



# WORK IT GIRL

*Late nights, working lunches  
and the constant BlackBerry  
attachment—is working  
overtime hurting your health?*  
By MEGAN MCCHESENEY

Ilison Scott\* is in her early 30s, and about six or seven years into her career. She works in downtown Toronto, and in an average week, she puts in about 10 to 30 hours of overtime (that she's not paid for, it's worth noting). Asked for the highest number of hours she's ever put in over a week, she does a swift mental calculation and says, "I would say about 100 hours." In *one week*? Yes, in a week. She smiles a bit when she says it; It's a mixture of pride and disbelief.

You might think she's a corporate something-or-other climbing that long, rickety corporate ladder, or a determined resident fighting sleepless nights in the ER, saving lives and tending wounds. Or maybe a young lawyer working hard to prove >

\*Name has been changed.

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her worth to the old boys' club. They'd be logical guesses, but you'd be wrong. Scott is a secondary school teacher. One who loves her job and works really, really hard at it.

Teachers, along with those in finance and management, are the most likely to work unpaid overtime hours. But they're not the only ones with their noses to the grindstone. Recent Statistics Canada numbers indicate that about one in five employees—almost three million of us—will work overtime in any given week. That's an increase of nearly 20 per cent in a decade. And while men are more likely to put in the overtime hours, women aged 25 to 54 are around twice as likely to work overtime for no pay. And then there's what many consider unpaid work around the home once you've clocked out: child care, elder care, housework.

But that's the way of the world, these days, isn't it? Work is our identity; when we meet new people, instead of asking about their family, their favourite food or what they love most in the world, we ask, "So, what do you do for a living?" As though work and living are actually one and the same. Our jobs are our identities, and many of us want to do them well, and that often means putting in the hours.

So long as everyone's making money and more or less happy, this doesn't really matter. But the problem is this: It's making a lot of people unhappy, and it's making people sick. And instead of making everyone rich, it's actually costing us a lot of money. If you add up the health-related costs of work-life conflict in Canada—including excess trips to the doctor, visits to the emergency room and hospital

stays—you end up with the staggering figure of over \$14 billion. New studies about the dangers associated with working gruelling hours emerge all the time, such as the one released last May by epidemiologists at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health—it found that people who work more than 11 hours a day are about 60 per cent more likely to have heart-related problems such as angina, heart attacks or fatal heart disease than those who put in eight hours. The study found that those working overtime were likely to be type As—aggressive, competitive and time-conscious.

**T**ake Christina Ponte. Before hitting age 30, she was named one of Canada's Ones to Watch by *Marketing* magazine, in her role as the senior manager of online marketing for Penguin Group Canada in Toronto—she's now working as a web

producer for a large video-game developer in Vancouver. Work is very much a part of her life. "I get in early to the office, stay late, check my email every hour at night and get a couple hours of work done on weekends. I'm constantly 'connected' to work," she says. At the time of our interview, she was gearing up to come back to Ontario for her fall wedding. "I know myself well enough to guarantee that I'll be checking my messages a couple of times per day while I'm away." She's good at what she does, and she loves it. In her mid-20s, Ponte's doctor discovered she was suffering from high blood pressure and gave her a choice: either get her stress under control or go on medication. "That was a significant wake-up call," she says. Ponte incorporated small changes like taking regular breaks during the workday and making time for an exercise routine.

Even if you're immortal and don't care about health-care spending, there's a social cost to working long hours. There are the missed parties and events, the time unspent with your partner or your children, and in some cases, there are the families left un-made altogether: 37 per cent of women in managerial or professional positions say they have delayed having kids or decided not to at all due to work/life conflict. Scott can recall epic battles with an ex-boyfriend over the hours she worked. Ponte can think of many times she's been late for dinners and birthdays because of late nights at the office. As a corporate lawyer friend of mine recently said, "At some point, you wonder what you're giving up."

Of course, some people use work as a refuge. Arlie Hochschild is a University of California, Berkeley, sociologist and the author of *The Time Bind*: »

*When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work.* "A lot of single people do find work safer and a more reliable source of support than personal relationships, sad to say," she says. As Scott puts it, "No one wants to come home to an empty house."

Those with families can feel much the same way. "When I've asked people where they feel most appreciated—at home or at work," says Hochschild, "one guy said, 'If I'm doing the right thing at work, my boss is clapping me on the back. If I'm doing the right thing at home, my teenage son is giving me hell for it.'"

Even those who use work as a sanctuary have probably faced those overwhelming days that leave us dreaming of a pastoral life, or wishing for a winning lottery ticket. Linda Duxbury of the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University in Ottawa, along with her fellow researchers, has examined work-life balance coping strategies from all angles: from prioritizing and delegating to drinking and using prescription drugs, to simply reducing the quality of the work. Their report, which looks at a number of proposed strategies, asks: "What can employees personally do to reduce the amount of work-life conflict that they experience? Unfortunately, the findings from this study would suggest there is not much they can do."

If talking, planning, time management, drinking, drugs, giving up, rolling over and playing dead all don't work, what's the answer? Turns out, it's up to

the organizations to change. The good news is they may have to.

**D**ue to the post-war baby boom, in the '70s, '80s and '90s there were way more good people than there were good jobs. "Then we had a recession [in the '80s], a jobless recovery [in the early 90s] and then another recession [in the mid-'90s]," says Duxbury. "What organizations found was that they could get rid of people, but not get rid of work. And because you had to work, you just felt lucky to have a job. And if you wanted to get promoted, you had to be there." Add to that cocktail the rising cost of living and a swelling obsession with having more material goods, and it's easy to see how we've wound up with lots of people working lots of hours. But due to the fact that we're not reproducing at a rate that would sustain the current population (which is the bafflingly precise figure of 2.1 kids per family), the next decade or so will see a reversal of that trend. "We're moving into a very profound sellers' market for labour," says Duxbury, "and that means that employers will have to pay more attention to balance."

"Those young women out there working the overtime hours and getting so frustrated need to know it's not their fault," says Lorna Turnbull, acting dean of law at the University of Manitoba and adviser to the UNPAC Gender Budgets Project, which promotes women's equality in government budgets. "We have a structural problem as a society. And more than anything, people need to know what their options are and what the limitations are [when it comes to demands of work], so that they can be appropriately angry or frustrated when their desired choice is not available."

Happily, more choices are becoming available. A recent survey of Canadian companies by Hewitt Associates found that 86 per cent of employers surveyed offer flexible working hours to some or all employees, 77 per cent allow for telecommuting arrangements and 65 per cent allow time for education leave. Employers are beginning to realize that if they don't provide these choices, their bright, hard-working employees will simply make the choice to work somewhere else.

Until every organization gets wise, some changes can start with individuals. It's OK to love your job, and it's OK to work hard at it, but remember to shut off the BlackBerry from time to time. "If you don't put some boundaries between your job and your life," says Duxbury, "you're going to find you don't have much of a life." □

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