

July 3, 2007

Working to Extremes

Most large organizations have at least a few employees who regularly work 70 hours or more a week. Though many say they relish the work style, HR is right to be concerned about the impact on health, family life and long-term productivity.

By Mark Rowh

For many Americans, the 40-hour work week is standard. Of course, many managers and professionals often work more than eight hours a day or five days a week. But for some, a 50-hour week is just getting started.



According to research published in the December 2006 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* ("Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek," by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce), an estimated 1.7 million Americans hold "extreme jobs," generally defined as high-pressure positions that require 70 hours or more a week. Some of them thrive on this practice, but it can also pose a variety of challenges (to family life, health -- even their sex lives), not only for these harried professionals, but also for HR practitioners who hope to retain them.

David Nour, a management consultant based in Atlanta, routinely puts in 70 to 80 hours a week. On weekdays, this means rising at 5 a.m. and working at home -- where he processes e-mails, reads reports and reviews the day's upcoming schedule -- then reporting to the office or a coffee meeting by 7 a.m.

After a day of meetings and other work, he concludes the day with a drink or dinner at 8 or 9 p.m. before returning home. If he's traveling, the day typically begins with a 7 a.m. flight and ends up with late-night work in a hotel room.

Why such a demanding schedule?

"Long hours are a means to an end," Nour says. "If success is financial independence, more family time, and working as optional, then I'll invest the time now to get to that end result."

The extra hours, he feels, provide a competitive advantage.

"We win more marquee business with this hustle than our competitors, and we're building a solid brand for quality and a unique market position," he says. "As such, I'm building and scaling a business toward a rewarding exit for the entire team."

Playing the Game

For some, excessively long hours are an expectation.

"A hedge fund analyst or portfolio manager routinely works these kinds of hours," says Sandy Gross, managing partner at Pinetum Partners, an executive search firm in Greenwich, Conn. "It differs from fund to fund, but realistically, in order to keep current with the research and trends necessary to do the job well, and to contribute to a team in order to earn what can become a substantial salary, the hours are expected."

Junior-level attorneys, medical residents and others often find themselves working schedules that are required, rather than as a personal choice.

"Typically, young lawyers and accountants in big firms put in well over 70 hours per week, and, in fact, these long hours are the price of admission," says Heather Gatley, executive vice president of HR services and general counsel at AlphaStaff Group in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "These institutions expect this commitment, and your worth is defined by the hours you work even more than the results obtained."

At the same time, extreme hours can also provide a way to accomplish what otherwise might be considered impossible. Hewlett tells of a young professional who emigrated from India five years ago and now works as a financial analyst at a major commercial bank in New York, spending 90 to 120 hours a week in the office, sticking around even when there is nothing specific to do.

"The face-time culture is a hazard of the job, but in his eyes it's well worth it," she says, pointing out that as a 23-year-old at his first job, the analyst takes home \$120,000 a year and is among the top 6 percent of earners in the United States.

For Love of the Job

Outside of those professions where long hours are understood to be a part of the job, this approach often boils down to personal style.

"Every organization has individuals who choose to work extensive hours," says Bernadette Kenny, senior vice president of human resources at staffing firm Adecco N.A. "There are very few organizations that demand this. People at all levels make this choice. We all know of the . . . executive who answers e-mails at midnight."

For reasons ranging from basic personality to a kind of missionary zeal, some people actually seem to relish the lifestyle that comes with working excessive hours.

"The extreme work model is enormously alluring," Hewlett says. "Far from resenting the grind, the professionals we surveyed love their jobs. They love the intellectual challenge and the thrill of achieving difficult goals. There is very little sense of victimization, and quite a lot of pride."

That's the case for Michael Novack, president of St. Louis-based Kiosite, which provides services to automate the hiring process. With work days that begin at 9 a.m. and extend as late as 3 a.m., his hours are the epitome of extreme -- not that he's complaining.

"While the job is strenuous and the hours can be exhausting, many firms and individuals rely on us as a mission-critical provider to improve business results" he says. "To me, that is both satisfying and exhilarating."

He feels he is well-suited to such a role.

"My personality thrives on a fast-paced schedule and demanding workload, as long as there is a terrific and supportive team in place," he says.

For others, motivations include the lure of large compensation packages or the sheer complexity of a leadership position.

George F. Brenlla, a partner in the law firm of Clifton, Budd and DeMaria in New York, cites as examples high-level executives such as CFOs and COOs who need to coordinate all the departments under their

control, as well as those who travel four or five days per week. In many cases, though, their responsibilities are only part of the equation.

"These employees work long hours, but some of the expectations are choices made by the employees themselves," he says. "The organization expects 55 to 60 hours to ensure the job gets done, but these types of employees are generally Type-A personalities and will not rest until they think everything is as perfect as possible."

David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a human resources consulting firm in Stamford, Conn. (where he routinely works in the 70-hour range), says that love of the job should be the main consideration.

"If you love what you do, the hours are not an issue," Lewis says. "If you are working these hours due to lack of resources or inefficient work style, then you need to make some changes."

Great Job, No Sex?

Despite the advantages noted by those who elect to work extreme hours, the practice definitely has its downside.

"Extreme jobs may be deeply alluring, but they're certainly not cost-free," Hewlett says. In addition to the *Harvard Business Review* article, she and co-authors Carolyn Buck Luce, Sandra Southwell and Linda Bernstein have recently published *Seduction and Risk: The Emergence of Extreme Jobs*. Their research has highlighted a major contradiction between the glamour, excitement and rewards that professionals say they experience on the job and what they actually describe happening in their lives, both at work and at home.

"Across the board, people with extreme jobs report that their work impacts their ability to craft happy and healthy private lives," says Hewlett. Among those surveyed, 69 percent said their extreme jobs undermine their health, 58 percent said that their work gets in the way of a strong relationship with children, and 46 percent said that it hurts their marriages. And 50 percent reported that their extreme jobs make it impossible to have a satisfying sex life.

Certainly, high levels of intensity are difficult to sustain over time.

"A major disadvantage is burnout," Brenlla says. "And, depending on the organization, their efforts may not be properly recognized."

Even more serious are the health problems that may develop when work becomes overly dominant.

In its November 2006 issue, the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* cited research finding that long working hours increase stress levels and the risk of serious physical illness such as heart attacks and strokes. The research found that nurses, police officers and others who work 12- to 16-hour shifts may be more likely to make mistakes that adversely affect those they serve. Other findings noted stress on families, more work-related injuries and mistakes, and too many instances where employees show up for work when they are sick.

"The major factors are health-related," says Kenny. "No one can do this over a considerable period of time without running the risk of some physical issue, exhaustion or burnout."

As CEO of Communication Infrastructure Group in Evergreen, Colo., Karen Morales has experienced firsthand the effects of overly long work weeks. Although she enjoys her job and doesn't mind working 70 hours weekly, some warning signs have given her pause.

"I started the firm a year and a half ago, and was going full steam ahead on a continuous basis until last fall," she says. "I caught a bug in early October and was literally sick until the first week of January. As an extremely healthy individual, this was a trigger to me that the long hours I am putting in definitely can have a negative impact on my ability to effectively fight illness."

Eventually, such difficulties are bound to have a negative impact on the organization as well as the individual.

"In the long term, working excessively long hours is likely to leave the organization with high levels of turnover and vacant positions," says Dr. Laura Belsten, president of CEO Partnership, a Denver-based executive coaching firm. "Many HR professionals asked to fill [an extreme worker's] position will regret that more wasn't done to keep this person happy, especially when considering replacement costs."

Bending the Rules

When possible, HR leaders might be well advised to discourage situations in which 70-hour weeks become the norm for any one employee or group of employees. When that isn't feasible, the best approach may be taking creative approaches to help extreme employees manage other aspects of their lives.

"Consider steps such as arranging for a local dry cleaner to pick up and deliver, having a child-care center on-site or booking massage therapists," says Gatley. "More importantly, the HR professional should encourage both the individual and the organization to recognize the value of balance." This might include sponsoring health and wellness fairs and finding ways to reward employees other than in ways that might encourage long hours, she adds.

"Recognize that whatever you get out of an employee now, you will pay for later if it is excessive," Gatley says.

In some instances, dealing with those who work excessive hours may mean bending traditional policies or practices.

"HR professionals are trained to follow their employee policies uniformly and to treat every employee the same," says Brenlla. "However, in the extreme case of these employees, HR professionals need to be flexible in order to accommodate their schedules and needs. Examples might include paying for the spouse to travel with them occasionally, providing them with all necessary technology that allows them to work from home occasionally, and actually forcing them to take vacation or time off."

Kenny echoes the need for taking measures that show employees that HR cares about their welfare.

"People should not feel threatened if they work late at night, so be sure to provide a secure work environment," she says. "Create opportunities to 'take a break' that might not conform to generally accepted policies, such as an extra week of paid vacation. Finally, the HR officer should take responsibility for the overall culture of the organization and help an organization understand what kind of employer it wants to be."