

Balancing act

All work and no play makes for a dull life. Is it possible to get the best out of both worlds? By Julia Nekich.

Australians aren't afraid of hard work – it's a known fact. But are our individual workloads increasing? With many companies across the board attempting to increase productivity while cutting costs (a sign of our highly competitive economy), many experts believe the pressure on employees is rising – making work/life balance, and even our health, increasingly an issue.

A survey of working hours across the globe by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2000 showed that the average Australian worked 200 hours more a year than workers in other developed countries. In a survey of around 1000 people by Job Futures, a non-profit employment service group, 41 per cent of workers reported high stress levels and only 52 per cent worked less than 41 hours a week. According to Workcover NSW, mental disorders in the workplace are common.

Dr Peter Holland, at Monash University's Faculty of Business and Economics, says just 60 per cent of us take our full holiday entitlements. "Employees are struggling to cope in an environment where they are working harder and longer," he says.

Many recruitment experts say our long-hours culture isn't industry specific, but is happening more at executive level, particularly where bonuses are tied to performance. In the finance sector, many organisations are working 24/7 to compete with overseas markets, says Adam Kolokotsas, manager of banking and finance at Tanner Menzies. "It's not uncommon for people to be rostered."

Barbara Holmes, director of Managing Work/Life Balance, says finding a work/life balance is a real issue. "Sometimes it's due to inefficiencies in the systems and the workplace. Companies want to work smarter, but many aren't looking at the design of the jobs and the priorities of the team."

WHO'S AFFECTED MOST?

"It's the young families that are looking for work/life balance," says Cameron Judson, executive general manager of client services at recruitment company Chandler McLeod,

The Federal Government's Employment Advocate reported in August 2005 that 32 per cent of people on individual workplace contracts have less time for family life because they are working longer hours.

ARE EMPLOYERS COMPENSATING?

"A lot of senior managers recognise the problem, but don't know what to do about it. There's a lot of awareness, but not enough action," says Judson.

"In a worst-case scenario, if there's no compensation, employees leave," says Graham Gough, managing partner of Gough Recruitment. "The more progressive employers are trading off time in lieu, or extending annual leave to six weeks, or remunerating staff who don't receive

performance-related bonuses." Gough says this includes paid overtime.

"A lot of companies are providing benefits like childcare centres and internet cafes to get people to stay, but it's backfiring," says Gough. "It's defeating the purpose of work/life balance because staff members are staying longer at work."

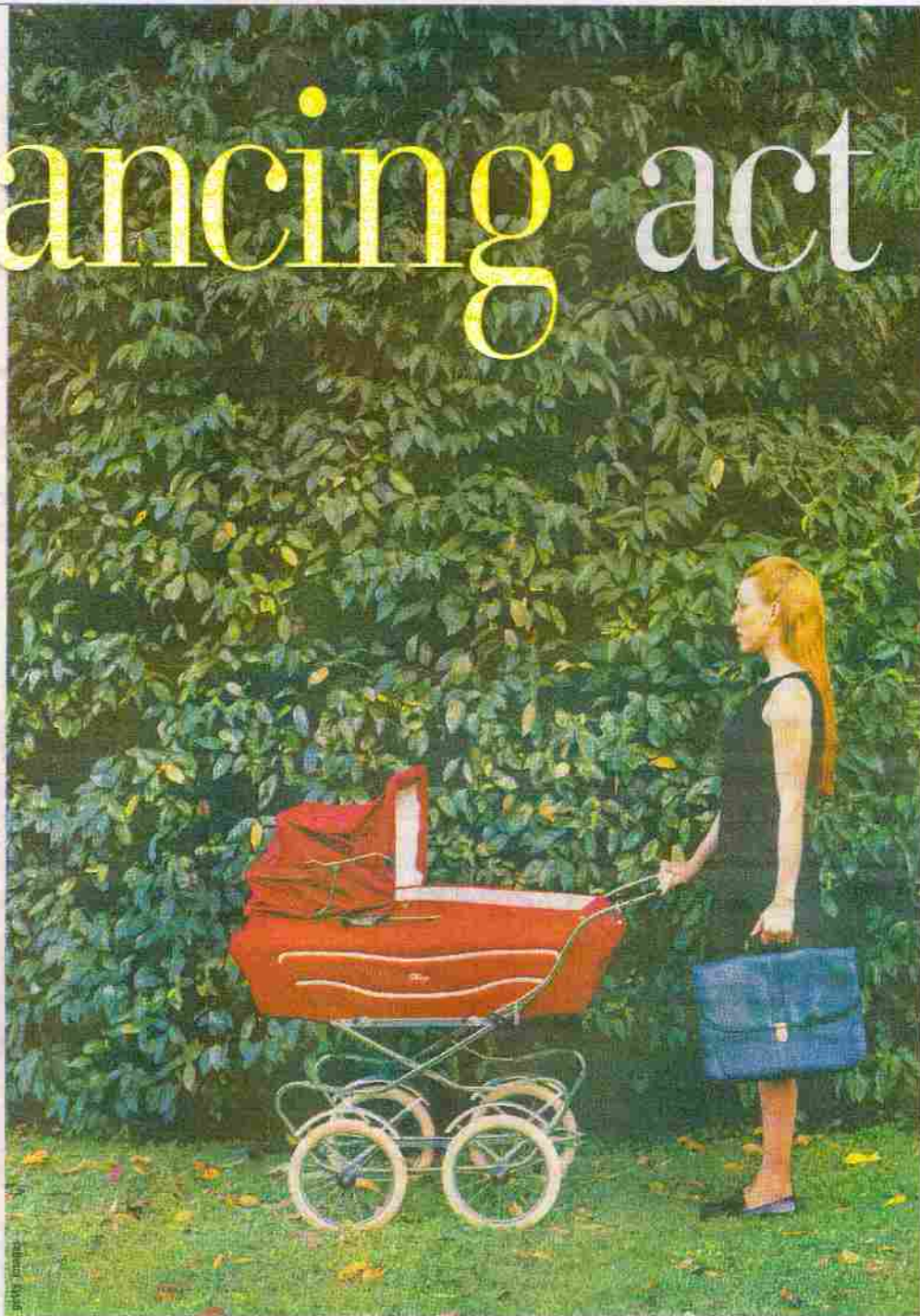
Kolokotsas suggests employees do have some power over their working conditions. "In Australia, we have full employment, so the market is very much candidate driven. Employees are more demanding and want rewards for longer hours, such as bonuses."

LOSING WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Total Health reports that 50 per cent of workers admit to having issues with the

ability to be productive on the job. General manager Michelle Spooner says that workers unable to cope with a heavy workload are likely to be coping by drinking more, smoking, feeling stressed, eating unhealthily and exercising less. "Our data shows that all of these factors lead to a reduction in your productivity," she says.

Organisational psychologist and life coach Barbara Miller identifies four zones in which workers operate at any one time: the chill zone (life is good but your job may be boring); the dynamic zone (where high flyers find themselves – people work well at this level); the distracted zone, an unproductive state that follows the dynamic zone if you don't relax; and the distraught zone (this is burn-out – in this zone, people can't cope).



"A lot of people don't know they're stressed," Miller says. "If stress continues, chronic fatigue can develop, then depression sets in. In Australia, we now have record levels of depression."

Dr John Tickell, from the TV show *Celebrity Overhaul*, says your body will tell you if you're under too much pressure. "The cracks start to appear before you get diagnosed with something: headaches, neck pains, migraines, palpitations, lower back pain, constipation or diarrhoea. Many people ignore these."

The long-term health effects can be enormous. "Breast, prostate and bowel cancer are the western cancers. Of the 20 million Australians, one million will get bowel cancer – that's a national disgrace. The risks of contracting these in the western world are huge, and I reckon much of it is stress-related," says Tickell.

"People have forgotten how to manage themselves. Ask yourself: am I eating decent food, am I getting enough physical activity, am I out of the pressure cooker?"

AVOIDING THE OVERWORKED TRAP

Kerrie Saunders* left her job as a project manager at a financial services company because she was unable to cope with her workload. "The company couldn't fill this position for months before I took it on," she says. She notes that she was happy with the salary, but there were problems from the start.

"It was a new project, the deadlines were pre-set and too tight, the resources were too lean, and there was no team structure. I wasn't given training, mentoring or structured support. I remember having to borrow staff from other departments to meet deadlines. At one point, I was working 75-hour weeks, and was required to travel interstate regularly."

Gough says employees can avoid falling into a role with unrealistic hours by asking the right questions at the job interview. "Ask about working weeks, the company's policy on overtime and financial benefits. Often, employees would want this latter benefit," he says.

Kolokotsas says employees can gauge whether long hours are part of a job by looking out for words such as "fast-paced", "dynamic" and "challenging" in ads. "Another term is 'greenfield opportunity', which indicates you will have to start a new project from scratch. This is a dead giveaway that there will be long hours in that job," he says.

Even in situations like Saunders', employees can make a difference to their working lives. Miller says, "Employees need to find solutions to problems, to take initiative – a lot is dumped on bosses. Women need to learn to be more assertive; men need to show more empathy."

She says long hours are sometimes driven by employees. "It can happen when your salary is driven by bonuses or if you're driven by status. When it's billable hours, it's even worse."

HOW TO ACHIEVE A WORK/LIFE BALANCE

TIPS FROM BARBARA MILLER

- Avoid trying to fill every open space of the day. Schedule "me" time (this includes "do nothing" periods).
- Two or three unrelated part-time jobs may give you the variety and balance you need to remain excited about work.
- Identify your strengths – be it creating, consulting or managing people – and find a way to use them in your work. Many jobs allow opportunities to do this.
- Identify flexible opportunities at work, including flexible hours.
- Don't allow others to use their agendas to control your time and working life.
- Prioritise. Focus on what is important and eliminate the insignificant.
- Improving your diet, making exercise a part of your life and getting the right amount of sleep will improve your wellbeing and outlook.

Public relations is often regarded as a high-powered, high-stress industry, and consultancies operate largely on billable hours. Kristin Austin, vice president of Ruder Finn Australia and days away from giving birth to her second child, says she is the best, and worst, proponent of work/life balance. "Primarily, people who are good at what they do and are passionate about it are willing to go above and beyond," she says. "But Australians do have such a chronic 'overwork' ethic – we tend to just sit there and keep going."

Austin has seen burn-out in less experienced staff "when they have been purposely overworked". Longer hours, however, are generally expected of senior staff, particularly in new-business development

phases. "Then you do the hours required," she says.

In 2003 Jennifer Lorraine left her full-time job in corporate PR to go freelance. "I saw people above me killing themselves trying to balance their work and family lives, and I wanted to avoid that," she says. Now a new mother, she says she's "busy, but not frantic".

Long work hours are happening because of the way employees and employers are managing workloads, says Holmes.

"If you're working excessive hours you need to work out if it's short term; if there is something you can do better, or is it something that your managers can fix? You've got to decide what's important to you."

* Name has been changed.