

ILR –Work & Corona Virus Issues Section

Need Help at Work: Here's How to Get It



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A social psychologist whose research focuses broadly on social influence and the psychology of compliance and consent, Associate Professor [Vanessa Bohns](#) explains why we're reluctant to ask for help at work and how to effectively request help.

“Many of us need some extra help from our coworkers, partners or bosses to get through the days lately. But, the kinds of help workers need are likely to be very different. One person may need a little extra time on a deadline, another might need meetings to be scheduled around the kids’ nap time, or their partner to watch the kids for a chunk of time each day, and yet another may need to take on some extra work to make ends meet.

“In many cases, the people we need help from would be more than happy to give it. But, our default assumptions about asking for help may prevent help from ever being given. Other people aren't mind readers. They don't know what our situation is like right now, or what they can do to help. However, we tend to be tentative about opening up about what we need and asking for it. These days, we need to fight our natural urge to sit back and wait for help to be offered.”

Instead of waiting for help to be offered and becoming vulnerable to [employee burnout](#),

consider these tips from Bohns:

Ask for help directly

We tend to think it is more polite to be indirect about asking for help. We hint at needing help by talking about how overwhelmed we are, or how hard it is to make our deadlines or meetings, or stay on top of our emails right now, rather than coming out and asking for something directly. But people are much more likely to agree to help us if we come out and ask. So, rather than talking about things you could maybe use some help with, come out and ask directly for an extension, or some extra slack responding to emails.

Be specific

Hearing that someone needs help tugs at many of our heartstrings and we genuinely want to help them. The barrier to receiving help for many people isn't that people don't want to help, it's that they don't know how. Tell them how. Instead of saying you could use some help managing your work and home responsibilities, think about what specifically would help, and ask for that. Instead of saying the daily team check-in meeting is at an inconvenient time, suggest moving it to a specific time that works for you, such as the kids' nap time. Give people a specific way to help you.

Don't be embarrassed about asking

Many people are worried about asking for help, and think it reflects poorly on them. This may be particularly true these days when many people are worried about their jobs and about demonstrating how hard they are working from home. But, people tend not to judge people for asking for help as harshly as we tend to think. And, if asking for help actually allows you to be more productive, all the better!

In a [Harvard Business Review piece](#), Bohns wrote with Laura M. Giurge that “the lines between work and non-work are blurring in new and unusual ways, and many employees who are working remotely for the first time are likely to struggle to preserve healthy boundaries between their professional and personal lives.”

When the boundaries blur and open the door to burnout, remember: ask for help directly, be specific and don't be embarrassed.