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THE ACTIVITY
ILLUSION



WHY WE LIVE TO WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY
AND HOW TO WORK TO LIVE INSTEAD

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INTRODUCTION

“A four-day week, and then
three days’ fun.”

It is the summer of 1953. Winston Churchill, Britain’s Prime Minister, is in bed at Chequers recovering from a stroke and being examined by his doctor, Lord Moran. Churchill, who thought deeply about the technological advances brought about by science, shared his vision of an end to the Cold War. “If it came off,” he said to Moran, “and there was disarmament, production might be doubled and we might be able to give the working man what he has never had – leisure. A four-day week, and then three days’ fun.”ⁱ

This aspiration of giving the worker a three-day weekend may seem a fantasy today but was not so far-fetched at the time. Some fifty years earlier, workers in manufacturing industries had only recently ceased the practice of working a full day on Saturday. The change was a result of the establishment of Trade Unions pushing back against eighteen-hour shifts and the technological

innovations that drove improvements in productivity. It was the Edwardian practice of allowing workers Saturday afternoons off work that led to the boom in professional football clubs with legions of paying fans. So, in the 1950s – an age of continuing scientific advancement – it did not seem unrealistic to pursue a vision of increased leisure.

Fast-forward another fifty years from Churchill's premiership and against a backdrop of accelerating and dizzying technological advancement, here is a pen-portrait of his twenty-first century successor written by Iain Martin in *The Daily Telegraph*. Describing the weekend preparation for Gordon Brown's visit to the US, Martin writes:

“By Sunday Team Brown will be suffering from severe sleep deprivation, taking phone calls and emails from the PM around the clock. Most likely, the advisers will have an agreed text signed off only as they board the plane for Washington. And only then will Brown decide that he does not like the prepared speech. At that point he will, I confidently predict, start bashing out a new one on a laptop. Head down, his hands a blur, as they have been thousands of times down the years, this is how Brown always works.”ⁱⁱ

While this is an imagined scene rather than a documentary description, it is an elegant summary of the leadership style that is evident in both the political and corporate classes of the twenty-first century – rich in technology but poor in effectiveness. The frenetic blur of activity straddling a weekend, the meddling in detail, the frenzy of digital communication all raise questions about

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the leader’s sense of perspective and the ability to delegate. The same behaviours are just as evident in the corporate world. “My family are used to not seeing me during the week,” says one CEO interviewed in *The Secrets of CEOs* by Steve Tappin and Andrew Cave. “They see me at weekends but not all the time or every weekend.” “I can’t remember my boys growing up,” says another.ⁱⁱⁱ As this book will show, it is not just the CEOs of organisations that are affected, since the impact of this way of working trickles down the hierarchy. In many ways, however, the CEOs are far better equipped to cope than more junior employees.

So how is it that, after decades of technological and economic advancement we have not only failed to deliver Churchill’s vision of a leisure society but, for many of us, we have gone backwards with even the two-day weekend being eroded by work?

This book examines why we work the way we do and asks the question whether or not our heightened levels of activity make us more productive and effective in our jobs or happier in our lives. Churchill’s primary concern was for the working man in an era when it was not unheard of for a paternalistic board of company directors to sleep off a big lunch after a board meeting while a retainer wheeled round the drinks trolley. Another Prime Minister of the era, Macmillan, said in a radio interview that one of the aspects of being Prime Minister that he most liked was that he found so much time to read Victorian fiction. Today, in the post-industrial age, there is evidence that the imbalance has

become reversed, with managers and leaders now working harder than anyone else. A 2001 study by the Economic and Social Research Council entitled “Willing Slaves: Employment in Britain in the 21st Century” found that “the long hours culture is more embedded for managers, those in professional jobs, and people with higher level qualifications.”^{iv} Similarly, the TUC has, through its Labour Force Survey, identified a marked increase in unpaid overtime among senior managers; with an average 12 hours a week of unpaid overtime, the 2006 survey saw them overtake teachers as the category of professionals with the greatest percentage of unpaid overtime. Why should it be the case that the managers and leaders towards the top of an organisation appear to be working hardest?

In addition to the fact that bosses are working long hours themselves, there is the impact of this trend on others. They are, often unwittingly, contributing to a culture in which the people that work for them also work long hours. Because they are so frenetically busy, they are often failing to find enough time to lead and manage. Delegation risks becoming a lost art as leaders fire from the hip the moment each successive message hits their BlackBerry. Not only are their people working harder, they are in all likelihood becoming progressively less effective and productive, which reduces their satisfaction in their work. And worst of all, they may be experiencing stress, something that can have a tangible physical and mental impact on not only their lives but those of their family members.

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It appears that we have fallen into the habit of hyper-activity. We constantly check emails, send texts and make mobile phone calls – even when we are supposed to be socially engaged with others such as joining partners for a meal in a restaurant or reading our children a bed-time story. Activity is regarded as a good state and there is an unspoken stigma surrounding passive silence. Why is it, when asked if we are busy, we feel compelled to answer affirmatively?

While an entire industry has emerged offering managers life coaching, this book focuses on the work side of the equation. Drawing on the new science of evolutionary psychology, it suggests that advances in communications technology have paradoxically led us to work harder and less effectively than ever.

We start with an analysis of the problem and an understanding of the impact on working effectiveness and quality of life. I will then argue that it is the collision of two environmental factors that has caused working life to become increasingly frenetic *and* ineffective. The first of these is the technology paradox in which advances in communications technology have caused us to work harder and longer and yet less effectively than ever before; the second is the nature of human psychology which yearns for status and gossip in a world in which the traditional trappings of hierarchy have all but vanished. The combination of these two forces has led to an environment in which activity is regarded as an indicator of status, and in

which the traditional Protestant work ethic has become distorted to such an extent that aggression is regarded as a pre-requisite for business success.

The book then offers practical solutions as to how some of these problems can be addressed both at a personal and an organisational level. Chapter 6 tackles the technology theme by confronting the technology paradox and offers practical tips to tame the technology beast. Chapter 7 looks at focus and how you can achieve more by taking on less. Chapter 8 examines the impact of the leader's behaviour on the rest of the organisation and how it can be coached into eradicating ineffective working practices. The following chapter covers people; the importance of having the right people in your organisation, the power of delegation and the need for effective team-working. Finally, Chapter 10 touches upon life outside the office and the personal dimension.

In addition to my academic study of organisational behaviour, this book is informed by a career of over twenty years working in companies large and small in positions ranging from junior manager to chief executive. For a two-year period, I combined a senior corporate role with being a single parent. I have not always succeeded as a manager and leader – some of the content of this book derives from lessons learned from painful experience. In my career, I have worked for and with a wide variety of managers and leaders. None has been perfect, but a small number inspired me to think hard about the way I worked and the way in

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which I led others. A larger number taught me only how unpleasant life can become in an organisation led by someone determined to spend every waking hour working; it's not only working life itself that can become unpleasant, since that unpleasantness inevitably bleeds into the personal lives of you and the people that work for you.

As well as contributing to stress, the impact of a long-hours culture can take the form of chronic fatigue, lack of energy and an addiction to what Dr Nick Baylis has called “emotional painkillers”, be it TV, alcohol or Prozac. There is any number of ways stress can manifest itself: for me, it always seemed to break through a few days into an expensive and eagerly anticipated holiday in the form of a crippling head-cold. If you currently enjoy working in excess of sixty or seventy hours a week, then all power to you – this book is probably not for you. If, however, you recognise yourself in any of the above, read on.

This book is not about work-life balance – it is about work. It will show you that optimising your work practices and reducing your level of activity will yield benefits for both your work and personal life. Neither is it about time management – time will take care of itself and become an abundant commodity once you stop a welter of ineffective activity.

If your work is causing you to spend too little time with your family, then there is all the more reason to read this book. I have been greatly struck that the best bosses I have had in my career have been the ones that avoided a frenetic

style of working, some to the point of laziness. These are the bosses from whom I have learnt the most. The result for me of their coaching and mentoring has been greater work effectiveness *and* more time with my family.

And I've yet to meet anyone in retirement who regretted that, in their working years, they spent too much time with their family.