

Faking it: 80-hour work weeks not always real

Some employees pressured to be 'always on': Study

BY LIZ BERNIER

THE TENSION between long working hours and family or personal responsibilities has long been painted as a women's problem. And while many women find work-life balance a challenge, it's not exclusive to the fairer sex.

Many men — particularly those in high-pressure, long-hours work environments — are also struggling to find that balance. But bowing out of 60- or 80-hour work weeks to take flexible hours is not often a widely accepted practice.

So what's a guy to do? Fake it, according to Erin Reid, assistant professor of organization behavior at Boston University's Questrom School of Business.

For many male employees at a global consulting firm she studied, the solution was appearing to work 80-hour weeks, without actually doing so.

"Men were just as likely as women to have trouble with these 'always on' expectations. However, men often coped with these demands in ways that differed strikingly," wrote Reid in an April edition of the *Harvard Business Review*.

"Women who had trouble with the work hours tended to simply to take formal accommodations, reducing their work hours... they were consequently marginalized within the firm.

"In contrast, many men found unobtrusive, under-the-radar ways to alter the structure of their work (such as cultivating mostly local clients)... such that they could work predictable schedules in the

50- to 60-hour range. In doing so, they were able to work far less than those who fully devoted themselves to work and had greater control over when and where those hours were worked, yet were able to 'pass' as ideal workers."

Minimizing career damage

One factor behind this desire to "pass" as a dedicated worker was the organization's culture, which implicitly suggested "flex hours" were not for men, said Reid, who interviewed more than 100 people at the firm and examined performance data and internal HR documents.

"Part of what happened — and I think this is common of many organizations — is that this firm had flexible work arrangements which were sort of nominally available to everyone, but mostly targeted at women," she said.

"It was pretty clear that there was a cost — a career penalty — to taking them."

Men who tried to take the flex work were discouraged from doing so, and if they did take them, they were also penalized, she said.

"For men, there was stigma around even asking to take it."

So men tried to minimize any negative consequences to their career progression by simply flying under the radar, said Reid.

"When the client needs me to be somewhere, I just have to be there," one employee told her.

"In the consulting — in the professional services industry, gener-

ally — you don't really have the latitude of saying, 'I can't really be there.' And if you can't be there, it's probably because you've got another client meeting at the same time. You know, it's tough to say, 'I can't be there because (my) son had a Cub Scout meeting.'"

Productivity gain — or drain?

This kind of high-pressure culture is not the case at every workplace — in fact, it's arguably more the anomaly than the norm these days, said Peter Saulnier, partner at Logan HR in Vancouver.

But there are certain sectors that seem to be holdouts, according to Cissy Pau, principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting in Vancouver.

"We see it all the time with law firms — people on the partner track — or accounting firms, consultancy firms, there are people in those industries putting in all those long hours and it's become expected."

Productivity concerns

But are the long hours actually effective and leading to better productivity?

"(Many) professional services firms might have a tendency to push their people too hard... it starts to impact the commitment that an individual has toward their employer," said Saulnier.

"There's more emphasis today on people wanting to be measured by the results they produce rather than how long they sit at their desk. That's quite an archaic way of measuring

performance and I think most organizations are realizing that."

A bit of pressure can be a good thing, said Pau, if it's just a matter of being energized, motivated and putting in the effort.

"But intense pressure over a long period of time, I don't know if that's sustainable," she said.

"If you put in 80 hours, it doesn't mean that they're 80 productive hours. You could be productive for two of those hours, but 78 of those hours, you're just there — you show up. But that's not necessarily what's going to drive the success of the business."

Generational differences

Fortunately, this type of work philosophy is likely on its way out the door, said Janet Salopek, partner and senior consultant at Salopek Consulting in Calgary.

"When it comes to the hours that we work and the hours that we're expected to work, the millennials are having a pretty big impact on that. Because what we're seeing around the millennials... they are very, very prepared to be available for longer hours, as long as they've got the flexibility to also do personal things and have that work-life balance."

It could be seen as less of a gender issue and more of a generational issue, she said.

"(Millennials) are willing to keep their phones on during the weekend if it means that they can leave early and take their kids to a soccer game or participate in a field trip... when they're doing that, they're also

available. Just because they have to go to a soccer game at three (o'clock) doesn't mean that they're not available to take a client call — and they see that as a good thing.”

And as more millennials move into leadership roles, these changes will accelerate, said Salopek.

“We're already seeing (these changes) because we have a number of CEOs that we're working with that are millennials... they don't clock an eight-to-five job. It's very, very much changing.”

These high-pressure jobs may no longer be the aspiration of young, talented workers, said Pau.

“These days, people are less and less willing to sacrifice their life for their work. And I think more people

are making decisions and choices about their work that suits their lifestyle, rather than the other way around. So that whole work-life balance, that issue becomes much more important,” she said.

“These types of jobs, where you're expected to put in 80, 90 hours, those C-level jobs or the partner-track jobs, I think over time we're going to see that those positions are not what people are aspiring to.”

Lessons for employers

While some may take a rather critical view of employees who “fake” a long work week, said Reid, their situation can provide valuable take-aways for employers.

“They were doing what they

needed to do to get by. I don't think they were doing anything bad. Some people have been casting them in a really negative light — that they're lying or they're unethical. I don't know — the organization was happy with their work product, the clients were happy with their work product... for me, the big lesson from their experience is that you don't need to work flat-out all the time to produce a good work product. Theoretically, these organizations could change the way they work so that people were on call less and still deliver a really great product,” she said.

Employers that don't take heed will likely lose talent, said Reid.

“Even the men who passed, they

left this organization pretty quickly — they didn't stay. Even though they were able to make it work, ultimately, they felt they didn't fit in, and the organization lost (them), which was a real loss given that the organization thought of them as their stars.”

Employers need to understand that excessive work hours and a lack of balance are damaging, said Reid — and not just for women.

“We tend to think about these face-time requirements as a problem for women, and so perhaps that sort of framing makes women a special category... but my research says these expectations are also a problem for men.

“This is a problem for the workforce.”