

Work-life balance

Making a fetish of overwork bodes ill for productivity

Extra hours are spent reversing poor decisions and smoothing ruffled feathers

Margaret Heffernan



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YESTERDAY by: **Margaret Heffernan**

When engineers talk about “asset integrity”, what they usually refer to is the good practice of servicing and repairing equipment before it breaks. Companies that use a lot of machinery take this very seriously; companies that mostly just use people rarely do.

Although to my knowledge no other nation than Japan has a word for death by overwork — [karoshi](http://next.ft.com/content/Ocd29210-8dd1-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78) (<http://next.ft.com/content/Ocd29210-8dd1-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>) — we probably need one. For while it is tempting to imagine the phenomenon is unique to Japan, it may simply be that it is the first country to look deeply enough to identify it. Coined in the 1970s, the word returned to Japanese newspapers last month when the Tokyo Labour bureau ruled that the suicide of [Matsuri Takahashi](http://next.ft.com/content/6d6b73b4-) (<http://next.ft.com/content/6d6b73b4->

[94fa-11e6-a1dc-bdf38d484582](#)), a young employee of the advertising agency Dentsu, had been caused by overwork. She had worked 105 hours of overtime in a single month.

Most of the chief executives I know — predominantly in the US and UK — routinely work a 12 or 15-hour day, six or seven days a week. Few of them are familiar with studies that routinely show that productivity is not linear. After about 40 hours a week fatigue sets in, provoking mistakes. Any extra hours spent are needed to clear up the mess: reversing poor decisions, soothing ruffled feathers. The classic, but comic, expression of this was produced by the efficiency expert, Frank Gilbreth. He found he could shave faster if he used two razors but then wasted all the time he saved covering the cuts with plasters.

While a few [chief executives \(http://next.ft.com/content/50125bbe-96af-11e6-a1dc-bdf38d484582\)](#) love to boast of their powers of endurance, many insist their jobs simply require long days, weeks and months. They acknowledge it sets a poor example and a few have learnt to keep weekend emails stored in their outbox. But the speed with which the death, in 2013, of a [Bank of America intern \(http://next.ft.com/content/f4352b14-539f-11e3-9250-00144feabdc0\)](#) working in the City of London was interpreted as death by overwork showed how fully everyone knew that the economic crisis and relative scarcity of good jobs was taking its toll on those at the bottom of the heap.

This mirrors what Professor Michael Marmot, the British epidemiologist, discovered when he conducted a longitudinal study of [10,000 Whitehall civil servants \(http://unhealthywork.org/classic-studies/the-whitehall-study/\)](#): that stress tended to concentrate at the top and the bottom of the pyramid. But when [Marianna Virtanen \(http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/daf4cde8-5d5e-11df-8373-00144feab49a.html\)](#) continued the study to look at the long-term consequences of that stress, she found working 11 or more hours a day doubled the risk of a [“major depressive episode \(http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0030719\)”](#). A lifetime of long hours was also associated with cognitive loss in middle years: reasoning, problem solving, creativity were all poorer.

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“Most of the CEOs I know routinely work a 12 or 15-hour day, six or seven days a week,” says Margaret Heffernan, entrepreneur and author of ‘Wilful Blindness’. But, she says,

All of this damage is invisible. If it were not — if some of the wear and tear resulted in visible injury — perhaps companies would take more care. But it is very hard for most people to accept that thinking is a physical activity, performed by the brain — which, like every organ, has limits to its capacity. We can see machinery break down, we notice broken arms and legs. We do not see broken minds — until it is too late. A proliferation of supposed antidotes to overwork — mindfulness, resilience

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training — may promise some respite but few of these programmes are any kind of a cure. Designed to increase endurance, they perpetuate the problem. We know machines have limits; we like to imagine that we do not.

Tough corporate cultures that measure performance by the hour inevitably lead to fatigue and tunnel vision, and adversely affect problem-solving. They are efficient in the sense that they reduce costs but dangerous in spheres where reputation and judgment count. If we want creativity, originality and mastery of complex problems, we must accept the physical limitations of the human brain. As long as we ignore more than 100 years of research into human productivity and manage people as though they were robots with faulty batteries, we waste talent and sacrifice our own integrity.

The writer is an entrepreneur, consultant and author of 'Wilful Blindness'

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