

# SEDUCTION AND RISK

The emergence of extreme jobs

Sylvia Ann Hewlett  
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Center for Work-Life Policy

Study sponsored by American Express, BP plc, ProLogis, UBS

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February 2007

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## About the Authors

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# Executive Summary

When Eugene O’Kelly, CEO at the accounting giant KPMG, wrote a memoir in 2005 shortly after learning he had late-stage brain cancer, the revelations about his work-life balance sent ripples across the business world. O’Kelly was so immersed in his job that over the course of a decade, he had managed to have lunch with his wife on a weekday just twice. But O’Kelly’s work-before-family ways are hardly unique. Across the nation, and across the globe, a new ethos has taken over the workforce—an extreme ethos. Professionals today—especially high level professionals—are working longer hours, taking on more responsibility and facing more pressure than ever before. It’s a dynamic with profound implications for companies and professionals alike.

In 2004 the Center for Work-Life Policy launched the Hidden Brain Drain, a private sector Task Force comprising 34 global companies, to investigate how to better realize female talent over the lifespan. (A description of the Hidden Brain Task Force can be found in the Appendix.) In 2005 and 2006 we fielded two major surveys and conducted a series of focus groups sponsored by four members of the task force (American Express, BP plc, ProLogis and UBS) to investigate the impact of the emerging extreme work model on this critical talent pool. Our research, shared here for the first time, showcases findings in four areas. (See Appendix for Survey Methodology.)

First, across all sectors, professionals are working harder and longer—and giving huge amounts of their hearts and brains to the job. A combination of factors (global span of operations, modern communication technology, gargantuan rewards at the top) have yielded a high-intensity workplace that is extraordinarily demanding. Companies are leaner and meaner. More responsibility falls on the shoulders of fewer individuals. BlackBerry, e-mail, cell phones, along with the need to oversee multiple global time zones, have contributed to a 24/7 work style. In today’s client-is-king culture, professionals are always on the job: we have created a new cadre of superworkers grappling with an American Dream on steroids.

Second, in spite of the demands, the extreme work model is hugely rewarding. Professionals love their extreme jobs. They love the thrill, the meaning, the challenge, the oversized compensation packages and the brilliant colleagues. They are not only productive; they are devoted. A majority of those we surveyed are exhilarated by their jobs and feel that the oversized burdens are freely

chosen or self-inflicted. For the most part, they do not feel exploited or victimized. Companies also love their extreme professionals who are an engine of innovation, productivity and profit.

Third, there is a danger. Extreme professionals, male and female alike, are exhausted, teetering on the edge of a cliff. They are losing sleep and suffering anxiety-related disorders. They have deeply compromised their personal lives, family lives and even sex lives. They suffer from brown out (a decline in productivity due to overload) and burn out, two factors that, our research shows, are compromising their value and squelching innovation. Worse, many of these professionals have one foot out the door. Despite their love for their jobs, the majority of men and the overwhelming majority of women say they want out within one year. When absorbing this fact, it is important to note that while the majority of extreme professionals—male and female—may want to quit, in fact older male workers (ages 45 to 60) are even more likely than their younger peers to hold an extreme job. Men experience enormous pressure to keep their extreme jobs over the long haul; but women, and, increasingly, young people, pose a serious flight risk.

This brings us, finally, to a critical fourth finding: the extreme work model is leaving women behind in new ways. The majority of those who hold extreme jobs—especially those who work the longest hours—are men. Our data show that women don’t shirk the pressure or responsibility of extreme work; but, at a time when the demands and norms of parenting and care-giving have also become more extreme (as a cover story in the *Atlantic Monthly* titled “Extreme Parenting” pointed out), women simply can’t—or choose not to—work exceedingly long hours.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the data showcased in this study suggest both a challenge and a risk. The extreme work model has been a boon for companies in the past—increasing productivity and boosting profits—and it’s not going away anytime soon. Indeed there is no quick fix to the extreme job phenomenon. But we must begin to read the writing on the wall. Over the long term, the extreme work model creates vulnerability and detracts from long term enterprise sustainability. Companies that can fully realize top talent with a more sustainable human capital model and re-engineer extreme jobs will have a significant competitive advantage into the future.



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