

Positive shift in work-life balance up to employees

April 5 2013, by Paul Mayne

Do you find yourself taking work home with you? Are you constantly checking your work email while lounging at home? Are you having trouble finding that perfect work-life balance? If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you're not alone.

Of the more than 25,000 Canadians who took part in the *2012 National Work-Life Balance Study*, 54 per cent said they take [work](#) home to complete outside of their regular hours – evenings and weekends – averaging an additional seven hours in work per week.

The study, conducted by Ivey [Business School](#) professor Chris Higgins and Carleton University's Linda Duxbury, is the third such study the pair have done, with similar reports in 1991 and 2001. As expected, more Canadians are working more hours than ever, with almost two-thirds working more than 45 hours each week – up 50 per cent from 20 years ago.

And, to be expected, more than three-quarters of workers surveyed this time around said they're not satisfied with life. The 23 per cent who said they are happy is half of what it was in 1991.

Higgins is not surprised by what the new study found when it comes to the trouble some folks have harmonizing family and work responsibilities. But it may surprise you who he thinks is at the root of the problem.

"It depends who you talk to. A lot of people feel the governments should do more or the employers should do more," he said "But, in my opinion, the onus is on the individual to balance their own work and family life."

The study covered a wide range of [workload](#) and work-life balance issues from hours worked and parenting-task distribution to the affects it has on physical and mental health. The study showed almost 60 per cent of [Canadians](#) suffer from high [levels of stress](#), while 75 per cent reported high to moderate levels of depressed moods resulting in missed work due to sickness or mental exhaustion.

And a lot of this could stem from the one thing we all crave and are addicted to – technology. Canadian employees spend a significant proportion of their time at work sending and receiving emails, with virtually all (98 per cent) respondents saying they use email at work. While a third (35 per cent) of the respondents spend less than an hour each work day sending and reading emails, 37 per cent spend between one and three hours a day using email and 25 per cent spend more than three hours a day processing email. The majority also check their email on their days off.

In fact, the 'typical' employee in this sample spends three hours per workday and one hour per non-work day in email per week (17 hours per week using email). In other words, they spend approximately one third of their working hours using email.

"The biggest thing now is that technology is causing us a lot of our stress. It is allowing organizations to come into your living room basically 24 hours a day," Higgins said. In a tough economic climate, what business wouldn't want access to their employees 24/7 to ensure that bottom line?

"They love it. Sure they do. Perhaps not consciously, but they say why wouldn't we give our employees Blackberries? Why not?" he added.

"They're a company in competition with other companies all over the world. They can't afford not to be competing. Now, we can get hold of them (employees) any time. Before, when you left the office, you left the office, now with the phones people are checking all the time for their emails. People even take them on vacations."

So when it comes down to it, it looks as if businesses aren't going to be the ones to suddenly encourage their employees to spend less time at work, so the buck has to stop with the employee themselves.

"That's why I say we have to learn that there's a boundary between work and family. Often, we let the work come into the family time. It's up to us to establish where that boundary should be put in place," Higgins said. "I think we all know dinner time is taboo, or bedtime, for the kids, is taboo, but some people it's like call-waiting. You're talking to someone and you get a call and say 'oh, I got another call.' Um, excuse me, I called you first. It's the excitement of the new email, the new text. It's got people hooked."

But the thought for some in these tough economic times is if they don't put in those extra hours, if they're not available any time of the day, their job, raise or promotion could be in jeopardy.

Higgins compares this to the famous line from the old Walt Kelly comic strip Pogo that read: 'We have met the enemy, and he is us.' But he is confident at some point we'll start to see some pushback from individuals claiming "enough of this" and start re-establishing the boundaries.

"We need to take responsibility," Higgins said. "To truly balance work and family you have to give up something. If you give up a bit of work, does that mean you're not getting the promotion? Does that mean you're not getting the big pay raise? That's the trade off. You can make

\$100,000 a year and have a happy family or \$200,000 and never see them, it's your choice.

"We all need to look in the mirror. There's an old saying that when people die they never say, gee, I wish I spent more time at work, they say gee, I wish I spent more time with my family."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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