedule you have—the pros and cons about your freelance-type work?

A: A lot of what I said is a little bit different than traditional freelancing, because I also work at an agency, and agencies in general tend to be really fast-paced. They tend to have really high turnover because a lot of people burn out very quickly. But a lot of the pros of being able to set your own hours and being able to work when you're productive—those come with any type of freelancing job. If I worked for some of my side clients 40 hours per week, it would be a lot less stressful, but I'd still be able to set my hours and work when I'm most productive. But the agency does give me extra benefits that make the fast-paced workload worthwhile, especially as a recent college graduate: a chance to do a little bit of everything and get a lot of training, which is obviously going to be important down the line for my career.

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