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Work-Life Flexibility and Greedy Jobs

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“High-pressure,” “demanding,” even “extreme”—these are terms that are used more and more to describe the jobs held by managers and professionals. Due to expectations that salaried employees should be available 24/7, should devote 60+ hours of face time at the office, and should be in constant touch with a laptop or BlackBerry, today’s professionals are finding that their jobs are becoming greedier and greedier. But companies that actively fight against the insidious culture of “face time,” may actually find themselves in a better competitive position.

Aware of the increasingly demanding nature of today’s careers, female business students actively seek to learn how to combine career success with a happy family life that includes children. Conversely, male business students are still much like their older counterparts, they’re not yet at a stage where they’re actively planning how to combine work and family.

One solution to extreme travel might be to take your family along on business trips. But I doubt that many people will find this suggestion appealing in the long term. While single career families may have the option of a spouse and children occasionally joining a far-flung weekend business trip, it’s more difficult for dual-career families to co-ordinate family time around one person’s travel schedule.

I am all in favor of tacking a few extra days onto a business trip and combining it with a family vacation, especially if it involves a business meeting in Aruba. But the idea that the deleterious effects on family of excessive job demands can be ameliorated by having employees pack up and bring baby along is just one example of asking individuals to fix a problem that requires an *organizational* solution.

Today’s professional and managerial jobs have simply become too greedy. Managers have to learn that families can only change so much to accommodate business needs. Despite the fact that organizations like to tout their flexibility and family-friendliness, this lip service is belied by the trend identified in the *Harvard Business Review* (December, 2006), the development of “the extreme job.” In their article, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce argue that professionals are working harder than ever. Unpredictable work flow, tight deadlines, cramming the responsibilities of two, three or more jobs into one, constant availability to clients, and face time of 10 hours or more each day are making jobs greedier and leaving professionals with less time and energy for family and other life activities.

A recent IDC survey, sponsored by Nortel, outlines the growing “culture of connectivity,” saying 16% of the workforce is hyperconnected and that may soon increase to 40%. Those who are hyperconnected have fully embraced Web 2.0 and employ multiple devices for business and personal use. Their boundary between work and personal life is “almost non-existent.”

When I had this conversation about work eating into personal time with one extremely successful business women, she told me not to waste my time “beating my head against the brick walls of the last bastions.” Rather, she said to look at the entrepreneurs to find new business models that are both highly profitable and considerably more humane. She certainly was in a credible position to make that statement as one of Canada’s Most Powerful Women in the Entrepreneurship category, as identified by the Women’s Executive Network.

Indeed I have met female entrepreneurs who have developed amazingly successful businesses based on the values of excellence combined with balance. And balance is not just for women. It’s heartening to hear an increasing number of stories about men taking paternity leave and in fact striking out on their own to create their own companies with more family-friendly environments.

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These more humane high quality entrepreneurial organizations are poised to eat the

greedy organizations' lunch. Greedy jobs have several negative outcomes, including stress and its accompanying health problems, burnout, lack of creativity, lack of efficiency (after all, it's called "face time" not productive time), and loss of the talents of the people who want something more in their lives than work.

Organizations need to provide real flexibility and allow people to be in the office only when necessary. Their employees will work harder, their clients will be happy to avoid charges for empty "billable hours," and to pay only for productive work time. The clients get the same quality product, the company charges the same rate per hour, but the total price is lower, and employees get time for a real life. Indeed, the humane balanced organizational model is the more efficient system, and my prediction is that it will eventually win in the marketplace.

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