

December 3, 2006**LIFE'S WORK**

Putting in the Hours and Paying a Price

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

I'VE always been taken with the word "zeitgeist." I remember hearing it for the first time when I was in college, wondering why I had never heard it before, and tucking it away because it was one of those perfect foreign words that said what no word in English did.

Language adapts to changing needs, and new terms are cropping up to describe the evolving workplace. As it happens, two reports will be released this week, from two giants in the field of life/work study, and they both coin phrases that may well become part of the lexicon.

The general message of both studies is that we spend far too much time at work, but the authors move beyond merely complaining and measure the downside not only to workers — particularly parents — but to business. That both groups independently examined the same territory and reached the same conclusions says something about what's in the life/work zeitgeist.

"Extreme jobs" is the phrase coined by the Hidden Brain Drain Task Force of the Center for Work-Life Policy. As defined by the task force, you have an extreme job if you work 60 hours or more a week and meet at least 5 additional characteristics from a list of 10. These include fast-paced work under tight deadlines, responsibility for profit and loss, a large amount of travel, an unpredictable flow of work, and work-related events outside business hours.

Based on two surveys and dozens of interviews and focus groups, the task force estimates that about 20 percent of high earners in the United States (defined as those in the top 6 percent of income levels) meet the definition of an extreme worker. That means 20 percent of those who make it to the top are working harder than any human can sustain for very long.

A 60-hour workweek, with a one-hour commute each way, means leaving the house at 7 a.m. every morning and not returning until 9 p.m. And more than half of extreme workers log longer hours than that.

"It's the American dream on steroids," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who heads the task force, turning another phrase. Ms. Hewlett wrote the book "Creating a Life," in which she argued that the most successful women are the least likely to have children.

Ms. Hewlett points out that these extreme workers love their jobs, lest this become a "poor me I earn so much money" story. "They love the thrill, the meaning, the challenge, the oversized compensation packages and the brilliant colleagues."

What they don't love is the fallout on the parts of their lives that are not work. Sixty-nine percent say their extreme jobs undermine their health, 46 percent say work gets in the way of a good relationship with their spouse, and 58 percent say it gets in the way of strong relationships with their children.

And what about those children? That is a concern of both the task force study and of Catalyst, the research and consulting organization that aims to expand opportunities for women at work. Catalyst worked with the Community, Families and Work Program at Brandeis University to look specifically at stress on working parents at the office, which they call "parental concern about after-school time," or Pcast. No, that doesn't trip off the tongue as smoothly as extreme jobs, but in the realm of human resources, where policy is made, it might well become a term of art, because both groups have couched this not just in terms of a problem for parents, but a problem for business.

"Pcast is not just bad for parents: it is bad for employers," Catalyst says. All those dashes from work when child care falls through, all those distracted hours spent at the office knowing a child is home sick — that affects close to 50 million employees, the Catalyst study says.

The task force goes further, and measures what is worrying parents who hold extreme jobs. "Has your child ever experienced any of the following because of the number of hours you work?" they were asked. "Watching too much television" (40 percent of women and 35 percent of men said yes); "acting out/discipline issues due to lack of attention" (38 percent of women, 18 percent of men); and "eating too much junk food" (34 percent of women, 12 percent of men).

The solution, both groups say, is what Catalyst calls "the agile workplace." That means a philosophy of flexibility. On the specific topic of Pcast, that could include subsidies for after-school care and backup care, and the ability to telecommute.

The alternative, the task force warns, is that today's distracted and overworked employees will become tomorrow's drag on the bottom line. "The culture that celebrates the extreme ethos today may tire of it — quite literally — tomorrow," Ms. Hewlett writes. If so, she will need to coin another term. "Expired workers," perhaps?

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week. E-mail: Belkin@nytimes.com.

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)