



Certain industries breed a type of professional for whom get-a-life dedication is a badge of honor. The phenomenon is on the rise, but is it sustainable?

Extreme Jobs The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce

A FINANCIAL ANALYST we'll call Sudhir emigrated five years ago from Mumbai, India. He works at a major commercial bank in New York. Summertime, when he puts in 90 hours a week, is his "light" season. The rest of the year, he works upwards of 120 hours per week – leaving only 48 hours for sleeping, eating, entertaining, and (he smiles) bathing. Sudhir stays late in the office even when he has nothing particularly pressing to do. His get-a-life existence is a hazard of the profession – but worth it: As a 23-year-old with a first job, he is in the top 6% of earners in America.

Higher up the totem pole, Joe (not his real name) has risen through the corporate ranks to become a managing director at a major bank. Joe thought his workload would become lighter as he moved up, but the opposite has occurred: He now works six or seven days a week, from multiple locations. He keeps an apartment in New York, where he works two days, and is on the road another three or four days. Only on weekends does he see his wife and three children – who live in Connecticut. Even then, he gets calls in the middle of the night on Saturdays and Sundays, and flies out to see clients on a moment's

notice. “The first year we were married,” Joe’s wife recalls, “we had to rearrange my grandmother’s funeral so that he wouldn’t miss a meeting.”

Ming Mei is a managing director and a member of the executive committee at ProLogis, a fast-growing real estate investment trust with extensive operations in Asia. Mei is in charge of expansion in China, where he’s built ProLogis’s portfolio base from zero to 10 million square feet of properties over the past three years. The demands of his job are immense. Negotiating with Chinese government officials, he routinely packs five cities into six-day business trips. These trips can be grueling—back-to-back meetings spill over into late dinners where key relationships are cultivated and cemented. Despite the pressure and the pace, Mei describes his job in glowing terms: “Building this business in markets where no one has done anything like this before is enormously exciting. And important. We’ve built distribution centers that are vital for China’s growth—they contribute to the overall prospects of the economy.”

Jonelle Salter is similarly enthusiastic about her job. An offshore installation manager (OIM) at BP, Jonelle knows what it’s like to be in charge of the health and safety of 80 workers on an oil platform in the North Sea. On top of pressures that would face anyone in this job, she has some unique management challenges. As the first black woman to become an OIM at BP, Jonelle has sometimes had to go to extra lengths to establish her authority in this male-dominated environment. But she loves being a pioneer and credits BP for going out on a limb and finding a female mentor (Gro Kielland, a managing director for BP Norway) to help her through the rough patches. Jonelle talks eloquently about the thrill that comes with the challenges of her job. “You train and train, but you still don’t know whether you’ll come through when

Researching Extreme Jobs

In 2004 the Center for Work-Life Policy launched a private-sector task force consisting of 33 global companies devoted to stemming attrition in their female executive ranks—a problem referred to as the “hidden brain drain.” Task force discussions and survey data showed that one challenge facing women was a trend toward more extreme work in corporate managerial positions. In 2005 and 2006, we focused specifically on that issue. This research consists of two surveys—one of high earners across various professions in the U.S. and the other of high-earning managers in large multinational corporations—as well as 14 focus groups and 35 one-on-one interviews. The survey of U.S. workers targeted the top 6% of earners in the country and garnered responses from 1,564 full-time employees (844 men, 720 women) ages 25 to 60. The survey of managers at global companies included 652 men and 323 women, ages 25 to 60, at the director level or above; 54% were from the United States or Canada, and 46% were from Europe, the Middle East, or Africa. Survey statistics cited throughout this article refer to the U.S. high earners unless specifically attributed to the multinational management population. The surveys were conducted online by Harris Interactive from November 1, 2005, through April 6, 2006.

an emergency happens—and whether you can conjure up the right kind of leadership,” she says. “It’s a kind of test. And when you pass, you feel quite wonderful.”

Sudhir, Joe, Mei, and Jonelle are succeeding in what we have come to term “extreme jobs,” and they’re not alone. Across the economy, there are high-earning professionals whose work has become all consuming. The outrageous hours they put into their careers are matched only by the over-the-top rewards they receive.

Do these professionals constitute a new breed? Not entirely. Highly demanding and important jobs have always been around—along with the workaholics who created them where they didn’t need to exist. Yet there is a difference. No longer the pitiable drones and graspers of society, today’s overachieving professionals are recast as road warriors and masters of the universe. They labor longer, take on more responsibility, and earn more ex-

travagantly than ever before—and their numbers are growing.

Our research on extreme jobs is a project of the Hidden Brain Drain Task Force, which we launched in February 2004 and now head up. In late 2005, four of the task force’s member companies—American Express, BP, ProLogis, and UBS—sponsored two large surveys with the intent of “mapping” the shape and scope of high-level, high-impact jobs these days. We also conducted in-depth qualitative research—focus groups and interviews—to get at the attitudes and motivations that lie behind the extreme-work model (the sidebar “Researching Extreme Jobs” provides more detail). We then considered the data in relation to the large-scale structural shifts that have made high-stakes employment a more prominent feature of the U.S. economy and culture. What emerges from this inquiry is a complex picture of the all-consuming career—rewarding in many ways, but not without danger to individuals and society.

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The Elements of Extremity

How do we define extreme jobs? For the purposes of data analysis, we've said that survey respondents have such jobs if they work 60 hours or more per week, are high earners, and hold positions with at least five of these characteristics:

- Unpredictable flow of work
- Fast-paced work under tight deadlines
- Inordinate scope of responsibility that amounts to more than one job
- Work-related events outside regular work hours
- Availability to clients 24/7
- Responsibility for profit and loss
- Responsibility for mentoring and recruiting
- Large amount of travel
- Large number of direct reports
- Physical presence at workplace at least ten hours a day

Our two surveys of high-earning professionals have revealed the four characteristics thought to create the most intensity and pressure: unpredictability (cited by 91% of respondents), fast pace with tight deadlines (86%), work-related events outside business hours (66%), and 24/7 client demands (61%).

The American Dream on Steroids

The first thing that becomes clear is that successful professionals are working harder than ever. The 40-hour workweek, it seems, is a thing of the past. Even the 60-hour workweek, once the path to the top, is now practically considered part-time, as a recent *Fortune* magazine article put it. Our data reveal that 62% of high-earning individuals work more than 50 hours a week, 35% work more than 60 hours a week, and 10% work more than 80 hours a week. Add in a typical one-hour commute, and a 60-hour workweek translates into leaving the house at 7 AM and getting home at 9 PM five days a week. If we focus on the subset of those workers who hold what we consider extreme jobs (a designation based on responsibilities and other attributes beyond pay), the hours are even more punishing. The majority of them (56%) work 70 hours or more a week, and 9% work 100 hours or more.

How dramatic a jump is this from the past? Without longitudinal data on ac-

tual behavior, we must rely on our respondents to gauge the increase. Of the extreme jobholders, 48% say they are working an average of 16.6 more hours per week than they did five years ago. That finding is consistent with other studies of the expanding workweek, including, most recently, one by Peter Kuhn and Fernando Lozano of the National Bureau of Economic Research. (Among college-educated men working full-time in the United States, Kuhn and Lozano report, those putting in 50-hour weeks rose from 22.2% to 30.5% between 1980 and 2001.)

Vacations, meanwhile, seem to be shrinking. Among the extreme-jobs crowd, 42% take ten or fewer vacation days per year—far less time off than they are officially entitled to—and 55% claim they have had to cancel vacation plans “regularly.” Moreover, they say no one is forcing them to do this. The long hours and months without breaks are discretionary. Jay (not his real name), a creative executive at a major entertainment company, is a case in point. He can't remember the last time he

had a vacation, and he has all but delegated his social life to handlers. He is driven by a vision of taking his company into a new creative space—video games—and his heart and soul are wrapped up in this mission, which has become the defining element of his identity. “If I can get this to work for the studio,” he told us with unalloyed enthusiasm, “I’ll be the first guy to figure it out. Everyone else who has tried has failed. It’s my Everest.”

Let us back up for a moment and clarify the distinction we are making between run-of-the-mill long-hours jobs and extreme jobs. Our definition, which grew out of extended focus group discussions, takes into account not just hours (and, of course, pay) but also the pressures that make these positions particularly stressful. We identified ten common characteristics of extreme jobs and decided to classify a respondent as an extreme jobholder if he or she is confronted by at least five of them, on top of working 60 hours or more per week (see the sidebar “The Elements of Extremity”). By this standard, 21% of the high earners in the U.S. whom we surveyed have extreme jobs. (In our separate survey of professionals working in global companies, this figure rises to 45%.)

The fact is, extreme jobs are no longer a rarity. Our data reveal an enormous increase in work pressure for high-caliber professionals across ages, genders, sectors, and continents. Extreme jobs, we've found, are distributed across the economy—in large manufacturing companies as well as on Wall Street, in entertainment and media, in medicine and law, in consulting and accounting.

Given this increasingly extreme work model, one might imagine that our study has also uncovered a great many burned out and bitter professionals. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The overwhelming majority of extreme jobholders in our U.S. sample (66%) say they love their jobs—and in the global companies survey, this figure rises to 76%. Far from seeing themselves as workaholics in need of rescuing, extreme workers wear their commitments like

badges of honor. To use the words of the cultural critic Catherine Orenstein, these jobs constitute “the American Dream on steroids.” There is very little sense of victimization. Almost two-thirds (64%) of extreme workers admit that the pressure and the pace are self-inflicted—a function of a type A personality. By and large, extreme professionals don’t feel exploited; they feel exalted.

Why the Rise in Extreme Work?

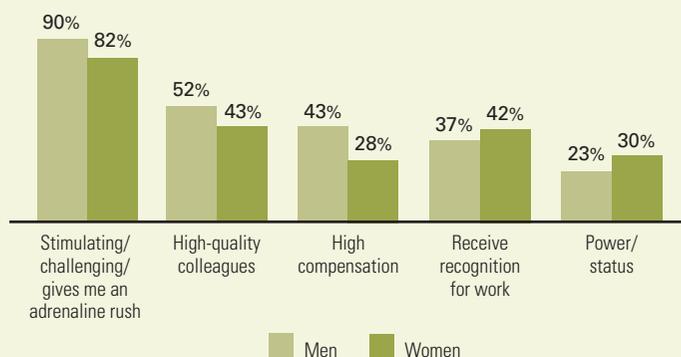
Every extreme worker has his or her own reasons for putting in the effort. Many people love the intellectual challenge and the thrill of achieving something big. Others are turned on by the oversize compensation packages, brilliant colleagues, and recognition and respect that come with the territory. When we asked our survey respondents what motivated them, most cited a number of factors. (See the exhibit “Why Do You Do It?”)

Note how gendered the responses are. For men, compensation comes in third on the list of motivators, after stimulation/challenge and high-quality colleagues. For women, compensation comes in fifth, or last. The following comments by Debra Langford are typical of what we heard in interviews: “It’s not that compensation isn’t a top priority – it clearly is important. As an African-American single woman with financial responsibilities, I must be strategic in my career choices. When I accepted this position with Time Warner, in which I am responsible for identifying diverse candidates for high-level positions at the company, I knew the benefits would be beyond the purely financial. This is an important position because of the value of what I do – and the recognition and support I receive for my efforts are incredibly rewarding.”

Similarly, Susan Sobott, president of the OPEN division of American Express, chose AmEx because she wanted to be part of a mission she believed in – and part of a dedicated team. “I used to be a financial analyst on Wall Street,” she said. “After my MBA, I weighed going back into investment banking and

Why Do You Do It?

Holders of extreme jobs indicated what motivates them to work long, stressful hours. They answered the question “What are the main reasons you love your job?” Multiple responses were allowed.



considered consulting. I thought about the big paycheck that typically comes with working in these fields. But for me, the most important thing in choosing a path – more important than zeros after a dollar sign – was to find an organization where I could work with talented people to create leading business strategies that further a great brand.”

Interesting as these motivations are, it should be pointed out that individual decisions about work are not made in a vacuum. At a macro level, the reasons behind the rise of the extreme job are structural; it’s the outcome of sweeping changes in the global economic environment. These changes – which include increased competitive pressures, vastly improved communication technology, and cultural shifts – intersect in powerful ways.

Competitive pressures. To begin with, competition has become more intense, both at the level of the individual professional and at the level of the corporation. Within companies, the combined effect of merger mania and substantially flattened hierarchies has been to pit a bigger pool of workers against one another for any given promotion. Catalyst reported that in 2005 there were 368 fewer corporate officer posi-

tions in the *Fortune* 500 than there had been ten years earlier (the number declined from 11,241 to 10,873) – which means the competition for high-level positions has become that much fiercer. Add to this the influx of talent that has come about through women’s large-scale movement into the workforce and companies’ ongoing diversity efforts. Both factors heighten the level of competition. As companies grow leaner and meaner, we see the declining job security that Louis Uchitelle describes in *The Disposable American*. Meanwhile, more responsibility falls on the shoulders of fewer individuals. Paul, a vice chairman at one of the big four accounting firms, told us his job has gotten so huge that each day more things are left undone. “The clincher,” he said, “is that the importance of the things I’m not getting to is greater than it used to be.”

The economists Robert Frank and Philip Cook have argued that, more and more, our economy operates by “winner take all” rules. This is the kind of dynamic that exists in flatter hierarchies. Because a slight performance edge yields outsized rewards (culminating in the gargantuan salaries awarded to CEOs these days), there is a powerful incentive to work incrementally more

than one's rivals. Hours and effort ratchet up accordingly. Consider how different this is from the days of TV shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet*, when a professional man who was reasonably productive between the hours of 9 and 5 could count on a steady if unspectacular ascent through the ranks. The 1950s professional model was in many ways kinder and gentler, but for any young Turk willing to work harder and eager to be rewarded, it was a source of intense frustration. Today's model operates by the young turks' rules: The American Dream isn't about being Ozzie Nelson. It's about being Donald Trump.

Increasingly, the young turks are actually young Indians or young Chinese—or whatever smart and hardworking population offers a labor cost advantage. The threat of losing jobs to outsourcing arrangements is another driver in the rise of extreme work. Finally, the climbing costs of health care insurance and other benefits—and the fact that “nonexempt” professionals do not earn overtime pay in the U.S.—make companies eager to squeeze as many hours of work as possible out of their employees before springing for another fully loaded salary.

The “extreme” ethos. While competitive pressures in corporations are making extreme jobs more necessary, other changes in the broader society are making them more attractive. Orenstein points to signs in the popular culture of the widespread embrace of the “extreme” ethos. Extreme sports in particular have become wildly popular—they have their own version of the Olympics, known simply as the X Games, created in 1995 by ESPN. The reality TV show *Fear Factor* gives couch potatoes vicarious thrills by putting ordinary people to the test in extreme stunts. Neighborhood health clubs now offer rock-climbing walls and kickboxing classes for those who abhor the dull routine of exercise.

We first heard the word “extreme” applied to white-collar work four years ago in an interview with Marilyn, a senior banker at a London-based investment



bank. Marilyn was captivated by extreme sports: skydiving, snowboarding, triathlons, bungee jumping, surfing, mountaineering—anything that provided a rush of adrenaline and an element of danger. She eagerly recommended Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* (an account of an ill-fated trip by amateur mountain climbers) as a window into why people push themselves to the limits of their physical endurance. Marilyn saw parallels between extreme sports and her life as an investment banker. First, there were the extraordinary time demands and performance stressors. Seventy-hour workweeks, grueling travel requirements, and relentless bottom-line pressures constantly pushed her to her limits—both physically and intellectually. Second, there was the allure of the job. Much like extreme sports, investment banking was exhilarating and seductive. Marilyn told us, “It gives me this rush. Like a drug, it's addictive.”

In the world of extreme sports, the more daring, demanding, and—this is

telling—gratuitous the feat, the greater our awe of the athlete. We appreciate the extreme athlete's talent, skill, and courage, but also the hubris that sets him or her apart from the crowd. High stakes and danger define the extreme-sports challenge, which in the end is less about the physical than about the existential—less about mountain peaks or big waves than about inner strength and testing one's limits. In a popular culture that lionizes such athletes, it is not surprising that the extreme ethos has worked its way into other endeavors. And so, our most intense jobs are seen not as exploitative but, rather, as glamorous, desirable, and virtuous. (Witness *The Apprentice*.) From ER doctors to tax lawyers to management consultants to hedge fund salespeople, many professionals are wearing their outside work commitments on their sleeves; they consider their over-the-top efforts—and often voluntary sacrifices and risks—a reflection of character. They brag about pulling all-nighters and about flying

Something's Gotta Give

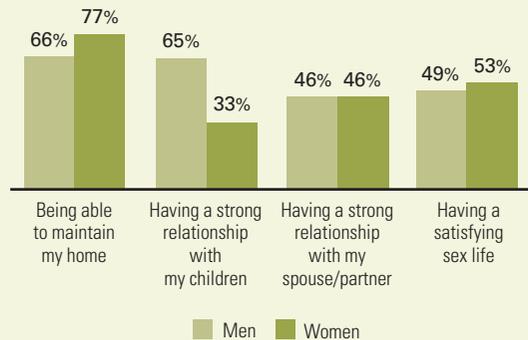
Extreme jobs may be deeply alluring, but they are certainly not cost free. Our data show that the extreme-work model is wreaking havoc on private lives and taking a toll on health and well-being.

Housework and home care seem to be among the first things to go. Over three-quarters (77%) of the women we surveyed and two-thirds

extreme jobs said their work interferes with their ability to have strong relationships with their children—compared with one-third (33%) of women. In a focus group targeting the teenage children of extreme workers, a fresh-faced 16-year-old we'll call Ellen said her dad had promised he'd work less when he made partner at a major accounting firm. "But instead,

Repercussions of Extreme Jobs for Family, Home, and Intimate Life

U.S. Survey
Extreme Jobholders Saying Job Interferes with the Following



(66%) of the men said they can't properly maintain their homes. One executive in a London-based focus group told us that although he had lived in his South Kensington flat for two years, a mattress and a sleeping bag were the sum total of his furnishings. His schedule was such that he hadn't been able to make a commitment to be home to accept a delivery.

Health is also an issue. More than two-thirds of professionals we surveyed don't get enough sleep; half don't get enough exercise; and a significant number overeat, consume too much alcohol, or rely on medications to relieve insomnia or anxiety.

Moms with extreme jobs tend to do better than dads in terms of coming through for their children. Almost two-thirds (65%) of men with

he works more....My dad's always exhausted. He's gone when I get up, and not back when I go to sleep." But her father's absentee parenting seemed normal to her since, in her world, all the fathers she knew worked such long hours.

Spouses and partners also suffer from the extreme-work model. Extreme workers dramatically underinvest in intimate relationships. Some of the data are quite startling. For example, at the end of a 12-hour or longer workday, 45% of all respondents in our global companies survey are too tired to say anything at all to their spouses or partners. Focus group conversations were sprinkled with half-joking references to four in bed these days: oneself, one's partner, and two BlackBerrys or Treos.

300,000 miles in a year. To them, a 70-hour workweek is about proving their worth. It's akin to going up against the elements.

New levels of connectivity. Extreme work is also the result of the key technologies that facilitate it. Modern communication devices have prompted a shift in expectations and behavior. We see it all around us: people glued to their cell phones or BlackBerrys, no matter the day, time, or occasion. Professionals tap so incessantly at their wireless devices that a new medical ailment has arisen—"BlackBerry thumb"—and Hyatt hotel spas now offer a "BlackBerry Balm hand massage."

Communication technology seems to have both liberated and shackled extreme professionals. In our U.S. survey, 67% of people with extreme jobs said that being available for clients 24/7 is a critical part of being successful. According to one young investment banker, "When you're an analyst, even when you're in a meeting, waiting an hour to respond to an e-mail is just not acceptable." This kind of availability, not possible before the advent of BlackBerrys and cell phones, is a curse as well as a blessing. A Dallas-based accountant in one of our focus groups described how her boss had tracked her down at a five-year-old's birthday party the previous weekend and insisted she join a 90-minute conference call because something had blown up with a client. Of the U.S. survey respondents, 72% said that technology helps them do their jobs well, 59% said that it lengthens their working day, and 64% noted its encroachment on family time.

The workplace as social center. Perhaps most profound among the cultural shifts we've been describing is the fact that the workplace is now the center and source of many people's social lives. When one's best friends and most stimulating encounters are at the office—as is increasingly the case—the prospect of working late into the evening becomes less onerous. Robert Putnam famously decried the loss of social capital in American cities as more people "bowed alone." But it can be argued that the

kinds of personal connections once made through civic organizations are now made in workplaces. In a far less positive light, this is a theme that Arlie Russell Hochschild has explored in her book *The Time Bind*, which gets inside the relationships of some dual-career couples and reveals how home life can become seriously depleted when both men and women work long hours. As households and families are starved of time, they become progressively less appealing, and both men and women begin to avoid going home. Returning to a house or an apartment with an empty refrigerator and a neglected teenager might prove to be a little bleak at the

the hours. It is probably not wrong to assume that more knowledge work means that people simply like their jobs more.

This surely seems true of Alex, a federal prosecutor who focuses on securities fraud. He works long hours, typically arriving home around 11 PM and routinely skipping meals. Instead of eating dinner, he will have a PowerBar at his desk—or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when he gets home late at night. He never makes it home before his two young children are in bed, although he does make a point of taking his daughter to preschool in the morning. He laments that in trying to salvage

Professionals tap so incessantly at their wireless devices that a new medical ailment has arisen – “BlackBerry thumb.”

end of a long working day—so why not look in on that networking event or put that presentation through one more draft? Hochschild shows that for many professionals, “home” and “work” have reversed roles. Home is the source of stress and guilt, while work has become the “haven in a heartless world” – the place where successful professionals get strokes, admiration, and respect.

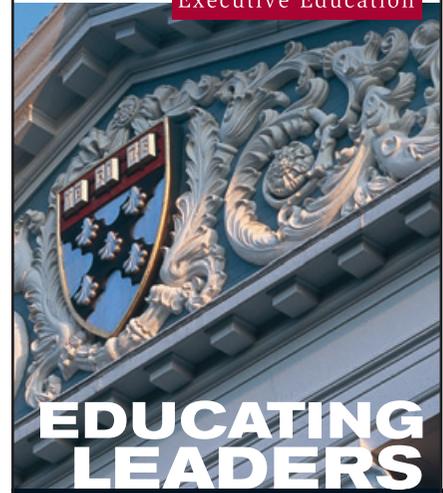
More knowledge-based work. Part of the reason that workplaces have become more sociable is that the nature of work has undergone a transformation. “Knowledge work” is increasingly important, and corporations are now full of people employing their brains more than their brawn. One thing’s for sure: There’s no need to lay down tools at the end of a shift; to the extent that knowledge work requires capital equipment, the equipment is highly portable communications devices rather than plant machinery. Knowledge-based enterprises also tend to attract employees who are on a par intellectually. The exchange of ideas and knowledge that now characterizes most workplaces is without doubt a source of stimulation—again, making it less painful to put in

as much family time as possible, he is neglecting his relationship with his wife. On a rare recent “date,” the couple went to a jazz club, only to have Alex doze off after one drink. It’s not hard to imagine why: His average workweek is 75 hours—and in the midst of a trial, he can put in 95 hours.

Nevertheless, Alex derives enormous satisfaction from his work. Last year, for example, he prosecuted an accounting fraud case. “Enron writ small,” he calls it. For him, the case exemplifies what motivates him to work so hard. He not only made sure a criminal was punished for breaking the law; he also helped secure compensation for those who were wronged. The problem with this great job is its size. “In a nutshell, it’s undoable,” says Alex. “We’re underfunded and painfully understaffed....Over the last five years, I’ve built up some great relationships with our FBI agents, who often bring me compelling cases – but the fact of the matter is, I can only take a small proportion of them. It’s disappointing and frustrating, but I just can’t drive myself any harder.”

Global operations. As companies gain global spans of operation, there are

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Is There a Gender Issue Here?

Our research shows that extreme jobs are much more common among men than among women. The exhibit “Who Has Extreme Jobs?” tells the tale. Among high earners in the United States, 21% hold such jobs, and less than a fifth of those are women. Among high earners at global companies, 45% are working extremely, and women make up a third of that group.

Why aren’t more extreme workers women? Part of the answer emerges from finer cuts of the data. In the global companies survey, we found that young, talented women are well represented in jobs that have reasonable hours (fewer than 60 a week) but high performance requirements (fast pace with tight deadlines, 24/7 client demands, and so on). Of the respondents holding these jobs, 39% are women. By contrast, of those meeting high performance requirements and putting in longer hours, only 30% are women. The data suggest that women are not afraid of the

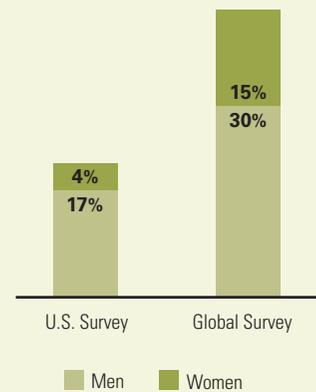
pressure or responsibility of extreme jobs—they just can’t pony up the hours.

The U.S. survey, too, demonstrates that the number of hours worked is where women fall short. Consider the exhibit “How Many Hours and How Much Responsibility?”—which divides the high earners we surveyed into four quadrants, according to the length of the workweek and the demands of the job. Positions that involve long hours but little in the way of performance pressure are particularly shunned by women: Only 2% of the women in our sample work long hours in positions with few extreme-job responsibilities. Men are somewhat more tolerant of such jobs.

Perhaps women are less tolerant of high-hours, low-impact work because they are more aware of the “opportunity costs.” They seem particularly tuned into—and pained by—the fallout on their children. They see a direct link between their long workweeks and a variety of distressing

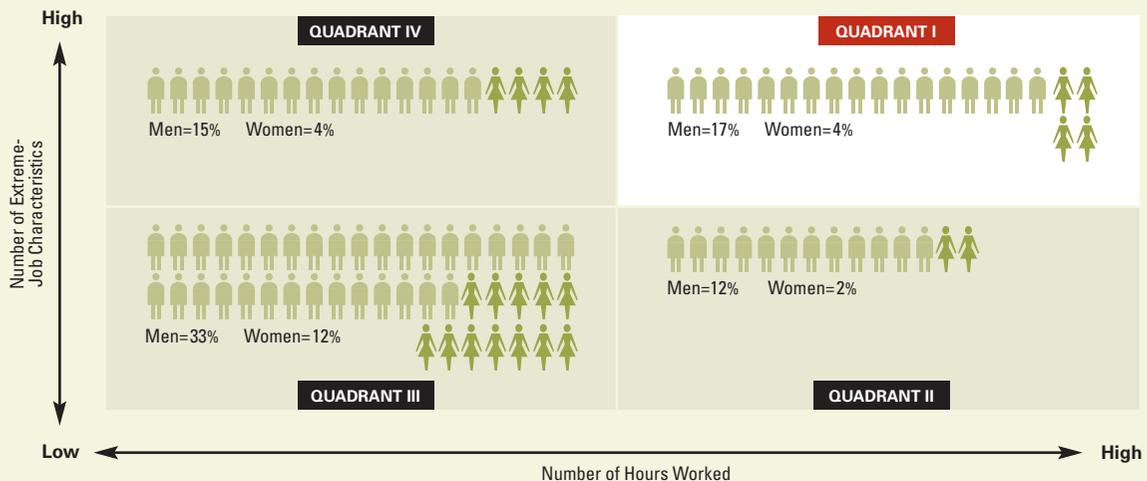
behaviors in their children. As the research literature attests, it’s extremely rare for parents to admit to having problems with their children. (There are serious problems in society, but never in one’s own home.) Thus, the data in the exhibit “Extreme Jobs Affect Well-Being of Children” constitute a veritable portrait of guilt. That women

Who Has Extreme Jobs?



How Many Hours and How Much Responsibility?

Extreme jobs demand a high number of responsibilities (five or more out of ten specific challenges, such as tight deadlines and 24/7 availability to clients) as well as a high number of work hours (60 or more a week). The matrix below illustrates where the men and women in our U.S. survey fall. Each figure represents 1% of the total population of high earners surveyed.



worry about the implications for their children is probably not because mothers are more caring than fathers but because, as our survey data show, more men in extreme jobs (25%) than women (12%) have the support of an at-home spouse or partner.

These dynamics play out in homes around the world every day. In a focus group held at Canary Wharf in London, a woman lawyer put it succinctly: “When I walk out the door in the morning, leaving my two-year-old with the nanny, there’s usually a bit of a scene. Tommy clings, pouts, and whips up the guilt. Now, I know it’s not serious—he’s a happy kid, and he likes his nanny. But it sure makes me think about why I go to work—and why I put in a ten-hour day. It’s as though every day I make this calculation: Do the satisfactions I derive from my job (efficacy, recognition, a sense of stretching my mind) justify leaving Tommy? Some days it’s a close run.”

Indeed, for many women, the equation is not balancing out. A clear majority (57%) of the women in extreme jobs in the United States told us they don’t want to continue working at this pace for more than a year. Less than half the men (48%) felt the same way. Only 13% of the women (versus 27% of the men) want to be working at this pace in five years. The numbers were far more dramatic in our global companies survey, in which 80% of the women (versus 58% of the men) said they don’t want to keep working this many hours for more than a year, and only 5% of the women (and 12% of the men) said they want to do so for the next five years.

The key question, of course, is whether all this creates a barrier for ambitious women and for companies that want to achieve more gender diversity in their upper ranks. The answer is yes to the extent that extreme workers constitute the talent pool from which top leadership will be drawn. If this group of high-octane workers represents

the “A team”—and we think it does—it’s very disturbing to see so few women in it.

The silver lining is that employers face a real opportunity here. We know of several companies that are beginning to tap into the talents of women who are willing to commit to hard work and take on responsibility but cannot do the long hours. For

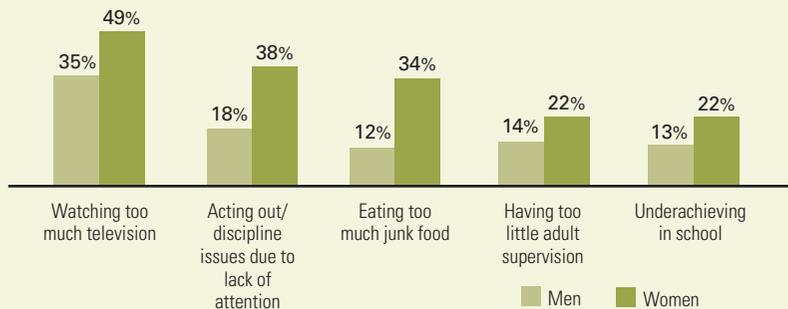
“new compass” for returning women, showing them a way back into their careers.

Heidi Yang, an investment banker in Hong Kong, illustrates the edge some global companies are developing as employers of choice for young, talented women. Heidi is definitely a “high-potential manager.” During her three and a half years in the

Extreme Jobs Affect Well-Being of Children

Global Survey

Respondents answered the question “Has your child ever experienced any of the following because of the number of hours you work?”



example, Booz Allen Hamilton and American Express are beginning to “chunk out” work in different ways. AmEx has created an internal consulting pool that provides flexible career paths for high-performing employees. A working mom, for instance, might choose to arrange her workday so that she’s able to pick her children up from school. “We’re sharpening our approach to creating flexible work models,” says L. Kevin Cox, executive vice president of human resources at American Express. In a similar vein, Lehman Brothers and Goldman Sachs are beginning to create flexibility over the arc of a career. Lehman’s Encore program welcomes talented women who have off-ramped and are looking for a road back into the financial sector—reaching out with networks, mentors, and flexibility. Goldman Sachs’s New Directions program provides reskilling and a

investment division of UBS in Hong Kong, she has been promoted twice; she now runs a team of 25. When we first met with her in November 2005, she was pregnant with her first child and pleased with UBS’s parent-friendly policies—which she considered as generous as any “on the street”—but she worried about whether those policies were “for real.” If, for instance, she availed herself of her full maternity leave, would she be seen as not serious, and subtly derailed from the fast track? Happily, when we last interviewed her, in July 2006, her fears had not been realized. “There’s been a real change at this firm,” she observed. “The culture is shifting. They’re allowing me to work flexibly. As long as I come through for my clients, I can work wherever I want. There’s none of this face-time stuff. My bosses seem to understand the importance of keeping women.”

additional reasons for jobs to become extreme. The need to oversee work in multiple time zones increases not only the travel requirements of a job but also the length of the workday. One oil company executive we interviewed ran a global team composed of colleagues in Angola, the United States, and China. As he put it, this “did a number” on his working day. Other professionals in our focus groups told anecdotes about pulling all-nighters and defying jet lag to attend back-to-back meetings in Singapore and New York. The difficulty of waking up to participate in global

We believe that these are the key trends underlying the rise in extreme work. There may be others. The point, however, is that they represent a mix of positive and negative pressures. Long workweeks cannot simply be chalked up to the crushing effects of a heartless and unchecked capitalist system, as some commentators have argued. The extreme professionals who find their work enormously alluring are not deluded. Recognizing trends like the rise in knowledge work and society’s general embrace of the extreme ethos makes it easier to understand the attitudes of

the way of strong relationships with their children; 46% think it gets in the way of good relationships with their spouses; and 50% say their jobs make it impossible to have a satisfying sex life. (For more data on the personal costs of extreme work, see the sidebar “Something’s Gotta Give.”)

These statistics are underscored by the stories shared by focus group participants. In one session, which took place at a financial services company, an executive described how he had lost all credibility with his elderly wheelchair-bound father by canceling so many promised weekend visits. Another executive, striking a more positive note, described the transformative recent experience of taking, for the first time in his 14-year career, two consecutive weeks of vacation: “It was a revelation. I had no idea I even had it in me to enter into this other zone, where I was able to focus on my nine-year-old son, and I mean really focus. By the second week, I was listening to meandering stories of a tiff he’d had with a best friend and his description of what had happened in the last episode of his favorite TV show without urging him to get to the point, or wrap it up. And we spent hours playing Ping-Pong – a game he loves but I generally have no patience for.” The other participants listened intently, clearly trying to wrap their minds around what a two-week vacation would be like.

These are poignant examples of the costs of extreme work to individuals, but there can be costs at the company level, as well – for instance, when burn-out occurs. Half of our extreme jobholders don’t want to continue working under this kind of pressure for more than a year. Moreover, the next generations of management – the so-called Gen X and Gen Y cohorts – seem less enamored of their jobs than baby boomers. In the 45-to-60 age group, only 19% of extreme jobholders say they are likely to leave their jobs within two years; this figure rises to 30% in the 35-to-44 age group and to 36% in the 25-to-34 age group. The ultimate price may be paid in succession planning if maxed-out

Long workweeks cannot simply be chalked up to the crushing effects of a heartless and unchecked capitalist system.

conference calls in the middle of the night was a common refrain.

Because many companies are expanding globally, senior managers have a larger scope of responsibility. Take Gwen (not her real name), who manages a supply chain for a large DIY retailer. The pressures of her job are enormous – involving quick decisions on inventory levels that can have huge consequences for her company’s bottom line. Just three years ago, most of her suppliers were in South Carolina and Georgia; now her supply chain reaches to Eastern Europe and China. Gwen operates in three different time zones and seven different countries. She says, “The challenges are intense – and I like that. But being away from home half the time – and I mean *away* away – is really hard on my ten-year-old.” Compounding the overload problem is the fact that managers these days are less able to delegate low-value but necessary tasks (like compiling the expense reports for all that travel Gwen does). Secretaries seem to have been replaced by do-it-yourself technology – 71% of extreme workers have no dedicated administrative assistant, and more than a third (37%) don’t even have a shared assistant.

people like Madeleine (not her real name), the chief operating officer of a major global bank. As she detailed the demands of her job for us, we found her to be downright exuberant. She had recently transferred from the bank’s New York headquarters to London, where her responsibilities were expanded tenfold: She now travels between three time zones. The pressure is undeniable, but we heard no complaint. Instead, Madeleine described the thrill of managing a large international business and being “a global player on top of my game.”

Life on the Edge

If people in extreme jobs are uncomplaining and their employers are happy to have their services, is it reasonable to claim there is a problem? Arguably, the trend toward more extreme work is a boon to national competitiveness.

Yet there are, even in the responses to our survey, hints of the dangers afoot. Asked about the effects of their extreme jobs on their health and relationships, most respondents readily noted the downsides. More than 69% believe they would be healthier if they worked less extremely; 58% think their work gets in

professionals stop striving for top jobs. In our survey, 65% said they would decline a promotion if it were even more demanding of their energy.

Beyond the level of any single company, the costs of the extreme-job phenomenon become far more troubling. The common observation about a job category that is demanding to the point of exhaustion is that it is “a young man’s game.” But more jobs are falling into this category – and more than young men need to be in the game. The societal costs of income disparity and winner-take-all economics are huge, as many before us have argued.

Women in particular stand to lose from the extreme-work model. Our research finds that while women don’t shirk the pressure or responsibility of extreme work, they are not matching the hours logged by their male colleagues. This is especially true of mothers, who are also dealing with an increasingly extreme parenting model; they simply can’t – or don’t choose to – work exceedingly long hours. Of all the high earners we classified as extreme jobholders, only 20% are women. The women who do hold extreme jobs, meanwhile, are somewhat less likely than the men to love their work. (The sidebar “Is There a Gender Issue Here?” offers an extensive analysis of the implications for women executives and the companies that strive to retain them.)

Cultures of Midnight Oil

Of all the high earners we surveyed (not just the extreme-job subset), 44% feel that the pace of their work is extreme. Professionals these days are putting in longer hours, taking on more responsibility, and facing more pressure than ever before. Their intensity and investment may serve companies well in the short run but will pose risks in the long run. The extreme-work model threatens to cull real talent, particularly female talent, that otherwise could have reached the top.

It’s hard to offer solutions. Many companies are encouraging more work/life balance; a few go to some lengths to

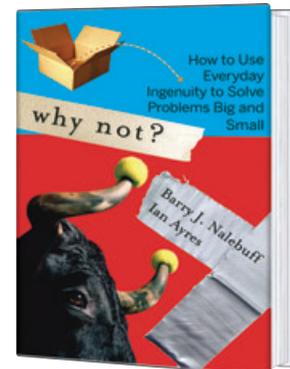
ensure that the policies they’ve put on paper are reflected in reality. For every company that does so, however, there are others afraid of creating a work atmosphere that is unattractive to “A players.” If an effort to establish a more measured work style means that extreme achievement will no longer be rewarded, they reason, then some extreme workers will seek opportunities with firms more likely to appreciate their outsize contributions. Colleagues may be happy to see extreme workers go; workaholics can be highly demanding and critical of their less dedicated coworkers. But some management teams think there are worse things than having an ultraperformer around – like having that person join the competition.

Indeed, some organizations – certain management-consulting and investment-banking firms come to mind – attract talent in the first place with their famously tough environments. The importance of company culture in setting the pace of work was strongly affirmed by our survey, in which 74% of respondents agreed that extreme jobs emerge from companies’ particular value sets. Shane, a young man who participated in a focus group, put his finger on it. Having spent his weekend jumping through hoops for a demanding boss, only to discover that he’d wasted his time, he pinned the problem on the “tone at the top.”

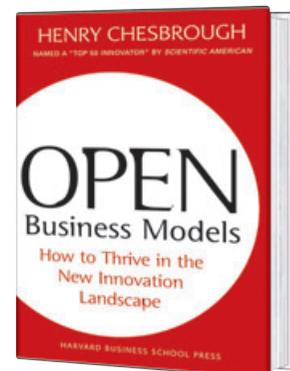
Senior leadership of organizations should take note: The attributes that give a workplace an advantage in recruiting and retention can change dramatically over time. The culture that celebrates the extreme ethos today may tire of it – quite literally – tomorrow. At a minimum, senior executives should think carefully about the work behaviors they are rewarding, encouraging, or requiring. More than anything, the signals they send will determine whether jobs become extreme – and if so, whether those jobs remain exhilarating or simply become exhausting. 

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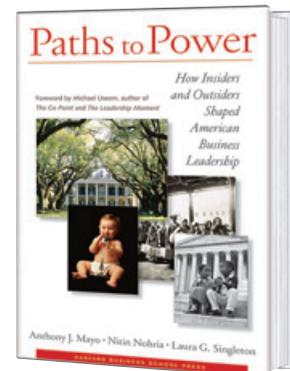
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