

Work's Intimacy

Melissa Gregg

@Jason_a_w

polity

explains how ordinary workers may withdraw from a range of more complex human relationships to focus on a proven source of personal esteem – their job – since its rewards are so openly celebrated in the dominant register for modern relationships: the capitalist marketplace.

All books are difficult to write, but this one has been especially affected by my own implication in the phenomena under discussion. Coming to terms with work's intimacy has entailed moving states and cities more than once in search of what may be an elusive fit between personal and professional motives. On a more troubling level, it has also meant learning alongside others the grammar of hunched shoulders, clandestine drinking cultures, RSI prevention, and enforced leave. This project has presented a complex scholarly dilemma, which is the difficulty of distinguishing among participants' revelations about work, the behavior of peers and colleagues, and my own lived practice. It concludes with a strong conviction that the present generation of academics must be among the first to see their lives and loves as potentially open to change.

Introduction: Work's Intimacy

Performing Professionalism Online and On the Job

No-one's job is safe.

Australian Federal Industry Minister
Kim Carr, February 2009

This book provides an overdue account of online technology and its impact on work life. It moves between the offices and homes of today's salaried professionals to provide an intimate insight into the personal, family and wider social tensions faced by workers in a changing employment landscape. For any number of years now, new media technology has been marketed as giving us the freedom to work where we want, when we want, in flexible arrangements that apparently suit the conditions of the modern office. But little has been written to illustrate the consequences of this development, where work has broken out of the office, downstairs to the cafe, in to the street, on to the train, and later still to the living room, dining room, and bedroom.

Online technology has brought some significant problems to the work and personal lives of ordinary office workers – the information workers at the heart of the so-called “knowledge economy.” This book describes the experiences of these employees, focusing on the information, communication and education (“ICE”) professions that complement the heavy-hitting “FIRE” sectors of finance, insurance and real estate.¹ The latter have enjoyed their own chronicles of late. The global economic downturn generated a predictable flurry of insider accounts of work cultures at the top end of town, as well

as the housing and loan schemes that precipitated much of the wider disaster. *Work's Intimacy* provides a different white-collar story. It reflects the lives of those in much more mundane office environments, in a city with a significant case of suburban sprawl. But in a digitally connected "network society" (Castells 2000), these workers' livelihoods are no less affected in the shift from prosperity to recession – and back again.

The following chapters demonstrate the increasingly intimate relationship salaried professionals have with their work, and how new media technologies are involved in this development. Most obviously, online technology changes our sense of availability in professional information jobs. Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence. This is a process we might describe the *presence bleed* of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply. Presence bleed explains the familiar experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations faced with a "to do" list that seems forever out of control. It not only explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours, but also captures the feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled – especially since there are not enough workers to carry the load. Throughout this book, workers will be shown to use online networks in the home to catch up on work that can't be finished in the office, as roles expand and employees are asked to do "more with less." With the increased use of digital technology, workloads that may have been acceptable to begin with are shown to accumulate further expectations and responsibilities that aren't being recognized – and never will be, if home-based work continues to go unremarked. Like the mobile devices facilitating this workload, the jobs themselves are subject to "function creep." The purported convenience of the technologies obscures the amount of additional work they demand. As one young librarian in this study explained: "They're not reducing any work load, they're just giving us more stuff to do. You kind of think something has to give, you know, you can't just keep piling work on us."

Presence bleed captures both the changing behavioral dimensions and professional expectations in communication- and information-heavy jobs. For the middle-class employees this condition affects, networked technologies are affordable enough to have in the home, so when online connections allow access to work beyond office hours, the possibility of being willing and able to work can manifest

as a compulsion that has to be monitored.² To some extent, this is a result of the sense of fulfillment and gratification many workers derive from their job, which makes them susceptible to letting professional duties spill into other times and spaces. But for just as many, the coerciveness of online technology allows employers to contact them beyond paid hours as a matter of course, whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged. In either case, consciousness of the always-present potential for engaging with work is a new form of affective labor that must be constantly regulated.³

The professionals in this book engage in work beyond the formal work day for a range of reasons. For some, it's to "keep sane" amidst a constant tide of communication requests that a hectic schedule cannot accommodate. For others, it's to maintain perceptions of competence and professionalism surpassing the call of duty – to reassure clients of their importance, or to keep the rest of "the team" happy. In the absence of formal policies regarding new media use, particularly when it comes to email response times, the stories they tell reveal online devices to be part of an armory of psychological preparedness that workers bring to their jobs even before the workday begins. Online technology allows workers to carve out strategies to cope with conditions that are highly intensified because they are taken to be individual rather than structural in nature.

In some ways, this behavior accords with ideas of neoliberal governance in which workers take responsibility for their actions and enjoy this as a form of freedom (Rose 1999a, 1999b). "Working from home" can perhaps be read as a kind of personal and professional cohesiveness employees establish to make individualized working conditions palatable. Retreating from an office environment that appears to obstruct the completion of core job tasks, workers choose to conduct some of the most critical parts of their professional practice from home. For women in particular, this appears to be a way of coping with the lack of flexibility in the performance, attendance and reward measures that continue to guide the formal workplace. Subsequent chapters show women are prepared to wait until the cooking and cleaning are done, and the rest of the house is asleep, to have time alone to work. Having time alone with one's paid work can even become a form of solace from other, dubiously recognized, labors.

"I can't work at work" is also a common expression for employees introduced in this book who find the workplace full of unnecessary deviations. What's interesting is that the bulk of these "distractions" come in the form of interaction with other employees. One of the greatest benefits of online technology is therefore to moderate

preferred levels of collegial engagement. Remoteness can be feigned in spite of physical presence, just as presence can be simulated when employees are actually out of the office. In either case, the coercive nature of “face-time” is one of the many “inefficiencies” of the office that play a role in driving employees home to work.

But as professional concerns claim a larger stake in the activities and priorities of the home, employees risk placing themselves in a position where employers will no longer feel obliged to provide effective compensation for their efforts. The lengthening workday can't be recognized in the spreadsheet formulae that calculate the hours served by modern employees. Moreover as economic conditions deteriorate – and employees are asked to accept reduced hours or pay cuts for the benefit of the company bottom line – an already large gulf between motivation, incentive and reward for salaried work comes in to play. The self-directed employee of the future may be less susceptible to the ties that bind their labor to an employer.⁴

The work/life ruse

In the years preceding the recent economic downturn, a range of commentators failed to appreciate the extent to which middle-class professionals had been encouraged to see work as the most significant demonstration of their success and identity. Feminists in particular seemed more interested in popular culture as a gauge for political accomplishments (or lack thereof) leaving workplace concerns to the dwindling ranks of union members and organizers.⁵ While business was booming, men and women each worked long hours for firms that were more than happy to profit from their “sacrificial labor” (Ross 2004). The refusal to mount a sustained critique of long hours culture, and the gendered assumptions underpinning it, had the effect of making women feel grateful for so-called “flexible” work arrangements. These were conditions that allowed women to maintain traditional childcare and home maintenance expectations but only in addition to paid work (see chapter 2).

Sociologists, management literature and HR directives provided a powerful discourse encouraging employees to pursue “work-life balance” as a necessary corrective to the high performance demands of entrenched work cultures. That this trend coincided with an increased number of women in the workplace only served to imply such balance was their particular concern. It couldn't admit that work in itself might not be the problem; that many people enjoy their job for the sense of accomplishment it can bring. Nor could it

appreciate that leaders of organizations play a key role in generating, facilitating and maintaining workloads. The language of work-life balance in fact absolved management for the human resourcing decisions defining their employees' experience. Little wonder that it was taken up with such fervor in workplace training initiatives and a raft of complimentary “coping with stress” “dealing with change” and “time management” workshops. These well-funded measures were the ideological ruse disguising the concrete calculations being made to affect the bulk of employees' workloads. Their effect was to imply that individuals who could not cope with growing job requirements were at personal fault.

As a solution to workplace ills, “work-life balance” also ignored another momentous point. Well-off employees who gain pleasure from their work aren't likely to want to balance it with other things. Leisure pursuits or personal relationships may prove more difficult, costly, emotionally complicated, and altogether less satisfying for a range of personalities. As Arlie Hochschild (1997) has demonstrated, the work world offers a range of consolations when one's private life may demand more effort and less reward than the clearly defined, routine satisfactions of paid pursuits. Today's workplaces can be infinitely attractive to women who may not know how to improve the household division of labor without risking their marriage, but who can rely on legislation to ensure equity in the office (which she doesn't also have to clean). For middle-class women, equal opportunity in the public arena may have revealed how very few home-based pleasures can compete with the interest and excitement to be found in paid work.⁶ The notion of “work-life balance” is inadequate “not only because it seems to arrive when women enter full-time employment” – which downplays the gender norms that were central to the Fordist economy (see also Pateman 1988; Mitropoulos 2006) – it also assumes “a classic (Marxian) understanding of work as alienating” (Adkins and Jokinen 2008: 144). But “only alienating work needs to be balanced out or mitigated against by home, family, and leisure time” (ibid.). In a cultural context that regularly celebrates the status and rewards of creative work – indeed, as new media jobs purposefully collapse the boundaries between work and play – a new vocabulary is needed.⁷

This book provides evidence to suggest that professional work generates forms of pleasure and accomplishment that rival the markers of identity favored in previous historical formations. This is what online technology and its growing list of applications finally allows us to see. These pleasures and intimacies underwrite professional workers' willingness to engage in work outside paid hours,

just as they provide justification for abandoning other forms of experience and fulfillment that stand in their way. The most successful online platforms of recent years, social networking sites, build on the deliberate confusion of work and friendship that have been hallmarks of professional middle-class office cultures for decades. The hegemony of the “contact” in office software packages worldwide promotes this deliberately blurry line between professional and personal etiquette. And in spite of numerous efforts to claim these developments as positive, onerous terms of service and obscure privacy settings of web platforms like Facebook showed the profits to be made from making bourgeois business culture the new normal.

If the language of intimacy helps to demonstrate work's enticing and seductive dimensions, including the social dimensions to work that will be elaborated in later chapters, it also forces recognition of the ease with which these aspects have been aligned with capitalist profits. Online culture's incredible capacity to quantify and instrumentalize friendship is one of the main trends this book highlights. Appreciating work's intimacy in this sense helps to pinpoint what is at stake in the move to work-centered identities and cultures. That is, if our capacities for intimacy are most regularly exercised in the pursuit of competitive professional profit, we face the prospect of being unable to appreciate the benefits of intimacy for unprofitable purposes. The consequences this poses for society are of course troubling, and so a backwards glance in time may help establish the extent to which this trend should cause us alarm.

A history of networking

The email-equipped mobile phone and wireless laptop are just the latest in a range of always-on devices offering ample opportunity for work to follow us out of the office. They pose new questions for the notion of professionalism as the workday adjusts to fit new surroundings. Should I answer that email tonight after my last glass of wine? Do I have to be friends with my colleagues on Facebook? Will my son know if I'm listening to him from the other room as I finish this overdue presentation? Does my boss even know when I am at work?

But just how different are these dilemmas from previous manifestations of office life? In the drive to understand the novelty of online culture, few have noted the links between social networking practices of the present and those of white-collar work in previous

decades.⁸ This has had the knock-on effect of missing what may be unique about the cultures of online communities, as Part II of this book elaborates. In 1936, a modest self-help volume began to attract the attention of business readers seeking advice to navigate matters of etiquette and manners in professional contexts. Originally published to bring together a series of lectures by its author, Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* described a range of skills useful for life and business. The tips imparted in the book included how to deliver a compliment, how to appear friendly and genuine to colleagues, and how to apologize convincingly – all of which would help to ensure ongoing collegiality in the workplace. Carnegie's anecdotal approach may sound quaint to today's readers, but with sales of over 15 million, its effects have been lasting. This manual of pleasantries not only offers an important archive of white male business culture (particularly in its earlier editions); it also marks the beginning of an entire industry for what we might call *management self-help*.⁹ Carnegie's book is a relic of a time when women were a rarity in the office, men survived on reputation and a job was ostensibly for life. As the television series *Mad Men* also illustrates, in this white-collar world, a businessman's main priority was to cultivate a reliable and likable personality that could be traded for a certain level of security. Before Human Resources policies and modulated induction training, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was part of a soon to be flourishing genre of business manuals that helped workers identify appropriate behavior for the workplace. This was a time when the very idea of professionalism for the growing middle classes had yet to take hold (cf. Liu 2004: chapter 2). Carnegie's classic provides an early precedent for understanding the deliberate confusion of friendship and business interests that are ongoing concerns of this book.

A number of authors in the years since, among them William H. Whyte (1963/1956) and C. Wright Mills (1951), advanced sociological understandings of the white-collar mindset. Whyte's “organization man” of the 1950s, for instance, was a diligent, mobile employee who could expect to move through a succession of “company towns” in tandem with his elevation up the career ladder. The mutual bond captured in the title of Whyte's book was as much a description of the kinds of loyalty expected between employer and worker as it was an indictment of mindless corporate ambition. In fact, Whyte's writing still speaks of a time when one could believe that a “social ethic” could be pursued through affiliation with an outstanding business. The worker could depend on a return on his investment in the company so long as the latter maintained a convincing

vocational narrative and enviable position within the community. Whyte distinguished between the “well-rounded man” of the organization, who is successful, but not *too* successful (1963: 125), and “the executive,” whom he endearingly terms the “not-well-rounded man.” The well-rounded worker followed the principle: “be loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to you,” and he had particular insights to share:

On the matter of overwork they are particularly stern. They want to work hard, but not too hard; the good, equitable life is paramount and they see no conflict between enjoying it and getting ahead. The usual top executive, they believe, works much too hard, and there are few subjects upon which they will discourse more emphatically than the folly of elders who have a single-minded devotion to work.

Whyte further observes:

Out of necessity, then, as well as natural desire, the wise young man is going to enjoy himself – plenty of time with the kids, some good hobbies . . . obtrusive in no particular, excessive in no zeal. He will be the man in the middle. (1963: 127)

The executive, by contrast, is described in part three of Whyte’s book, which has the telling title: “The Neuroses of Organization Man.”

Common to these men is an average work week that runs between 50 and 60 hours. Typically, it would break down something like this: each weekday the executive will put in about 9 1/2 hours in the office. Four out of five weekdays he will work nights. One night he will be booked for business entertaining, another night he will probably spend at the office or in a protracted conference somewhere else.

On two of the other nights he goes home. But it’s no sanctuary he retreats to; it’s a branch office. While only a few go so far as to have a room equipped with dictating machines, calculators, and other appurtenances of their real life, most executives make a regular practice of doing the bulk of their business reading at home and some find it the best time to do their most serious business phone work (“I do a lot of spot-checking by phone from home,” one executive explained. “I have more time then, and besides most people have their guard down when you phone them at home.”)

Whyte’s description predates the BlackBerry by, say, 50 years, but it is a fascinating portent of today’s office cultures: “In one company, the top executives have set up a pool of Dictaphones to service

executives who want to take them home, the better to do more night and weekend work. In almost all companies the five-day week is pure fiction.”

These details allow us to appreciate that technology has long facilitated particular work styles and preferences, especially for a business demographic. But Whyte goes on to examine the rationale that is offered for engaging in this work-focused lifestyle. “In talking about why he works,” Whyte surmises: “the executive does not speak first of service, or of pressures from the organization; very rarely does he mention his family as a reason. He speaks of himself – and the demon within him. He works because his ego demands it.” For these personalities, work is the dominant focus. And even though their wives, doctors and friends all warn them that they work too hard, the executive maintains that outside parties “didn’t understand” (1963: 139). These words are worth remembering in the course of this book, since they echo the language used by many study participants to explain their reasons for working at home. As new technologies make the possibility of connecting to work an effortless proposition, it is not just the leaders and managers of organizations that are driven to work. Ordinary workers and the most junior employees show the habits and dispositions of Whyte’s executives. In the terms of his analysis, a growing number of employees in today’s workplaces are “not-well-rounded.”

Of the two writers, C. Wright Mills is perhaps the more critical. *White Collar* provides a more extensive historical description of the changes in occupation and demography in the move from rural to urban life in the United States. In doing so, Mills conveys a sense of foreboding about the emergence of the professional class in the 1950s and its particular obsessions. From the feudal communities of one era to the autonomous secularism taking hold, Mills anticipated that individuals would face growing difficulties in their working relationships in future. “In the movement from authority to manipulation,” he warned, “power shifts from the visible to the invisible, from the known to the anonymous. And with rising material standards, exploitation becomes less material and more psychological” (Mills 1951: 110). Alan Liu develops these observations in *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (2004). In a wide-ranging book, one of the first to extensively theorize the impact of online culture on corporate practice, Liu suggests that to gauge “the tone of modern emotional experience” we must look not to the sphere of private life but to “the great impersonal organizations of modernity – above all, the workplace” (2004: 89). Like Mills, Liu sees that the key feature

distinguishing the move to urban-based office work is in the appropriate regulation of affect:

However important it was for a child to learn to manage anger in the presence of father or mother, it was now even more important that father and mother learn to manage their anger, resentment, joy, lust, distraction, or boredom in a workplace cut off from the farm or town that had been the customary, ambient field of emotion. (2004: 90)

In Liu's account, the office embodies the dominant protocols for the manners, skills and relationships necessary to succeed in modern life, something Carnegie's book also foretold. Here we can note how practices like online social networking extend the scope for today's workers seeking to acquire the skills necessary for professional success. Liu's updated reading of workplace culture displays frank abandonment of any lingering expectation of meritocracy or security as factors in the rise up the company hierarchy. Written at a time when mass layoffs had become commonplace in white-collar work, Liu explains that to be a "professional-managerial-technical worker now is to stake one's authority on an even more precarious knowledge that has to be re-earned with every new technological change, business cycle, or downsizing in one's own life" (2004: 19). Instead of the linear career path described by earlier writers, this experience constitutes "the foundationless suspense, the perpetual anxiety" of knowledge work which involves a combination of self-auditing, life-long learning, and the successful performance of corporate "cool" (ibid.).

Liu's idea of "professional cool" draws on a history of feminist scholarship establishing the significance of "emotion work" in a range of occupations. In the United States, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) pioneered efforts to demonstrate the "affective" labor in service industry jobs, which can be physically tiring in the same way as apparently more physical, "manual" work. Hochschild's early research studying airline hostesses and parking infringement officers showed the traumatic impact of working with the general public in emotionally volatile situations. Employees risk their own psychological health in their efforts to manipulate the emotions of others and simultaneously perform "service with a smile." Workers therefore become accustomed to "deep acting" so that the needs of the job and their own desires ultimately become aligned. Hochschild provided important empirical insight into the forms of psychological exploitation that Mills anticipated would be felt in a growing number of jobs.

The flexible work persona of office life today is a further development from these studies. While the service worker seeks to control outwardly directed emotions for business profit, the knowledge worker's affective labor operates in the opposite direction. It is devoted to developing reserves of emotional resilience to withstand the ontological challenges of the typical workday. Later chapters show the extent of employees' investment in work and their subsequent exhaustion – whether from immediate job demands in poorly resourced offices or from the perpetual anxiety of not knowing what is to be expected in any given day. Liu captures this new landscape for work in his description of "the damned middle managers, who when laid off in the millions are by and large irrevocably shunted off the track of traditional job security and career growth into a wholly different school of hard knocks" (2004: 45). This is a fate of "purely lateral career movement, permanent re- or deskilling, and long-term salary and benefits reduction" (ibid.). While these words were written in the fallout from the economic context of the 1990s, the picture of mid-career instability reflects the fate of a number of workers in this book. A significant number of participants encountered redundancy, retraining, job changes or relocation during the course of our meetings. Of those still employed by the same organizations, several were unsure of their ongoing prospects. Work was regularly redesigned and assigned to dwindling ranks of employees, albeit in a language and on terms intended to make this feel empowering. An early promotion is not empowering if it makes your workload paralyzing, but with few staff members ever available to shoulder the incessant expectations of information jobs, a lack of training and time is now to be expected – another consequence of management parsimony.

An absence of long-term organizational strategy affects workers' capacity to predict their workload or ask for existing benefits as previous forms of responsibility and entitlement are turned on their head. These are workplaces composed of "multi-competent work teams" who "oversee projects holistically with perspective on total company strategy" (Liu 2004: 46). This is what we hear from project officers who color-code their email according to required response times to juggle a host of ongoing jobs with multiple stakeholders and hierarchies. It is in the comments of the junior PR strategist who regularly covers for a boss too busy to answer her own email. It is in the foresight of the expectant mother who subscribes to home broadband so that she can continue to run her department while on maternity leave. The function creep affecting workers' roles comes from a lack of specificity regarding the limits

of job descriptions that cannot keep pace with an accelerated workplace. And all along the acceleration of workloads is heightened by the processing capacities and ubiquitous availability encouraged by communications technology.

Emotional labor

Liu's writing is also useful for noting the particular combination of affect regulation and emotional distance required of workers dependent on communications technology for daily interaction. As computers entered the workplace, "It was not one's boss or manager that forbade laughing, weeping, cursing, shouting, or celebrating," on the job. Rather, "it was a blank cubicle wall that simply shut off social interaction and, within that cubicle, database forms that accepted not a jot of humor, not a single expletive" (Liu 2004: 118). In this grim view, software packages and poor office design each contribute to a dehumanized workplace by preventing social relations with colleagues. The present book extends this analysis to the post-dot-com juncture, where open-plan offices break down space barriers but pose new problems of collegial over-exposure and enforced intimacy. Meanwhile online platforms provide the potential for *endless* outpourings of emotion and spontaneity, delivering precisely those affective pleasures Liu worries have been lost from the professional workplace. Twitter tweets and status updates offer regular breaks from the dull patter of solitary typing, though it remains to be seen how long these subcultures of support will withstand the surveillance proclivities of employers. As chapters 5 and 6 explain, there is no easy distinction between the blank corporate space of the office and the codified intimacy of Facebook, especially as more and more organizations seek to utilize social networking sites for profit.

Liu argues that there is "no recreational outside" (2004: 77) to knowledge work – any resistance typically takes place within the same confines of the cubicle and the computer screen (Gregg 2009a). For both women and men, the workplace has become a "vast, compelling, dramatic, socially shared world" compared to the lifeless suburban neighborhoods they leave behind each day (Hochschild, in Wilson and Lande 2005: 276). This book documents a period when management techniques responded to the desires of workers at all levels to exercise autonomy, giving rise to the feelings of enterprise and esteem central to work's psychological appeal. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue, the "new spirit of capitalism"

revolutionizes past models of employment because it "guarantees the workers' commitment without recourse to compulsion, by making everyone's work meaningful" (2005: 76). The fulfilling nature of contemporary jobs, at least at the level of institutional rhetoric, rewards employees for being self-motivated agents, ready and willing to work: "everyone knows what they must do without having to be told. Firm direction is given without resorting to orders, and employees can continue to organize themselves. Nothing is imposed on them since they subscribe to the project" (*ibid.*).

Like Liu, Boltanski and Chiapello show how appropriate affect is the route to employee complicity with these new demands of the workplace. Workers can be relied upon "to control themselves, which involves transferring constraints from external organizational mechanisms to people's internal dispositions" (2005: 79). Those with ongoing positions in today's workplaces face a constant stream of requests to assess their own productivity in compliance with efficiency targets. Self-monitoring and individual goal-setting become disciplinary techniques by which employees engage in the "deep acting" required to implement management tenets. The autonomy of salaried work comes at a price: to constantly prove responsibility.

Intimate work

With this overview, we have some sense of what has changed about office culture in recent decades. First of all, if salaried jobs have always relied on networking skills for reputation management and career progression, increasingly there are fewer material and psychological rewards for engaging in these practices. In fact, as subsequent chapters testify, job security is no longer attained as a consequence of social networking. Rather, networking is an additional form of labor that is required to demonstrate ongoing employability. The crucial difference is that the stability of a permanent job is no longer an end result of the practice. The practice is itself the job; the only thing assumed is that any hallmarks of security will remain elusive. As Boltanski and Chiapello explain, the "activity par excellence" for workers in information jobs "is integrating oneself into networks." To network is "to put an end to isolation, and have opportunities for meeting people or associating with things, proximity to which is liable to generate a project" (2005: 110). In information jobs, the content of the project is less important than the general fact of activity. The priority is for employees "never to be short of a project, bereft of an idea, always to have something in mind, in

the pipeline, with other people one meets out of a desire to do something" (ibid.).¹⁰

In this book, workers without something "in the pipeline" were the first to suffer during the downturn. But those who survived also suffered costs in the quest to maintain multiple "projects." By making a virtue of individuals' capacities to juggle competing commitments at once, employers avoided the responsibility of providing adequate support and reassurance for workers. Legitimate feelings of instability and overload were dealt with by "professional development courses" designed to ease the anxiety arising from constant churn. They were later met with requests to accept reduced hours or extended unpaid leave. Such gestures placed the onus on employees to develop the emotional and psychological capacity to withstand positions and workloads with no definitive beginning or end. Paolo Virno notes the consequences of this "dramatic lack of foundation" in the workplace:

Fears of particular dangers, if only virtual ones, haunt the workday like a mood that cannot be escaped. This fear, however, is transformed into an operational requirement, a special tool of the trade. Insecurity about one's place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety about being "left behind" translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself. (1996: 17)

Communication technologies play a key role in these broader shifts. The surveillance capabilities of many online applications create new dilemmas as social networking sites, calendar scheduling devices, chat programs and above all email bring a raft of opportunities and requirements for work-related contact. Future chapters illustrate in detail how workers retain a sense of privacy in this transformed professional realm, and what strategies are useful to survive a networked office with its never-ending flow of information and communication demands. The process of professional reconfiguration is underway at pace.

Labor politics has always rested on the notion that limits must be placed on the workday. In an era of presence bleed, the possibility of asserting absence from the workplace becomes a matter of intense concern. If the office exists in your phone, how is it possible to claim the right to be away from it for any length of time? Indeed, how do employees assert the right to avoid work-related contact if the bulk of their colleagues are friends? Labor activism is powerless to meet these challenges with its current vocabulary. Like never before, communications technologies grant access to the workplace beyond

physical constraints, just as workplace intimacies trouble the sense of what is coerced or freely chosen labor. To give a sense of the stories to follow, note how policy officer Jenny combines notions of professional performance, diligence and anxiety in explaining her approach to answering email:

I feel that if I don't answer an email someone thinks I'm purposely ignoring them instead of I haven't read it yet . . . It's a concern and it's also just how I see myself as a professional. I want people to know I am looking after things, and I think sometimes when you send an email out, if you don't get anything back, you don't know whether they're ignoring it, dealing with it, thinking about it, pending a response – and I want people to know that if they send an email to me, I'm actioning it.

A defining feature of Jenny's sense of professionalism is her approach to email monitoring. As other responses in the study will show, a platform that was first designed to overcome the asynchronous schedules of co-workers has been transformed into its opposite. It is now a means to demonstrate co-presence with colleagues and enhance the pace and immediacy of busy office schedules. The complicity between always-on technologies and emerging forms of workplace subjectivity are powerful disciplinary incitements for Jenny to engage in what might otherwise appear as compulsive behavior. For she admits: "I think that the anxiety I have with emails is absolutely ridiculous. I just think it's stupid; I should get over it. I don't think it's something that's placed upon me; I think it's truly a personal manifestation."

Whether a personal choice, an addiction or simply a sensible response to new norms in the workplace, Jenny is one of many workers trapped in some very unhealthy habits. While her comments are evidence of her commitment to her job, they also indicate that her workload is a transaction and a performance that must be managed alone. She is apologetic about her ability to adequately cope with her email, as if it is an individual failing. She doesn't see that her experience is shared across professions and industries, that it is the result of widespread policy failure, and that ultimately these problems can be addressed.

Ordinary offices

In contrast to accounts of the new economy that take their cues from Silicon Valley or Wall Street, it is important that this book is set in a bunch of unremarkable office blocks amidst the traffic snarl of

boom-time Brisbane. It depicts a far from glamorous yet highly familiar reality encapsulated in the image of a grey workstation dominated by a recent model Dell desktop computer running Microsoft Outlook. It is a vision of technology so ordinary as to be mundane – and yet it is a vision that so many “new media” scholars seem resolutely prepared to ignore. The uptake of communications devices in mainstream jobs has brought a conclusive end to utopian dreams that the Internet will revolutionize the working day. While there have been changes to the average nine-to-five job, this book shows that these are minimal at best. The power of entrenched business interests is no more evident than in the speed with which online technology moved from offering hope for a better workplace to becoming one of the most onerous dimensions of work life today – often in the very language of freedom.

Anyone who has spent cocktail hour in the airline lounge of a capital city airport knows that the frequent flyer is the archetype for the new world of mobile work. Each weekday a stream of heavy hitting machos can be seen issuing orders through freshly minted BlackBerry's while enjoying complimentary house beverages and cable TV. For the majority of workers back at the office, the ones

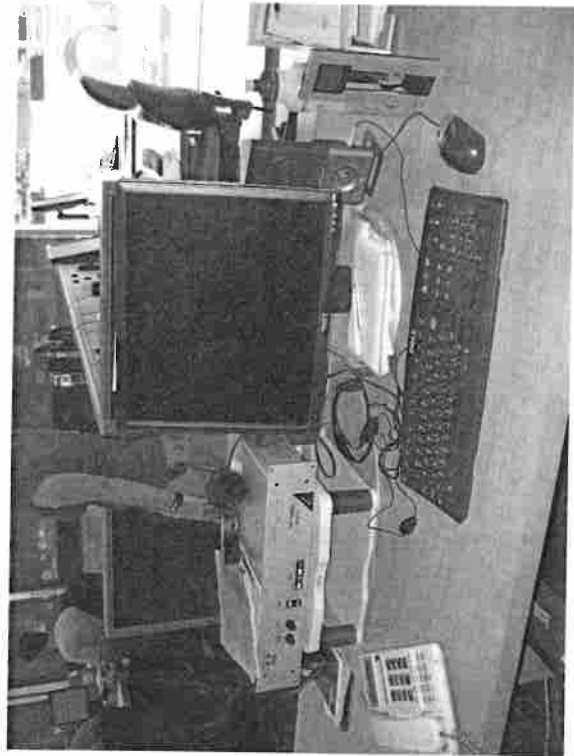


Figure 0.1 Open-plan newsroom, Brisbane, 2007



Figure 0.2 Arts festival workstation; Outlook running on Dell

on the other end of the phone actioning these directives, the workplace is rather different. It is typically a static, banal and routine experience, in which emails and phone calls pile up throughout the day regardless of location or schedule. For these ordinary workers, technology adds another layer of work on top of what is already expected. And due to the hierarchies that persist in the majority of workplaces, the opportunities for escape are few.

This is the salaried class of office workers living in the suburbs of all kinds of cities who know the precise number of minutes it takes to commute to work. These are people for whom work is hardly “better than sex” (Trinca and Fox 2004) but who might feel a sense of recognition watching the BBC comedy *The Office*. Like the characters in Gervais's mockumentary, these workers need to believe that collegial pleasures and intimacies can be carved out of even the most hopeless management cultures. They may or may not lament the lessening distinction between their personal and professional identities, but if this study is any indication, they feel quite powerless to stop the structural influences forcing this change upon them in the name of flexibility and efficiency.

For over a decade, online technologies have acted as orienting devices for the experience of career mobility negotiated by growing numbers of educated workers. As we'll see, these platforms provide opportunities for connection, community, and solidarity, generating relationships that complicate what we mean by the notion of "friendship." At the same time however, technology has played on feelings of instability, threat, and fear among workers facing an unstable employment landscape and the death of the linear career path. The worst of this behavior involves manic email monitoring, online presence performance, and the tyranny of the mobile phone among senior executives and junior on-call workers alike. These developments are symptomatic of a situation in which the assumed benefits of white-collar work in the past century – security and predictability – have perhaps finally been lost (Berlant 2008). The emotional tenor of the modern office is one in which middle-class professionals are asked to adjust to changing forms of privilege and entitlement – and to do so quickly, without complaint, in order to survive. Only recently, this has grown to include accepting the shock of unsustainable credit debts, the loss of long-term investments and cutbacks to paid work hours.

We have come a long way from the professional world of the "organization man," although some things remain familiar. Boltanski and Chiapello put a contemporary spin on C. Wright Mills's famous definition of the white-collar worker as one who enjoyed "no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a centre." Mills wondered: "perhaps because he does not know where he is going, he is in a frantic hurry; perhaps because he does not know what frightens him, he is paralysed with fear" (1951: xvi). Indeed, in spite of the relative privilege of salaried work, the persistent themes in accounts of office life are the affects of fear and anxiety. This ontological bearing so characteristic of white-collar work takes on new dimensions in an age of maximum flexibility (Ross 2009; Gill and Pratt 2008).

The professionals described in this book – those who have survived the redundancies already inflicted – look set to continue the strategies they have assembled to cope with working conditions that have been difficult for some time. By sharing their stories, I hope to begin a longer conversation about the better workplaces we might imagine for the future. Recognizing the value of a job in and of itself in the present climate has the potential effect of suspending efforts to resist workloads that have been so accelerated by new technology that they escape even the most steadfast efforts to manage them. In



Figure 0.3 Brisbane suburbia

providing a language to articulate the consequences of this new phenomenon, *Work's Intimacy* intends to be an indictment, if not also an elegy to the experience of "presence bleed." It should not need to be added that it is written with a sense of wonder at the consequences should even the wealthiest of nations fail to learn the lesson of valuing its workers.