

## Work and life out of balance

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Byline: Carol Goar  
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In offices, shops and factories across the country, workers are nursing a seasonal martyr complex. School is out, the legislatures are deserted, the temperatures are high and the beaches are jammed. It seems as if everybody is on vacation - except them.

If you're one of those people, you're actually less alone than you feel.

One-quarter of Canadian workers don't take their allotted vacation time. Ten per cent don't take any holidays at all. Even those who do get away often feel compelled to check their email and phone messages.

According to a poll conducted by Ipsos Reid this spring, Canadians take an average of 19 vacation days a year. That is down from 21 days in last year's survey.

It is below the French average of 39 days, German average of 27 days and British average of 23 days (but above the American average of 14 days.)

Even in Europe, however, vacations are shrinking, as employers seek to gain a competitive edge and stay ahead of global trends.

Those who enjoy languid summers on a beach or escape to the countryside are a lucky - and dwindling - minority. For most us, holidays consist of long weekends, a few days here and there and the odd out-of-town trip.

But that raises a bigger question How do we stop work from spilling over into every other part of our lives?

Weekends are no longer downtime for a growing segment of the labour force. In the last decade, the percentage of Canadians working weekends (not counting those who take work home) has risen from 11 per cent to 18.5 per cent.

Retirement at 65 is a lost hope for millions of Canadians. Most can't afford to stop working. Some are under pressure from their employers to stay on. Some need a job to give purpose and structure to their lives.

The number of Canadians who work more than 50 hours a week is increasing. In 1976, it stood at 11 per cent. By 2000, it was up to 14 per cent. Statistics Canada hasn't released any updates since then, but corporate headhunters and sociologists say the trajectory is still climbing.

Unpaid overtime, called the "new face of slave labour" by the BBC in a recent broadcast, is becoming common. According to **Canadian Policy Research Networks**, a think-tank that monitors job quality, 11 per cent of employees work overtime without compensation.

"My work with many private and public sector knowledge-based organizations across Canada shows that this work intensification is unsustainable," wrote Graham Lowe of the University of Alberta in a recent campus publication. "The resulting stress is not only unhealthy for employees, it is also dysfunctional for organizations."

Granted, some workers choose to stay late, skip their vacations, give up their private time and thumb their BlackBerries obsessively.

But most long for a less frantic pace, more control over their lives and a chance to step off the treadmill and relax. They know their families are suffering. They know they're putting their health at risk. They know they're snapping at their colleagues.

What nobody has figured out is how to reconcile the demands of the global marketplace with the needs of the people who fuel and run it.

There are a few hopeful glimmers.

Work/life balance, dismissed a few years ago as a frivolous academic notion, now is being recognized by a growing number of employers as an essential component of attracting and retaining talented people.

Young job seekers, knowing that demographic forces are on their side, are asking for shorter hours, more vacation time and the option of working from home.

Quebecers are taking a markedly different path from their fellow-Canadians. They put in less overtime and have more flexible working arrangements. So far, the province's productivity does not seem to have suffered. It trails supercharged Alberta but is ahead of all the Maritimes and two of the Prairie provinces.

A handful of major companies such as Alcan, Sun Life Financial and Merck Frosst have changed their corporate culture to reduce employee stress. Their efforts include everything from providing on-site child care to mandating no-work weekends.

None of this will bring back the era of lazy summer afternoons and lakeside reveries. But those longing for bygone pleasures might also want to recall that those were the days when air conditioning was confined to theatres and big department stores, foreign travel was prohibitively expensive and dining alfresco was unthinkable in Toronto.

Reversing history is not the answer. Moderating the omnipotence of the marketplace is.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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