

# /var/log/manager

## Rock Stars and Shift Schedules

ANDY SEELY



Andy Seely is the manager of an IT engineering division, customer-site chief engineer, and a computer science instructor for the University of Maryland University College. His wife Heather is his init process, and his sons Marek and Ivo are always on the run queue.

[andy@yankeetown.com](mailto:andy@yankeetown.com)

The stress level in a dynamic work place can be very high, even higher in a startup where every day may be the beginning or the end for the company. These types of businesses tend to hire the best and the brightest in the industry and encourage employees to give their all and more. Those same employees can be made more effective, and less susceptible to burnout, through some simple organizational tools that are obvious in hindsight but not always the first choice in the heat of the moment. A basic shift schedule can help guide effort, shepherd resources, and ultimately lead to a happier and more sustainable workforce.

I joined a company as the manager of a group of junior and mid-level system administrators. The tier-one operations team was responsible for around-the-clock monitoring and first-line response for the company's infrastructure and public-facing technology. This company was a dot-com startup that prided itself on the high quality of its workforce and the dot-com-style perks offered to them. Although we didn't actually say in our job advertisements that we only hired "rock stars," that was how we viewed ourselves. A month into the job, I started getting a creeping feeling that the surface was a rock-star party but that, underneath, there were currents preventing us from achieving our true peak of productivity. I discovered that our organization was being held captive by our own brilliance.

### Brilliant People, Great Work, Bright Future

I was new to "dot-com," so lots of things were exciting and wonderful to me. We had a "nap room" where a tired sysadmin could...take a nap. We had a fully stocked kitchen, which soon started having Dr. Pepper in the rotation after I mentioned I liked Dr. Pepper. This company didn't have an actual game room like many others in the area, but we made up for the lack with plenty of desk- and cube-level games and toys.

The people around me were some of the sharpest I've ever known. I've always joked that if I find myself being the smartest person in a room, then I need a new room. This team was that new room. They were innovators, inventors, and idea people, everyone simply brimming with self-confidence and assurance. The team also took a lot of pride in how much and how hard they worked to make the company successful.

The company had solid funding and was perpetually on an upward swing in the market. The CEO had an impeccable dot-com pedigree and was always optimistic about the great places he was taking the business. Staff meetings featured talk of big names, big media, big goals, and lots of work to be done. It was intoxicating.

Everything was perfect.

### Burning Bright or Just Burning Out?

My first hint of an underlying issue was the length of a "normal" workday. Most of the operations team—both tier-one and the more senior tier-two team—would be on the job at the office until seven or eight in the evening and then be online, working from home, sometimes

until midnight and later. There was a pervasive sense that the work never ended, and we were being very, very productive, but... the work never ended. Then, I realized that despite putting in an average 12-hour workday, people were only really doing effective work from about noon until about seven. The rest of the time was spent in what could be called “workplace activities,” which included frequent and long conversations about the long hours we were working.

The long workday issue was exacerbated by a recurring phenomenon where the response to a system problem would include several unnecessary people jumping in to help, and then those same people would be fatigued and less effective the next day. We didn’t respond to system problems conservatively, but rather with enthusiasm and brilliance. After observing several such events, I learned that qualities like enthusiasm and brilliance can be consumables when overtaxed, and that junior people can feel untrusted and disenfranchised when senior people always take over.

After I’d been on the team a few months, people started warming up to me, and I started gaining more insight on the undercurrents of the workplace. The night-shift guy worked from home and got very little in-person engagement with the team, and he wondered if anyone was ever going to swap shifts with him so he could be more involved. A particular day-shift guy always jumped first to take all the hard problems, and over time started wondering why he always had to be the one to work all the hard problems. People wanted to take off for family events or vacations, but they wouldn’t plan farther ahead than a couple days because long-term plans were always trumped by something operationally important. More than one team member took vacation time to visit family and ended up spending long hours online in a spare bedroom. When my own first child was being born, I was able to “take the rest of the afternoon off,” which my wife and I still laugh about.

The team made mistakes, which were always opportunities to excel at fixing hard problems. We argued and fought when it got late and we got tired and it felt like no one was really in control of a big problem. We used ourselves up and compensated with willpower and pride, because we were awesome. We had to be awesome, just to survive.

### Trying Some Old-Fashioned Discipline and Structure

Our “schedule” was pretty simple. Tier-one sysadmins roughly covered Monday through Friday, about 18 hours of each day. The gaps were filled in by tier-two staff being on call, with a tight rotation of a week spent on call every three or four weeks. This meant that a tier-two admin would work a normal week in the tier-two project space, plus be guaranteed to be paged by the system at least once a day after hours and sometimes dozens

of times around the clock on the weekend. Serious technical or public-facing problems would result in the whole team becoming involved, which might be weekly. Every week, some event would overtax a tier-two sysadmin and leave that person less effective at anything but reactive break-fix for a day or two.

We talked and talked about our inefficiencies and how we couldn’t sustain the pace. Finally, we were able to add capacity to the tier-one team. The act of growing the team gave us a moment to take a step back and rethink. I took the opportunity to do something previously unthinkable: I published an actual shift calendar.

Rock stars don’t need shift schedules because they’re always awesome, and awesome people don’t clock in for an eight-hour shift. A few people weren’t interested but got talked into playing along; others were surprisingly easy to convince, and some just had to be told to get in line. We worked together, and everyone had ownership. We worked out standard 40-hour shifts, day-swing mid-rotations, and came up with an incentive idea to have the tier-one team cover primary on call during the weekends. This didn’t prevent tier two from being on call, but it did prevent tier two from being woken up constantly for tier-one-level system issues. People started talking about—and taking—vacation time when they didn’t feel obligated to constantly check in. I knew we had made a cultural change when people started horse-trading shifts so they could plan their lives months in advance.

### More Reliability, Less Romance

The biggest impact of the tier-one shift schedule turned out to be the increased stability of the tier-two staff. We reduced the number of after-hours and weekend calls dramatically, which resulted in stable and focused senior sysadmins who made fewer operational mistakes and were able to contribute more effectively to projects. The tier-one crew—the more junior people on the team—gained a sense of empowerment as they handled more events by themselves without the entire operations team swooping in.

Yes, it’s true, those of us on “the schedule” felt less like “rock stars” and more like “employees,” but we felt more confident and we were able to do better work as a result. The real impact was that everyone worked fewer clock hours and yet managed to be more effective.

It wasn’t easy to change corporate culture, and it wasn’t always obvious that it was going to work out. In the end, the risk paid off. Understanding how work happens and aligning people in a way that gives them the opportunity to do what they do best and create real efficiencies in the workplace can be a true challenge, especially when that realignment is counter to established norms and identities. I’m the manager, and that’s my job.