

“Life moves
pretty fast. If
you don't
stop and look
around once in
a while, you
could miss it.”

[– *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, 1986]

Chapter 1



THIS PROBLEM
IS **REALLY**
SERIOUS

KNOW WHAT “*KAROSHI*” MEANS?

On 30 November 2007 the Nagoya District Court in Japan accepted Hiroko Uchino's claim that her husband, Kenichi, a third-generation Toyota employee, was a victim of *karoshi* when he died in 2002 at the age of 30. He collapsed at 4am at work, having put in more than 80 hours of overtime each month for six months before his death. The week of his death, Mr. Uchino told his wife, "The moment when I am happiest is when I can sleep". He left two children, aged 1 and 3.

As a manager of quality control, Mr. Uchino was constantly training workers, attending meetings and writing reports when not on the production line. Toyota treated almost all that time as voluntary and unpaid. So did the Toyota Labour Standards Inspection Office, part of the Labour Ministry. But the court ruled that the long hours were an integral part of his job. On 14 December the government decided not to appeal against the verdict.

The word "*karoshi*" in Japanese literally means "death from overwork". The major medical causes of *karoshi* deaths are heart attack and stroke due to stress. The first reported case of *karoshi* was in 1969 when a 29-year-old male worker at the shipping department of Japan's largest newspaper company, died of a stroke. But it was not until the later part of the 1980s, when several high-ranking executives, still in their prime, suddenly died without any previous sign of illness, that the media began picking up on what appeared to be a new phenomenon. This new phenomenon was quickly labelled "*karoshi*" and was immediately seen as a new and serious menace for people in the workforce.

But it's not just Japan. The average full-time American worker gets an average of 14 vacation days per year but most only use 12 of those days. Research done by the Center For Work-Life Policy shows that more than 53% of workers regularly forfeit vacation days in order to spend more time working. Nearly half of working Americans take fewer than 10 days and about 25% of Americans *don't take any vacation at all*.

We can probably safely assume that these same workers spend some of the weekend working on stuff they've brought home or checking email or taking/making work-related calls. The most recent *American Time Use Survey*¹ shows that people with jobs worked an average of 7.99 hours per day, up from 7.82 hours in 2010. Not too bad, I hear you say. No indeed – except that that 7.99 hours is every single day of the week. The idea of working five days a week seems long gone.

And while we maybe tend to think of the United States as being a very work-centred culture, the USA is nowhere near the worst when it comes to working very long hours. The average American works 1,695 hours per year. But that puts it at only #19 in the overall world rankings. The top 10 look like this:²

Ranking	Country	Hours worked per year
1	South Korea	2,193
2	Chile	2,068
3	Greece	2,017
4	Russian Federation	1,973
5	Hungary	1,956
6	Poland	1,939
7	Israel	1,929
8	Estonia	1,880
9	Turkey	1,877
10	Mexico	1,866

Looking at these figures it really would appear that we are headed for a place where life is going to be just about work.

But we already know all this from our own experience. We are busy in a way that our parents never were. Work intrudes into our personal lives in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago.

If this wasn't bad enough, most of this increased workload is not by choice. Far from it. These days most of this workload comes with an implied threat that if we won't do it, then bad things – redundancy, outsourcing, downsizing, offshoring – will happen. Work seems to be consuming our lives, so much so that we are losing sight of what life is really about, of the things that really matter to us, whatever those might be – family, children, loved ones, hobbies, ambitions, hopes, dreams.

*"Most men live lives
of quiet desperation."*

- THOREAU, American philosopher (1817–1862)

And while it's not often mentioned, it's worth saying how an awful lot of this extra time worked is a complete and utter waste. Bosses or employees who equate attendance with productivity are nuts. The notion that people can work continuous long hours over extended periods of time and still remain productive is laughable. While this may sound counterintuitive, if we think a little about it, we can see why.

Bosses or employees who equate attendance with productivity are nuts.

First, it's important to distinguish between a "push" to get a job done, versus slogging through something with no end in sight.

A push to get a job done may be to solve a critical problem or to hit a particular milestone. Such a push can be a great thing. It can be great for morale and team building and produce extraordinary results.

THE DAMBUSTERS RAID – OPERATION CHASTISE

The famous Dambusters Raid during World War II³ is a great example of a push to get a job done.

It was early 1943. The Germans had just been defeated at Stalingrad but D-Day was still more than a year away and victory in Europe more than two years away. Barnes Wallis, a British scientist and inventor, came up with the idea that if some of Germany's dams could be breached, the resulting flooding in the Ruhr Valley would cause massive damage to the German industrial capability.

The problem was to design a bomb big enough and deliver it close enough to the dam that when it exploded it would destroy the dam wall.

Inspired by what happens when flat stones are "skipped" across a lake, Wallis came up with the idea of a "bouncing" bomb. His experiments and calculations showed that if the bomb could be dropped from a precise height of just 60 feet, it would skip across the lake in front of the dam, strike the dam wall and then sink in close proximity to it before detonating. The problem then became one of developing and testing the bomb and training RAF pilots to deliver it under the exact conditions that Wallis had specified.

In the end, the bomb was made ready in just ten weeks. Then the specially trained flight crews of 617 Squadron flew their planes – at night – at tree top height over many miles of enemy held territory. They located the dams, dropped their bombs, breached two out of three of them and caused immense destruction as a result.

Extraordinary things can be done when people work against the clock to solve a particular problem. As you can see, pushes can produce amazing results. But that's not what we're talking about here.

Rather it's about what Kenichi Uchino in Toyota was going through: long hours day after day, week after week with – unlike a push – no end in sight, nor even a clear goal or objective. Why does this result in poor productivity? Why is it that the results achieved are out of all proportion (and not in a good way) to the effort put in? Have a quick think about it and you'll see why. Picture this.

You come in to work early in the morning. You left work late the previous night so you're now back where you were just a few hours earlier.

This is not the first day you've done this. You've been doing this for a while – quite a while. You've been working long days, maybe just grabbing a sandwich at your desk and not eating properly in the evenings, perhaps getting a take-out or throwing a frozen pizza in the microwave. You haven't been exercising. Nor have you been spending time with your loved ones. And you haven't been using the weekend to recover from all of this because you've been working the weekends (or at least some of them) too.

There's no end in sight. It's not like this is to achieve something special – this is just the way life is.

Now imagine how you'll spend your day. You know you're going to be working 12–15 hours that day, so you essentially feel like you've got all the time in the world. You'll linger over coffee. Somebody swings by for a chat, you're more than happy to chat with them. Or you'll maybe go seek out other people to socialize with. You'll spend time at meetings that

ramble on and achieve nothing in particular because it doesn't matter – you've got all the time in the world.

Towards the end of the day, rather than start some important piece of work, you'll say, "Ah, I'll start that tomorrow when I'm fresh" and you'll tinker with some emails instead.

In short, productivity goes out the window.

Now contrast that day with a day where you work a brisk eight or so hours. And imagine that your day *has* to be limited to eight hours. Imagine that you've got the hottest date of your life at 7 pm that evening.

Now, how will you spend your time? You'll plan your day. You'll make a list of the stuff you absolutely have to get done so that you can walk out the door that afternoon. You'll give short shrift to trivial or unimportant things. You'll set yourself a deadline so that you can go home and pretty yourself up. Maybe you'll have some contingency in your plan – aiming to get out at 4 pm but absolutely no later than 5. This is so that if some idiot does spring a surprise on you and asks you to do something, you'll have the time to do it and still be able to get out the door on schedule. You'll be brusque with time-wasters so that you can keep your little plan for your day on track and get to your date on time.

And productivity? It's goes through the roof. Days like this are *hugely* productive.

Endless long hours	Normal working hours
Got all the time in the world – “If I don’t get it done today, there’s always tomorrow”	Have to get certain things done today
No life outside work	A life outside work
Often no clear goal or plan other than to work long hours	Very clear goal and a plan to get there
No differentiation between important and unimportant things – “I’ll get to it eventually”	Focus on the important things
Constant time wasting	Very little time wasting
Physically unhealthy	Physically healthy
A sense of trying to clear a vast mountain of stuff	A sense of definite and consistent progress towards an end goal
Potentially very stressful	Low stress

So which of these days would you prefer?

Tom De Marco, in his book *The Deadline*,⁴ talks about the effects of the pressure to work long hours. This is what he says:

- "People under pressure don't think any faster.
- Extended overtime is a productivity-reduction tactic.
- Short bursts of pressure and even overtime may be a useful tactic as they focus people and increase the sense that the work is important, but extended pressure is always a mistake.
- Perhaps managers make so much use of pressure because they don't know what else to do, or are daunted by how difficult the alternatives are.
- Terrible suspicion: The real reason for use of pressure and overtime may be to make everyone look better when the project fails."

So here is perhaps the most depressing aspect of all of this working crazy hours – that much of it is a waste, a complete and utter pointless waste. Why on earth then would you want to sign up for something like that?

But time management should sort out all of this.

Shouldn't it ?

Do Less – Turn Something Down At Work

If, as we've said, the problem is too much to do and not enough time to do it, then clearly, every time you accept something more, then you take the existing problem and make it even worse. So how about if you were to *not* take on something? In other words, somebody asked you to do something and you declined it.

So this is going to be your first test. Next time you're in work, your job is to turn something down. It can be big or small, trivial or hugely important, it doesn't matter. Your job is to pick one thing that day and decline it.

How will you do that? Well, ideally you figure it out. It isn't actually that difficult. But if you really – and I mean really – try and you can't find a way, then read Chapter 5 and it will tell you how. But I'd much rather – and it would be much better for you – if you figured it out for yourself.