

November 2003: For Accountancy Magazine.

Are You One of the 2 Million? Seeking Work-Life Balance: Part 1

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In modern Britain, people work exceptionally hard. We all know of colleagues who have become ill through stress, and there are worrying social costs to long hours as well as physical costs. One of my PhD students is writing what I think will be a really interesting thesis entitled *Do British People Under-Invest in Friendship and Over-Invest in Work?* That seems a good and evocative way to think about the problem. I suspect the answer will come out to be yes, but we have not got to the end of the project.

Most of us officially do a 40-hour week. But the world gets increasingly complex and in practice that headline figure is routinely misleading. According to the best estimate, approximately 2 million Britons now put in more than 60 hours a week. That takes some thinking about. It means the equivalent of a person working from 9am until 9pm, then going out for something to eat until 10.00pm, say, and then going back to the office for another stint -- every weekday.

Anyone with a job knows the pressures of being an employee in modern society. Most of us would like to slow down but feel that we cannot do so because everyone else is working so hard. We get caught in a race to be promoted and to be thought well of and to do the right thing. All of a sudden, there are not enough hours to perform the job properly.

Technology has changed, too, and produced an extra twist. White-collar employees, who are easily the majority these days, are starting routinely to check their work email from home, and it seems likely that this trend will spiral increasingly out of control. Mobile phones are everywhere and the latest generation mean that you can read your email while on the move. I have friends who are frightened to go on holiday because they cannot cope with the thought of 300 emails waiting when they return. Then there is the curse of the cc: far too

many emails get copied to far too many people. Thanks to our technological inventiveness, the divisions between the workplace and the home are becoming increasingly blurred. Life in 2003 is stressful.

In a recent international survey, random samples of employees were asked about the amount of time they felt they were able to spend with their families. Strikingly, 46% of Americans wanted to have much more time at home with the family. For Britain, the figure was 36%. Other countries with severe work-life imbalance included France, Portugal, Sweden and Russia.

Yet some parts of the world did much better. In Spain, only 8% of workers wished for much more time with their families. In the Netherlands, 18% said so.

Work-life difficulties are starkest among those in middle age. The sense of wanting far more family time peaks in a person's early 40s. Highly qualified people suffer particularly.

Research by Francis Green and colleagues has shown that the 'intensification of work', as measured by reported levels of tiredness, grew through the 1990s, although it may recently have levelled off a bit. Warwick University studies have shown that mental health scores worsened sharply among British workers over the last decade. Job satisfaction levels have dropped in the United States, too, in each of the previous three decades. In the 1970s, 56% of Americans were extremely satisfied at work. In the 1980s, it was 52%. In the 1990s, 47% were.

For sanity, we need to pit our brains against the machines, and reclaim our lives. It is time for a life strategy.