

Working anything but 9 to 5 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In a typical last-minute scramble, Jannette Navarro, a 22-year-old Starbucks barista and single mother, scraped together a plan for surviving the month of July without setting off family or financial disaster.

In contrast to the joyless work she had done at a Dollar Tree store and a KFC franchise, the \$9-an-hour Starbucks job gave Ms. Navarro, the daughter of a drug addict and an absentee father, the hope of forward motion. She had been hired because she showed up so many times, cheerful and persistent, asking for work, and she had a way of flicking away setbacks - such as a missed bus on her three-hour commute - with the phrase, "I'm over it."

Newly off public assistance, she was just a few credits shy of an associate degree in business and talked of getting a master's degree as some of her co-workers were. Her take-home pay rarely topped \$400 to \$500 every two weeks; since starting in November, she had set aside \$900 toward a car - her next step toward stability and independence for herself and her 4-year-old son, Gavin.

But Ms. Navarro's fluctuating hours, combined with her limited resources, had also turned their lives into a chronic crisis over the clock. She rarely learned her schedule more than three days before the start of a workweek, plunging her into urgent logistical puzzles over who would watch the boy. Months after starting the job she moved out of her aunt's home, in part because of mounting friction over the erratic schedule, which the aunt felt was also holding her family captive. Ms. Navarro's degree was on indefinite pause because her shifting hours left her unable to commit to classes. She needed to work all she could, sometimes counting on dimes from the tip jar to make the bus fare home. If she dared ask for more stable hours, she feared, she would get fewer work hours over all.

"You're waiting on your job to control your life," she said, with the scheduling software used by her employer dictating everything from "how much sleep Gavin will get to what groceries I'll be able to buy this month."

Last month, she was scheduled to work until 11 p.m. on Friday, July 4; report again just hours later, at 4 a.m. on Saturday; and start again at 5 a.m. on Sunday. She braced herself to ask her aunt, Karina Rivera, to watch Gavin, hoping she would not explode in annoyance, or worse, refuse. She vowed to somehow practice for the driving test that she had promised her boyfriend she would pass by the previous month. To stay awake, she would formulate her own behind-the-counter coffee concoctions, pumping in extra shots of espresso.

Scheduling Chaos

Like increasing numbers of low-income mothers and fathers, Ms. Navarro is at the center of a new collision that pits sophisticated workplace technology against some fundamental requirements of parenting, with particularly harsh consequences for poor single mothers. Along with virtually every major retail and restaurant chain, Starbucks relies on software that choreographs workers in precise, intricate ballets, using sales patterns and other data to determine which of its 130,000 baristas are needed in its thousands of locations and exactly when. Big-box retailers or mall clothing chains are now capable of bringing in more hands in anticipation of a delivery truck pulling in or the weather changing, and sending workers home when real-time analyses show sales are slowing. Managers are often compensated based on the efficiency of their staffing.

Scheduling is now a powerful tool to bolster profits, allowing businesses to cut labor costs with a few keystrokes. "It's like magic," said Charles DeWitt, vice president for business development at Kronos, which supplies the software for Starbucks and many other chains.

Yet those advances are injecting turbulence into parents' routines and personal relationships, undermining efforts to expand preschool access, driving some mothers out of the work force and redistributing some of the uncertainty of doing business from corporations to families, say parents, child care providers and policy experts.

In Brooklyn, Sandianna Irvine often works "on call" hours at Ashley Stewart, a plus-size clothing store, rushing to make arrangements for her 5-year-old daughter if the store needs her. Before Martha Cadenas was promoted to manager at a Walmart in Apple Valley, Minn., she had to work any time the store needed; her mother "ended up having to move in with me," she said, because of the unpredictable hours. Maria Trisler is often dismissed early from her shifts at a McDonald's in Peoria, Ill., when the computers say sales are slow. The same sometimes happens to Ms. Navarro at Starbucks.

By Saturday afternoon of the Fourth of July weekend, Ms. Navarro had made it through "clopening," closing late at night and opening again just a few hours later. But she had not yet worked up the courage to ask Ms. Rivera and Ms. Rivera's boyfriend, Oscar Nuñez, for help the next day with Gavin.

The couple had repeatedly given her safe harbor over the years: when Ms. Navarro's mother abandoned her at the age of 17, and then died of an overdose; when Gavin's father disappeared without paying child support. But since Ms. Navarro started at Starbucks, her job had often spilled over into the lives of Ms. Rivera and Mr. Nuñez so that they had trouble juggling their own jobs - Ms. Rivera's as a dental assistant and his as a mechanic - or making plans with their two toddlers. "It puts a strain on the whole household, on my relationship with Karina," said Mr. Nuñez, 38.

Weekends, when Gavin's day care center is closed, were particularly charged; on top of that, the couple disapproved of Ms. Navarro's boyfriend, Nick Martinez. The tension culminated one night last winter, with all four adults screaming at one another on the front lawn. After that encounter, Ms. Navarro moved in with Mr. Martinez, 22. But months later, she still depended on her aunt for help, and Gavin tended to cling to the couple, crying and asking to stay at their house.

"You're not working tomorrow, are you?" Ms. Rivera finally asked. She had already watched Gavin all of Saturday morning, she had made beach plans for Sunday, and when she heard the answer she grew exasperated. "We can't even do our own thing," she told Ms. Navarro, who felt guilty and then surprised: Her aunt folded, saying she would take Gavin again.

With the crisis averted, Ms. Navarro reported to work before dawn the next morning, napping on the sidewalk for a few minutes before it was time for her to open the store.

Two days later, on July 8, she had to tug her son out of bed just as early, rousing Gavin before 5 a.m. for their long commute. But this time her boyfriend, Mr. Martinez, helped her get ready for the day. He had been a supportive force, inviting her and Gavin to share the bedroom he had in his sister's apartment, enjoying moments of surrogate fatherhood with the little boy.

In turn, Ms. Navarro had helped Mr. Martinez get a job at her Starbucks store, and together they had become a team, both poor but pooling their resources to get ahead.

Ms. Navarro hated waking Gavin so early, but the trip from home to day care to work took a mile-long walk, two trolleys, a bus ride and over three hours.

At the day care center, her scattered schedule created a perpetual blizzard of paperwork, with Ms. Navarro documenting her ever-changing hours, lest she lose the precious placement. She knew Gavin was fortunate to attend a preschool with live hermit crabs and Play-Doh sea urchins. Many other parents with unstable work schedules rely on ragtag coverage, paying neighbors or relatives small sums to watch their children.

Child care and policy experts worry that the entire apparatus for helping poor families is being strained by unpredictable work schedules, preventing parents from committing to regular drop-off times or answering standard questions on subsidy forms and applications for aid: "How many hours do you work?" and "What do you earn?"

"Some families drop their kids at 7:30 and then come back at 10:30 saying there was no more work for the day," said Patricia Smith, director of the Jeff and Deni Jacobs Child Development Center, the government-funded day care Gavin attends.

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