



Many white-collar employees put in 60 or 70 hours per week

[By Michael Kinsmans]

Vivian Lin knows the precise minute she needs to leave her office to pick up groceries at Trader Joe's before it closes at 9 p.m.

Sadly, it's three or four hours after she should have left work.

As with many other white-collar workers, Lin's workweek has expanded. It is no longer eight hours a day, five days a week, but more like 12 hours a day and full eight-hour shifts on Saturdays and Sundays.

Lin, 37, recently spent 28 straight days on the job, hasn't had time for a relationship in years and last took a vacation six years ago.

"I don't feel like I'm missing anything because I really enjoy my job," said Lin, who owns Tangent Entertainment, a San Diego company that creates and develops multimedia marketing campaigns. "But I do have those thoughts from time to time about how much time I work."

The 40-hour workweek is but a distant memory for many professionals.

Pressure to do more work, expectations that the good employee will go the extra mile, and the realization that technology provides the opportunity to work 24/7 is translating to more work hours.

"The time and space of the 40-hour workweek has been exploded," said John Challenger, president and chief executive of the Challenger, Gray & Christmas outplacement firm in Chicago. "We not only do our work at the office, but we do it at home, on the road or on vacation."

Challenger - who was interviewed during a recent work/vacation in Monterey, Calif.

- said there has been a clear cultural shift in recent years that is driving professionals to put in longer and longer hours.

Some of the work is voluntary, but some is done out of fear of employer demands.

The hours of work that salaried workers do at home or on vacation are not captured by most government statistics.

The Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that the U.S. workweek remained relatively stable between 1979 and 2004, while workweeks were shortened in many other industrial countries.

The number of hours worked by Americans dropped 2 percent during that 25-year span, compared to an average 13.1 percent drop in 19 other primarily European industrial countries.

With 1,824 average hours worked during the year, Americans ranked second only to New Zealanders in number of hours worked. New Zealand workers put in two more hours per year than Americans.

The survey showed that Japanese workers shaved 15.9 percent off their workweek during that 25-year time span, Germans cut hours by 18.9 percent, and French work schedules were reduced by 17.9 percent.

Challenger said there are forces building hours into the U.S. labor force that don't show up in official calculations.

In addition to white-collar professionals and technical workers who put in more time, there is the hidden aspect of hourly workers who work overtime regularly to assure themselves of job security.

"With all the downsizing going on today, nobody's job is ever secure," Challenger said. "But some workers think that by working harder and longer, they will be less likely to be downsized should their companies cut back."

A recent survey by staffing company Adecco found that 29 percent of workers report toiling longer today than a year ago, and 32 percent said they are experiencing more on-the-job stress.

Adecco said 35 percent of white-collar workers expected to put in work time while on their summer vacations this year.

Another study, by Harris/Interactive & Expedia travel service, found that the average American failed to take four vacation days owed them last year.

"It's clear that many people don't like their jobs and the time they put into them, but they don't know what to do about it," said Ann Nichols Roulac, author of the book "Power, Passion & Purpose" (Green Island; \$17), which offers advice for dealing with workplace stress.

Roulac blames chief executives, who in their rush to improve productivity have turned to driving workers harder with demands that force them to work more hours weekly and forgo vacation days.



"I think it's a disastrous attempt at a solution," Roulac said. "It is not uncommon to find people working 60 or 70 hours a week. When they work hours that long and those hours are intense, it just means they are not going to be functioning like they should. It's a major reason we see so much burnout among workers."

Ron Blackwell, chief economist for the AFL-CIO, said U.S. companies are to blame for a longer workweek.

"Employers are under pressure from Wall Street and foreign competition to reduce their costs," he said, "but they have no real pricing power to do that in a global economy. The only thing they have control over are labor costs. They have reduced wages and benefits and demanded more from their workers. It's a very serious threat to the American way of life."

Blackwell said that in their rush to satisfy the demands of employers, many employees have voluntarily worked longer hours without compensation.

"The worker has not been sharing in the benefits of increased productivity," Blackwell said. "The only way for them to get ahead is to work more. That means they work longer hours at their jobs, take second jobs, or other family members enter the work force. This is the story of our times."

The Economic Policy Institute, based in Washington, D.C., reported that U.S. productivity increased 79 percent from 1979 to 2005, while the median hourly wage, adjusted for inflation, gained 8.9 percent during the same period.

"When wages are flat and there are no economic gains to be made for individual workers, they become disillusioned," said EPI economist Jared Bernstein, co-author of "The State of Working America 2006/2007."

"That's when you see people start to fight back and resist working long hours. I think they are definitely going down that path. I think the pendulum will definitely swing back the other way, but when?"

U.S. worker productivity grew at 1.1 percent in the second quarter, its slowest growth rate in almost five years, after growing at 4.3 percent in the first quarter.

Bernstein said he finds many professional workers working longer hours than ever today. It is a cultural norm in some professions, such as law or accounting, to put in 70 hours a week.

"It's like a signaling mechanism," he said. "No one tells you that you have to work these hours, but it is expected of you. The message is that if you work those long work hours you will be OK. If you don't, it will be held against you. It's almost like a badge of honor to be working like that."

"That creates a climate where you have an attorney slinking out the door at 6 p.m., hoping that no one notices they are leaving," Bernstein said.

Roulac said that workers not only burn out in that environment, but they make mistakes along the way because they can't perform at a high level for 70 hours a week.

"It just gets to be too much and a lot of workers crash under this type of pressure," she said. "It doesn't help anyone when the company's demands drive people to do this."

Rich Pietras, who works in purchasing at the University of San Diego, faces a common dilemma. Pietras says he has pride in his job but often can't accomplish the goals laid out by his employer without putting in more than 40 hours a week.

Pietras works 10-hour days, including an occasional weekend day to stay on top of it.

"It is my choice, but it's something I think is important," Pietras said. "During the week, my time is consumed with putting out fires. The only time I can get to the strategic part of my job - that's what I am hired to do - is to work longer."

Pietras acknowledges that his pride in his work puts pressure on him to work longer than 40 hours.

"You want to do the job the best way you can and that might mean working extra hours," he said. "If that's what it takes, then I've got to do that. I suppose I could shrug my shoulders and go home after 40 hours, but I really want to be counted on as someone who can get the job done."

Others, such as small-business owner Annette Gomez, say they work long hours for the sake of their business.

Gomez, who has owned a flower shop in Encinitas, Calif., for 12 years, estimates that she works 50 to 70 hours per week.

"I used to keep track of the hours I worked, but I stopped because I didn't like seeing them on my calendar," she said. "I probably work more hours than I should, but I tell myself I won't always be working this hard."

Gomez gets up at 4 a.m. to get a jump on her workday. She said she feels no guilt about leaving her husband and three children - ages 14, 12 and 6 - because they're all sleeping and don't miss her.

Her formal plan is that she works four, 12-hour days. But that often gets stretched out to encompass more hours and more days.

"If I'm really busy, I can wind up working 80 hours a week," she said. "Sometimes I'm supposed to be off on Mondays, but I'll wind up coming in anyway. I can bring the kids in and let them help out because they always want to have money to spend, so I don't feel like I'm missing anything."



Gomez admits that sometimes she feels pressure from being on the go from 4 a.m. until 9 p.m. every day, but that doesn't cause her to want to cut back.

"I love what I do," she said. "It's not the business's fault that I'm here all the time. I only expect to work this hard another two or three years. Once I get systems in place, I can turn over some of my jobs to the girls working there."

Maybe working isn't all bad, and professionals ought to be allowed to say when they've had enough, said Rebecca Haddock, who teaches career development at the University of San Diego and manages community relations for High Tech High.

"We are asking people to take control of their careers today," she said. "The whole idea of a portfolio career is that you will wind up doing several different things."

"So if we are now in a mode of developing our own careers, it will be up to us as individuals to determine what the limits will be. That's

part of managing your career. Is this good or bad? Who knows? But it's something we have to do. So if we have the responsibility of developing our own careers, we'll have to take responsibility for limiting how much time we invest in them."

Challenger said that people tend to look myopically at the changes in the U.S. workplace over the past few years.

"Not all the changes have been bad," he said. "While work has not only invaded our personal lives, our personal time has entered the workplace. We now listen to music at work, do personal e-mails, look at eBay. We are now more flexible in our workplaces."

"And the freedom we get from flexibility can be great. Today, if you want to leave at 3 p.m. to go watch your kids play soccer, you can often arrange for that. Employers know that these people will be making up the time later at night when family things slow down. That's not a bad thing at all."

People such as Tangent owner Lin believe in their work and find the challenges worth the sacrifice of working long hours. Lin said she is so excited by her work that she often turns on her home computer first thing in the morning before having breakfast or brushing her teeth.

"This corporation is the most challenging endeavor I have ever taken on," she said. "You have to be a slave to its needs. I look at it as an investment, and it will eventually take care of me some day."

"But right now I'm embracing the situation for what it is. I'm not afraid to work this hard, but I don't want to work this hard forever."

Even someone as industrious as Lin can daydream.

"If I had a vacation, I'd go to Spain," she said. "And China. But if I went to China, I wouldn't go for a vacation. I'd go to do business."