



## About the Author

Have you ever wondered why, despite all the new labour saving technology we have, that we are now working longer and harder than ever before? Have you ever wondered if this pattern of working is good for our health or for our businesses?

Dr Jackie Holt has. Her Ph.D. focused on identifying effective strategies to reduce psychological distress amongst GPs and to assist them to identify ways to create work/life balance. Building on this success, she then worked extensively with Divisions of General Practice, Medical Colleges and Workforce Agencies to support them to develop a range of individual, collegiate and organizational strategies to address this issue.

Since then Jackie has worked with a range of professional groups, with a specific interest in knowledge workers who sell their time and expertise in a small business setting. She is the co-author of "Balance: real-life strategies for work/life balance", co-author of "Balance @ Work" soon to be released, as well as the author of several national training programs in the areas of individual and organizational change, work/life balance and stress management.

With a range of qualifications (PhD;MStudEd;DipPHC;B.Ed) that only her parents really care about, Jackie presents evidenced based insights and road tested strategies to support individuals and organisations turn the rhetoric of work/life balance into reality. She can be contacted at [www.equibrado.com.au](http://www.equibrado.com.au)

## Introduction

Whether we hate or love what we do, the undeniable truth is that we are now working longer and harder than ever before. As our time spent at work expands, our personal time shrinks. This is ironic, as in the 1970's we were told to prepare for the increased leisure time that the automation revolution would bring. Not only has this increased leisure time not materialized, research shows that actual leisure time has decreased in western countries.

There is clear evidence that long working hours, paid or unpaid, are prevalent in most occupations. Traditionally long work hours were linked to blue collar occupations. However, there is a significant change, especially amongst those who work unpaid overtime. Long unpaid work hours are associated with people in professional and managerial roles and amongst the self-employed.

Evidence from a number of occupations and industries suggests that the relationship between hours of work and productivity has changed. Whilst extended hours may have resulted in increased productivity 20 years ago, there has been a major shift in the type of work performed in many workplaces. Recent research clearly shows that long work hours can be unhealthy not only for the individual, but for the organisation as well.

## Long work hours amongst Real Estate Professionals

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 10,001 real estate services businesses operating in Australia, comprising 3,639 franchised real estate agents, 4,545 non-franchised agents and 1,818 other real estate services businesses at the end of June 2003. These businesses combined had employment of 76,599 persons, with 64% employed as permanent full-time employees.

The major staffing groups were:

- real estate salespersons (38%)
- property managers (20%)
- real estate agency managers (13%).

There were more females in property management, (74%) while males largely occupied real estate agency manager (74%) and real estate sales positions (67%). Real estate agents tended to be small employers: 39% had 4 or fewer persons employed, 34% had 5-9 persons and 21% had 10-19 persons. Only 0.6% of businesses had employment of 50 or more persons.

While there was limited data specific to the real estate industry, there are a number of studies which show that very long working hours are more common among workers who are self-employed or in small businesses (such as real estate). In 2001, 57% of self-employed workers worked 50 hours or more per week (compared with 23% of employees) while 14% of self-employed workers worked 70 hours or more per week (compared with 3% of employees). Among employees, very long working hours are most common in occupations involving high levels of personal responsibility and accountability, relatively high earnings and in jobs with no standard working hours.

There is evidence of increasing concern about the increase in work hours amongst Real Estate Professionals and the impact this has on work/life balance. In 2004 the National Association of Realtors in the US launched its new multi media program called "FamilyTime" designed to help real estate agents and their clients' better balance work/life. In addition there are work/life balance articles appearing in Industry related journals and magazines as well as a proliferation of in-house workshops and 'retreat-style' programs.

There is also evidence of increased concern about work/life balance amongst Australasian real estate agents with many of the key conferences including at least one session on work/life balance. There is increasing recognition that work/life balance is not a warm and fuzzy concept. We are only now beginning to see the true costs of long working hours; not only on the individual but also on the organisation and the community.

### **Real Estate Well Being Project**

The purpose of the survey was to collect baseline data about the health and well being of staff from a large Real Estate Group in Perth, WA. It is anticipated that this data will be used to: identify common areas of need; develop strategies to positively support staff undertaking their roles and ensure a healthy work/life balance is developed and maintained. The survey was sent to 520 real estate professionals, comprised of 4 key groups: Principals/Owner/Licensees; Sales Consultants/Representatives; Property Management and Receptionist/Administration.

One hundred and seventy (170) people responded (32% response rate). The key results were:

- approximately half of the respondents (51%) reported medium level of pressure
- 58% of the respondents reported moderate occupational stress
- 57% scored 5 and over on the work/life scale indicating some problems with balance
- over 75% of respondents reported 3 or more physical/behavioural stress symptoms
- 32% scored 3 and over on the GHQ-12\* indicating psychological distress.

(\* The GHQ-12 measures distress not stress – as what some people find stressful others find exciting! That is why there were two parts to the stress component of the survey. Any score of 3 and above on either component is cause for concern. It is not uncommon to see a low score on the psychological distress scale and a high score on the physical/behavioural scale as many people 'justify or ignore' their stress but their bodies tell them a different story eg some people work hard all year but as soon as they go on holiday they get sick).

As psychological distress is reported to occur in the general population at levels of around 20%, this finding of over 30% is of concern. This is comparable to other service orientated occupations, although the scores are somewhat lower than in high contact occupations such as medicine, education and law who have GHQ-12 percentages ranging from 35% – 50%.

Work was the most frequently reported stressor, with the second being financial concerns. However, the majority of respondents reported that they were satisfied/very satisfied (79%) with their role. This level of satisfaction is evidenced by the low number of people who reported that they had considered leaving their job (31%) or the profession (33%). This paradox of high satisfaction levels and medium to high perceived stress is often a feature of people who are involved in 'emotional labour' (i.e. providing services to clients).

This Australian research is similar to emerging research from the United States. A survey of over 1000 US real estate agents found that 55% said that real estate gave them more flexibility than a traditional office job. However, despite this flexibility, many real estate agents forgo this flexibility and worked long hours. The study also found that:

- 50% of family members were unhappy with their real estate spouses working habits
- 40% of real estate agents reported that work interrupts their family life frequently or very frequently
- 35% of real estate agents report that they do not have enough time for their families
- 21% are not able to make and fulfill commitments to spend with their families.

### **How do long working hours affect the individual?**

While there is not a definite disease of overwork, there are clearly defined clusters of signs and symptoms associated with extended hours of work. There is also evidence to suggest that a range of regressive coping strategies reportedly used to cope with work overload contribute to overall health status. Several reviews have outlined the range of negative health outcomes associated with long working hours such as:

- high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems
- indigestion, constipation, nausea and other gastrointestinal disorders
- chronic headaches and muscle tenseness
- decreased fertility, and increased rates of low birth weight and spontaneous abortion
- increased rates of fatigue related accidents and impaired cognitive performance
- anxiety, depression and other psychological disorders.

It has been suggested that these many of the health outcomes are linked to employees who adopt negative lifestyle behaviors and coping strategies to deal with working longer hours. These include the increased consumption of alcohol, caffeine and tobacco; reduced physical activity; irregular daily meals; poor nutrition and weight gain and reduced social interaction; lack of sleep and fatigue.

The most definitive of the studies are ones that link long work hours, sleep debt and fatigue. While the initial research focused on the impact of shift work and night work and their affect on a range of physical and emotional disorders, including increased accidents, recent research has also looked at recuperative time needed after long work hours. Once employees work more than 48 hours per week, the increased competition between sleep and other activities of daily living results in significant reductions in sleep.

At present, there is clear evidence that employees working more than 48 hours per week are at significantly greater risk of poor health, safety and social outcomes. Similarly, more than 60 hours per week is even more risky.

### **How do long working hours affect the organisation?**

These changes have resulted in many organisations operating in a state of diminishing returns. Any potential gains from extended hours of work are offset by costs associated with reduced employee performance, increased stress related claims, increased turnover, decreased workplace health and safety and decreased job satisfaction, morale and organizational commitment.

Dawson reported that fatigue was associated with the following aspects of workplace performance:

- the ability to comprehend complex situations without distraction
- monitoring events and improving strategies
- risk assessment and accurate prediction of consequences
- thinking laterally and being innovative
- personal interest in the outcome
- controlling mood and behaviour
- monitoring personal performance
- recollection of timing of events
- effective communication.

In addition to reducing company productivity and employee performance, high fatigue levels have been shown to increase accident risk. In fact, the effects of increased levels of fatigue have been compared to the effects of moderate alcohol intoxication. A significant body of research has concluded that fatigue is rapidly emerging as one of the greatest single safety issues now facing industry.

## Conclusion

Studies show that Australians are working longer hours, taking less holidays, volunteering less and our physical and mental health is declining. We own bigger houses with less people in them, we buy stuff we often don't have the time to use (the storage industry has grown significantly over the last 10 years and most of the things stored are domestic overflow) and many of us are trapped by huge credit card and personal loan debts.

While some short term sacrifices are necessary to grow, it is when sacrifice becomes a way of life that problems arise. It's been termed "Deferred Happiness Syndrome". We work hard in the belief that one day we will be able to enjoy the fruits of our labour. The reality is that for many people, all they have accumulated are huge relationship or health debts that have prevented them from realizing their dream. The pressure to perform can be so enormous, that unfortunately it often requires a crisis of some kind to prompt people to reflect on themselves, their families and their work practices. For many, it costs them their health, their marriage or the loss of time with children or significant others before they realize that there is more to life than work.

Real Estate professionals are not exempt from workplace stress. While the levels are not as high as some other occupations, there are a number of potential issues on the horizon that may impact on people. These include:

- fluctuations in the property market and financial security
- increased information about real estate requiring specialized knowledge to understand and process that information with clients
- rapid assimilation of technology into the real estate business (only 2% of real estate agents were using IT in 1995 while 97% were using IT in 2005)
- 'double edged sword' of mobile technology (eg flexibility versus intrusion after hours)
- outdated client notions that 'real estate' is an after hours business
- real estate is a form of 'emotional labour' and is subject to the whims of buyers, vendors and managers
- remuneration partly based on commission from sales and thus many real estate agents report feeling 'compelled' to respond to their work mobile phones, especially during times of static property market
- failure to develop systematic and consistent lead generation
- failure to develop 'mind share' and personal branding (85% of sellers and buyers only meet with one or two agents before they select a realtor. More about the person than the company)
- personality traits such as self sufficiency and independence seen as 'positive' values
- inability to articulate conscious and definite strategies for managing or negotiating the boundaries between work and life
- culture of rewards and kudos for people work long hours and generate high income.

There is no simple one size fits all program. However, there are a number of road tested strategies that can be implemented to help address these issues. These include a range of strategies that support people at an individual level as well as tackling some of the systemic problems at an Industry level.

While the 24-hour society has been effective in producing greater productivity and a higher level of competition within business, it has come at a cost to the individual and community. As work hours increase, the individual compensates for the increased time spent at work by reducing the amount of time allocated to other areas of their lives. It is time to say 'enough!' While life today cannot be neatly divided into the chunks of, "*Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what you will*" there is an urgent need for people to reflect on the amount of time they are spending at work and how they can take back their time. In our pursuit of 'more, better, faster', we have somehow lost our way.