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‘Willing slaves’ fast becoming business norm

Ray Williams

Overachieving professionals today are seen as road warriors – masters of the universe. They work harder, take on endless additional responsibilities and earn a lot more than their counterparts in earlier times, and their numbers are growing. And it is these individuals who bring into clear focus the question of work-life balance.

This concept was first coined in 1986 in reaction to unhealthy choices many Americans were making in flavor of work. A hundred years ago, the pundits were forecasting that technology would not only do away with household chores, but provide us with unlimited leisure. That prediction has not come to pass. Instead, the work ethic has been elevated to unprecedented heights, which reinforces the low value and worth attached to family, parenting, and building community amid a radical redefinition of the nature of work.

Madeline Bunting, in her book *“Willing Slaves – How the Overwork Culture Is Ruling Lives”* (2004), a study of the workplace reached the following conclusions, among others:

- ▶ Between 1977 and 1997, full time employees in the United States increased their weekly average hours by .5 hours, to a 47.1 hour work week;

- ▶ In the study of U.K. workplace managers – 65% said work was damaging their health and 77% admitted it had a negative effect on their relationship with their children;

- ▶ The Office of National Statistics in Britain found that most couples spend more time apart than together, and most of their shared time is spent watching television. Britons spend the most time at work, 40.3 hours, of all European Union countries, but still far below the U.S. average of 47.1 hours;

- ▶ European attitudes toward work, where the social fabric including the welfare of children and quality of

life is more important, are very different than those of North Americans;

- ▶ American workers average about 10 days of holiday a year, in constant to Britain, where the average is 25 days, and Germany, at 30 days;

- ▶ Unlike Scandinavian countries – which have pursued a humanization of work agenda with the emphasis on equal opportunity, child care, gender equity and the central role of the family – the United States and Britain have turned away from a consensual approach and toward political polarities. Canada is somewhere in the middle of these two positions.

In the *Hidden Brain Drain Task Force* study in the December, 2006, issue of *Harvard Business Review*, authors Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce outlined their conclusions about American’s obsession with work. They state that professionals are working harder than ever and that the 40-hour work week is a thing of the past. In fact, the 60-hour work week is commonplace. Hewlett and Luce say 62% of high-earning individuals they studied worked more than 50 hours a week and 35% worked more than 60 hours.

Most respondents indicated they worked on average 16 hours a week more than they did five years ago. The study also noted that vacations are shrinking, with 42% reporting they take 10 or fewer vacation days a year, which is less than they were entitled to.

Are these extreme workaholic professionals unbalanced, and in need of rescue? Hewlett and Luce say the majority of respondents indicated they love their jobs and work extreme hours because they want to. They don’t see themselves as victims, and are often characterized as Type A personalities.

But there are environmental factors to consider, as well. To begin with, competition has become more intense, both at the individual and corporate levels. Mergers, acquisitions, global competition, leader and leaner organizations have put the squeeze on performance expectations of executives. Economists, Robert Frank and Philip Cook argued that increasingly our economy operates by “winner take all” rules, where a slight performance edge yields outsized rewards, often reflected in huge executive compensation.

Catherine Ornstein, a U.S. cultural critic, calls extreme jobs the American Dream on steroids. “*No longer is the American Dream Ozzie Nelson of Father Knows Best, it’s Donald Trump and Survivor in the office tower.*” Ornstein says that is merely reflective of our culture’s embrace of an extreme ethos. Extreme sports, extreme reality shows, and extreme video games – the list goes on. At the same time, the nature of the work itself has changed. Most workers now are involved in knowledge work, rather than production.

For many professionals, work is the centre of their social life and friendships. Personal connections, once made exclusively through family, friends and civic organizations, are now made in the workplace. Arlie Hochschild, in *The Time Bind* writes that as home and families become starved for time, overworked people avoid going home and choose “more attractive” social venues associated with work. For many, home and family become associated with stress and guilt, while work becomes a haven.

While extreme workaholics are not complaining, 69% of those in the Hewlett and Luce study said they would be healthier if they worked less, and 58% said work got in the way of strong relationships with children and spouses.

The conclusion drawn from this complex, multi-faced issue? Work-life balance centers on some basic beliefs and principles:

Family life: Successful parenting requires energy, time, patience and tolerance. Family time must be

flexible and adaptive, and not just scheduled bits around work.

Home: The concept of the home needs to be seen as a creative place that reflects a sense of place, an extension of ourselves, a place where we can be free with our emotions, rather than a place for the bare essentials of storing our professions sleeping and eating. This takes time to create and sustain.

Friendship: The art of friendship requires a combination of affection, tolerance and patience and sense of constancy in difficult times. Yet when our work-life balance spirals out of control, often friendships, along with healthy habits such as exercise, are the first things to suffer. Several studies in the United States and Britain show that people are seeing less and less of their best friends. Yet, as our extended families become fractured, close friendships become even more important.

Community: Like family, home and friendships, our local communities depend on our time and energy to function effectively and spontaneously. If we lose that vital life-work balance then the many activities the neighborhood is responsible for are marginalized and community life declines.

As Hewlett and Luce observe, the attributes that give a workplace and advantage in recruiting and retention can change dramatically. And the culture that celebrates an extreme ethos today may tire of it overnight. At minimum, senior executives should think carefully about the behavior they are rewarding and encouraging.



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