We started our careers in two time-intensive fields—Joanna in law and Sharon in finance. We each looked around our offices and saw men working 24/7, and women doing the same thing—until they became parents. In our mostly male professions, long hours were not only a badge of honor and a sign of status, they were a necessity for anyone who wanted to get ahead. It was clear who the working mothers were (a handful of women who tried to keep more normal hours), but it was hard to tell who the fathers were. Single or with four kids at home, all men arrived at work early and went home late—or so it seemed. Talking to men and women in all kinds of jobs, we heard the same story. As young people starting out they, like us, got this message: To succeed, you need to work all the time. To work all the time, you need to be (or act) childless.

We’ve been lucky to learn this is not true—but only after many years of laboring under the delusion that it was. We’ve all been duped into thinking that more is better when it comes to our jobs, that somehow the more time we spend at work, from offices to hospitals to test kitchens to newsrooms, the more productive we’ll be. It starts
from a belief that’s largely right: That hard work is good (which it is),
that we can do a better job if we put in more hours (which was true
when we were talking about bringing the harvest in before the crops
froze). “It didn’t used to be this intense,” says Bill George, who ran
Medtronic and now sits on the boards of global companies like
ExxonMobil. “It got much worse starting fifteen years ago.”

Compounding the problem, some of the most hardheaded leaders
romanticize 24/7 life. “I used to show up at the office Saturday morn-
ing,” writes former General Electric CEO Jack Welch in his best-
selling book *Winning*. He had plenty of company, all men, on these
weekend mornings he describes as “a blast.” “We would mop up the
workweek in a more relaxed way and shoot the breeze about sports.

“I never once asked anyone ’Is there someplace you’d rather be—or
need to be—for your family or favorite hobby or whatever?’ The idea
just didn’t dawn on me that anyone would want to be anywhere but at
work.”

We’ve created a breed of managers who think 24/7 is a matter of
pride and the only path to success. The overfocus on hours can lead
even bright bosses to stop measuring things that matter more, like re-
results or the inputs that drive them, which take more effort to track.
Consider the management maxim that “what gets measured gets
done” and it’s no wonder we’re all at the office ever longer.

Studying a large firm, Harvard Business School professor Leslie
Perlow heard one boss excuse a failing worker this way: “I think we
would have lost faith in him a long time ago. But he works so hard, you
just have to assume he’s working on something really challenging.”
Bosses at this firm (as in many) were so focused on hours that they
would cut a poor performer slack but pushed out successful workers
who put in less time.

Something happens to our sense of time when we become parents.
Time becomes a prized commodity, something we’d rather not waste.
When our time is being misused—by either ourselves or others—we
want to punch the clock, literally. It’s always aggravating when the per-
son who called the 2:00 meeting shows up at 2:15 and then blows an-
other fifteen minutes off topic. It’s even worse when you’d like to leave
by 5:15, not 5:45. That’s half an hour your child will be waiting for you at day care (accruing those infuriating late fees).

“This is the dumbest meeting I’ve sat through in my life.” That was all I could think. It was an important client but we weren’t using our time well and I had to leave to make my daughter’s event,” said Grace, the advertising executive. “Before kids, I’d bought into this idea ‘I’m a partner at this big firm and this is what we do.’ But when there are kids who need you for specific things, you acknowledge the truth—that we spend a lot of time doing stupid things at work.”

It gets harder to see 24/7 as heroic when you know how much it hurts the well-being of kids (and of your marriage and spouse). You can’t get good results unless you put in good, hard work, but as Doug, a professor of psychiatry, says, “Sometimes I think we overdo it. When people feel they’re expected to be at the office for twelve hours a day, they spend a lot more time bullshitting at the watercooler.”

While it’s easy to think that the workplace is kinder than it was a generation ago, we are in fact being asked to work longer, harder, and faster, all in the name of the global competition. If we’re really interested in winning, our addiction to midnight oil is a danger. Productivity, efficiency, innovation should be our focus—all more easily achieved by alert minds not working 24/7.

**How 24/7 hurts profits, and why smart bosses say, “Go home”**

From the moment we get our first jobs, we’re led to believe that more is better—more billable hours, more orders from customers, more time with clients, more meetings to set more goals, more tasks learned, more e-mails sent, more products produced, whether it’s cherry pies or radial tires. More, more, more is the way of sending the signal that you’re good, better, the best at what you do. Working all the time says you’re tough, you’re tops, you’re macho (even if you’re biologically female). The old way of being macho was to play basketball on a sprained ankle for hours on end. The new way of being macho is to work nights and weekends.
But competing when you’re not at your best is always a mistake. “Businesses need to be 24/7,” says Xerox CEO Ann Mulcahy. “Individuals don’t.”

Not only do we not need to be “on” all the time, but for the good of our employers, we shouldn’t be. It’s no secret that when we work while exhausted, we often do more harm than good. Sleep experts have studied truck drivers and nuclear plant workers and have concluded that it is downright dangerous for them to work more than a six-to-eight-hour shift. The medical field is an infamous hotbed of sleep-deprived workers. Comparing hospital interns on a “normal” thirty-hour shift with those working shorter hours, one study found dramatic differences in performance. Interns on thirty-hour shifts misdiagnosed patients six times more often and made almost 60 percent more errors compared with interns who got more normal amounts of sleep.

While most of us aren’t doing jobs that could kill other people if we work past our peak, we can still do a lot of damage. Consider that e-mail you fired off to the Big Cheese at 11 last night (you misspelled his name), your after-hours voice mail to the supplier who’s late again (you said something bad, but what was it?), being abrupt with the rookie who screwed up the numbers after working all night.

A guru to Fortune 500 CEOs told us, “If you can’t get your job done in ten hours a day, there is something wrong with you.” His point: No matter where you sit in the food chain there are only so many productive hours your brain can put in—after that, you’ll make mistakes, you’ll make a gaffe, you’ll make a mess. “Your priority list should be short and very focused; you have to say no or delegate to others.”

When Joanna began her first career, she joined a large corporate law firm. She’d worked hard in law school to build what she thought were the relevant skills: studying precedent, learning to gather evidence and build legal arguments. But, for junior lawyers, a crucial part of the job was late-night proofreading, with the stamina to do it again and again, night after night, patiently shepherding hundreds of pages through a multiday, round-the-clock production process, often twenty hours at a
time. Sitting at the printers until 2 a.m., Joanna knew she and all the other associates were expected to be at their desks the next morning to begin again, minds as sharp as the day they were hired. But Joanna couldn’t do it and didn’t want to. Doing deals was her thing, proofing vigils weren’t, so Joanna left for a job where she could contribute (mostly) during daylight hours.

U.S. economic power is second to none, but it turns out that our actual productivity per hour lags behind that of many other countries. (In hours logged by the watercooler, perhaps we’re first.) When faced with a need to expand capacity, we throw more people and more hours at the problem, rather than figure out how to work more productively. We call more meetings. We generate more e-mails. We get busy—but in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. Martin Baily, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, says, “There is probably not a productivity penalty to shortening hours in the U.S., and there may even be a benefit.”

Researchers know too much 24/7 causes serious problems, that workaholics, who incidentally develop stress-related ailments that drain employee health-care benefits, have compromised decision-making and problem-solving skills, as they become uncreative and forgetful. The Chernobyl disaster, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle were all the result of too much 24/7, according to Martin Moore-Ede, physiologist and author of The Twenty-Four-Hour Society.

Most bosses don’t see the problem of pushing employees to the max because they get the results they want—short term, at least. The 24/7 ethic is a gross perversion of the good old-fashioned work ethic and it costs us a lot in productivity. In her book Finding Time, Harvard Business School’s Leslie Perlow conducted a nine-month study of time management at a Fortune 500 firm. She found that “those who work hardest do not necessarily contribute the most to the corporation’s productivity, and, in fact, that often no one benefits from this behavior, not even the corporation…if we had the incentive to get the work done in less time, we could create alternative ways of working that would be more efficient and effective.”
Leslie Perlow has devoted her career to exploring how people use—and misuse—their workday. Since the early 1990s, Perlow has been clocking workers in a variety of demanding fields from software programming to consulting. Among her key findings: We can do more in less time if we help each other and interrupt less.

Studying a Fortune 500 technology firm, Perlow asked workers to wear a watch that beeped on the hour, reminding them to record what they’d done with that unit of time—both at the office and at home. Then she asked the engineers to review their time logs and reflect on what did (and didn’t) help them get work done. What Perlow heard was dramatic: Even star workers felt much of their twelve-hour workday (sometimes close to half) was lost in activities that were either needless or ill planned. Straining to meet a product-launch deadline, many engineers complained about stress and overwork. So Perlow suggested an experiment: “Quiet time” three mornings a week when interruptions would not be allowed. The goal was to permit workers to rethink how they used their time. By the end of the experiment, 71 percent of engineers said that creating these blocks of focused time made them more productive. The project’s leaders were impressed, too—the team successfully launched its product on time and managers credited Perlow’s experiment.

Why do we perpetuate so many ineffective patterns of work? We’re often convinced that our way is the only one. Even when it’s clearly not true. It turns out that the very same task—at the same level of quality—can be done many ways. To discover just how differently people produce the same thing, Perlow looked abroad. “We asked a large U.S. company to identify joint venture partners that were highly productive and equally productive,” Perlow told us. This sent Perlow and her colleagues to three software firms—in China (we’ll call it “Cco”), India (“Ico”), and Hungary (“Hco”)—to observe one top-performing group in each of these places.
In the United States, it’s common for programmers to work twelve-hour days and longer—plus weekends. It’s assumed that this work style is required to produce top-notch results. But in Perlow’s study, only the Ico programmers believed they needed to work long hours like their U.S. peers.

At Cco, the workday was 8 to 5, with an hour for lunch. How? Programmers sat in a single room, quietly performing individual tasks, consulting the manager—and only the manager—as needed. Apart from the one-hour lunch break, there was no fraternizing, no team meetings. “We judge engineers based on how hard they work (while at work),” a Cco boss said, “and their native talent.”

At Hco, engineers had significant latitude to decide when and how they worked. “I don’t evaluate people based on long hours,” said an Hco manager. Work varied with the firm’s needs—normally, programmers worked a nine-hour day but, in an occasional pinch, they would stay as late as needed. Meeting time was used for group collaboration (not the perfunctory status updates that are common in U.S. office culture). Many Hco employees chose to work from home without fear it would count against them. In fact, the Hco project leader explained, “I get a lot more done at home. I work at home whenever I can.”

Hco managers encouraged engineers to help each other so that individual workers could leave the office without letting down their team. Hco engineers developed overlapping expertise so that if one programmer was out—running an errand, tending to a sick child, or on a long vacation—someone else would fill in and work would progress at a high level of quality.

For the engineers on these three equally productive teams, the different work cultures drove very different results for family life. One Cco manager explained, “The government is concerned that it is not healthy for the workforce to overwork,” and his employees openly expressed their desire to maximize family time. At Hco, work hours rose and fell with the demands of the project and engineers were comfortable saying that they needed time for “rest and revival, as well as for family needs.”
At Ico, with its culture of long hours and individualism, programmers made a point of saying their work came before all else.

Intrigued by these findings, Perlow has brought her research back home to the United States. “Can we rethink the norms in places that are the toughest?” Perlow asks. She is finding some encouraging news in her work with highly competitive professional service firms. Time can be treated as something valuable that should not be wasted, not as the sole currency to prove you’re committed to your job. “Work naturally has its peaks and valleys,” Perlow says. In the United States, it is standard to work at peak level all the time—the culture does not allow us to work less in the valleys—unless we are willing to challenge our assumptions and experiment. “We can do things differently. What we discovered in our cross-cultural work is bearing out in the United States. That it is possible—not unrealistic—to think you can reorganize work in a way that’s good for both family life and the bottom line.”

Best Buy, the electronics retailer, which is at the hub of global competition, saw that too many talented people quit due to their long hours. Best Buy is now three years into a program it is calling the ROWE (“Results-Oriented Work Environment”), where thirty-five hundred employees are allowed to work when and where they like, setting their own hours. With the employee discipline encouraged by ROWE, some divisions posted double-digit productivity gains, and virtually all groups gained lower turnover, and much higher job satisfaction.

How did Best Buy do it? They changed the culture—and made it clear that formerly admired work habits are now bad form: two-hour staff meetings, drop-by interruptions, long e-mails. They’ve also made productivity standards explicit. At Cisco Systems, managers are being urged to find effective ways to evaluate an employee’s performance. “If hours worked or face time is the criterion used, employees who can be very effective and organized may get penalized,” says Noni Allwood, Cisco’s senior director of worldwide diversity and inclusion.
You don’t have to have a big corporate program to find bosses who look at your output more often than your hours. Rob took over a failing staffing firm and made it highly profitable by recruiting the right people to help him run it. Two of his seven top people were mothers who worked part time. “It would have been very easy to fill those jobs with men willing to work full time,” says Rob, “But we didn’t want to hire the best person for the job just because they wanted to work less than five long days a week.” Valuing talent more than hours, Rob turned the firm around, made it a leader in its field, and sold the company for a handsome profit.

Even if there isn’t a results-focused program or a Rob where you work, there are plenty of things you can do on your own. First, let’s consider what gets in the way when we try to talk about efficiency at work.

The forest for the trees: How hidden agendas lurk in the 24/7 woods

Our 24/7-loving culture provides cover for a lot of ineffectiveness—and other unattractive practices. Julie, the former public defender, told us that some judges feel pressed to push trials through because the backlog of cases is so high. “Judges set schedules so aggressive that defense attorneys, caught racing from trial to trial, don’t have time to prepare fully. A lot of these cases have a natural life span and they need time to progress—time for evidence and witnesses to be identified,” says Julie. When the wrong guy goes to jail, the bad guys roam free—keeping the cops (and our tax dollars) busy. These judges, like their peers in many fields, get blinded by the idea that lots of work equals good work. Worse, “These judges make you go to trial because they can; you sense that often it’s just a power trip,” says Julie.

At 5 p.m., a sales manager named Kirk tells his junior colleagues what they need to do for the next day’s meetings: long lists of things to prepare, to be completed after they eat dinner at their desks. He seems untroubled by the fact the young people on his team are underemployed during the day. This is Kirk’s standard operating procedure. Kirk spends his own days meeting with more senior colleagues and clients. “Kirk isn’t any more productive than the rest of us—we brief our teams as
early as we can, and our folks get home,” says his colleague, “but Kirk seems to think he’s entitled to use his team’s time however he wants.” In a well-run firm, Kirk won’t last too long. But there are plenty of places where people like Kirk, and the judges in Julie’s court, use other people’s time as a way of demonstrating their own dominance.

**Face time versus family time**

In some workplaces, one person’s BS is another person’s path to glory, that holy grail known as “face time.” Once there was a time when you put up with it in its many forms: unproductive meetings, mindless chitchat, power breakfasts, business lunches, and celebratory drinking and dining, or simply coming in early and staying late to be “seen.” When you are an active parent, you see these things in a different light. You see them as wasteful.

Lan worked as a portfolio manager and was considered a great investor, one of the best in the firm, and gifted at working with clients whom she often traveled to visit. But during a review her boss told her, “You’re not integrated enough into the office culture. You need to spend more time in the office so other people see you here—you’re not in the football pool, you don’t hang around and shoot the shit.”

“But I try to be efficient—that’s why I work through lunch—so I can get home to see my kids,” she told them. His response: Act like everyone else. “We want you here,” Lan’s boss said, “but you won’t get promoted unless you spend more time being visible.”

“The guys in my department decided that our weekly divisional meeting should be at 7 a.m.,” says Linda, the medical professor. “That was a huge hardship,” Linda recalls. “I could not do the morning routine getting the kids ready for school. I showed up without complaint, but it was really annoying. The meeting took an hour and a half but had only about twenty minutes of substance. Everyone else in the meeting was male and it was sort of their breakfast club—they were having a grand old time.” If Linda’s male colleagues had been doing their half at home, would things have been different?

Building teamwork does take face-to-face interaction and that does take time. Lan and Linda (and working parents generally) just want
success does not require 24/7

some rigor around how hours are used when they cut into valuable family time: 8 a.m. (vs. 7 a.m.) meetings, business lunches (instead of dinners), efficient (rather than inefficient) off-sites. Small tweaks make a big difference. If we can spot the agendas (displays of dominance, conformity, and machismo) hiding in 24/7, it’s easier to uproot them.

CAUTION:
Men at Work

“If women can’t work 24/7, they just shouldn’t do important jobs,” a male business school student said to us. “I’m on the road twenty nights a month,” one father told us. “I’m the go-to guy for my boss. It’s a real man’s job.” When did lots of hours and travel become a marker for manliness? Twenty-four/seven has gotten tangled up with masculinity in an odd way. How many moms do you know who boast about their long work hours? Some men worry that anything less than all-the-time work calls into question more than their job commitment. “I was at Starbucks at 8:30 getting my preschooler some milk before drop-off. I saw an important guy I know and I was really embarrassed,” another dad told us, “like, what’s he going to think of me, hanging out with my kid when other guys are already in the office?”

The good news: What’s macho changes all the time. Two hundred years ago, the world’s most powerful men expressed their manhood by wearing lace and stockings. The sooner we can help men see 24/7 as an unfortunate male fad, the sooner we’ll have more practical talk about how to take fat out of the workday.

Eighty percent of mothers in our survey agreed with this statement: “Men think success requires that they appear to prioritize work over family.” On a family vacation, one working mom told her husband, “‘You know, they’ll survive if you don’t check e-mail every two hours.’ But he looked offended, like I was implying he wasn’t important if he wasn’t needed all the time.” Another woman said her husband wants to be more involved with the kids but “he thinks he’d be looked down on, he worries he’d look like a failure if he weren’t seen at work on weekends.”
When you question the usefulness of working long hours, some men get quite emotional. Sharon was telling a thirtysomething couple about the research on efficiency she'd read for this book. The wife asked what Sharon planned to do in her next job. Before Sharon could answer, the husband said, “Well, with a work ethic like Sharon’s, who’d hire her?” Seeing she’d stepped on a raw nerve, Sharon resisted the urge to compare her many years of twelve-plus-hour days with the more limited demands of this man’s job. It’s hard not to be proud of our hard work and harder still when someone infers our sacrifices sometimes just aren’t needed. But we can rise above this knee-jerk reaction, and some far-sighted men are joining women and leading the way.

The founder of a fast-growing, publicly traded firm strictly limits business travel. He sees that often you can do as much business over the phone as in a face-to-face meeting. A lot of business trips are, well, boondoggles and a (not terribly productive) way of keeping score. “I used to be proud of working all the time,” says Craig, the CEO of a technology firm. “Now, I feel like a loser if I’m in the office past 7.” Or as another dad, a successful investor, told us: “I don’t know why some men feel they have to work eighty hours a week to deserve their pay. They must have low self-esteem.”

What sane man would tell his kids “My job is more important than you”? Yet that’s basically what 24/7 machismo requires. When airline miles and hours logged are used as measures of masculinity, cutting back on them feels harder than it should. We’ll have more rational talk about what’s really needed to do a job well when we acknowledge that 24/7 weakens men in their most manly of roles—fatherhood.

The cult of 24/7—how we got sucked in

During the post–World War II boom years, when lucky homemakers were given “modern conveniences” like dishwashers and vacuum cleaners, the idea was that women would spend less time on housework. A self-cleaning oven! A washer and dryer! Yet, in 1960, women spent just as much time on housework as they did in 1920. Now that
moms could do laundry faster, the family bought more clothes and thought less about getting them dirty. Electric irons and fancy vacuums failed to net mothers more spare time because standards were raised—more was expected.

We know the clean-versus-dirty-house pendulum has now swung back in favor of the dust bunnies—we’re spending less time on tile grout and more on our kids. Several decades into household gadgets, we finally realize they can give us something more valuable: a little more time with our families. The same thing needs to happen at work. We have reduced paper memos, but they’ve metastasized into thousands of e-mails. Mobile phones, laptops, and BlackBerrys have become blankies for grown-ups. But how are we doing as the most wired (and tired) generation yet?

All these devices give us a world where “the marginal cost of interaction is falling toward zero,” says Lowell Bryan, a partner at McKinsey and Company, the consulting giant. “The volume of interactions is headed toward infinity and infinity’s winning.”

We all have our entries for the Pointless Meeting Hall of Fame, but have you ever calculated the hours you’ve spent in them? In 2005, Microsoft surveyed thirty-eight thousand workers in two hundred countries. The average worker spent nearly six hours a week in meetings, and rated 71 percent of those meetings as unproductive. That’s veering toward an entire weekday taken up with useless activity.

Another study found that 80 percent of top management talent is spent on work that represents less than 20 percent of the organization’s long-term value. McKinsey’s Bryan points out that many jobs are actually undoable if we expect people to participate in all their meetings, and respond to all their calls and e-mail. “We have created jobs that are literally impossible,” says Bryan. “The human cost is profound and the opportunity cost is also great in terms of organizational effectiveness.”

**TAMING THE TIME BEAST**

It’s hard to change how you work if you don’t believe there’s another way to do well. At work, many women see the listed price (all or nothing)
and think that’s what you have to pay, that it’s nonnegotiable. “I wanted to be great at my job and the only way to be great was work all the time—so I quit,” one woman told us.

Part of the problem may be finding the right job for you—where you can excel efficiently. “Too many people don’t ask themselves what their strengths really are, so they get into jobs that are wrong for them,” says Laura, who raised two kids while serving in senior roles at big firms. “There’s a whole set of stuff I’m really bad at. But if you do what you’re really good at, people will recognize your talents and you’ll get the respect on your terms.”

Another factor may be that many women (like men) see long hours as a sign of character. In the Harvard Business Review, a recent study of “extreme jobs” showed that women get the same high from throwing themselves into jobs as men do. You feel needed (ten voice mails while you were in your morning meeting), you fit in (remember high school, when you wore the same shoes as everyone else?), you feel like you are achieving something (exactly what you are achieving is sometimes unclear, but you’re too pooped to notice). Giving it your “all” is the stuff of movies; anything less seems B-team.

It’s hard to shut that worry out, especially if you kept 24/7 hours in your pre-kid life. But, as Carol Muller of MentorNet points out, “Guilt is a useless emotion. It keeps us from setting boundaries and makes us worry needlessly if we do. Women have not been in the workplace in large numbers for long enough for there to be lots of good role models. But if you pay attention to the work habits of both men and women you can find some answers. Women tend to focus on the man who works eighty hours a week because we assume that his way is the only way to be productive. We often fail to notice there are some equally successful men who actually have a life and spend it with their families.” And they don’t make a big deal out of carving out the time—they just do it. We should, too.

Carmen, the internist, says that she’s learned a lot from her husband’s guilt-free work style. “His self-preservation instinct is much better. He says ‘no’ and nothing bad happens... It is so easy to get sucked into thinking you have to do everything to be successful. No
Success Does Not Require 24/7

one tells you how to say no—how to stop throwing yourself in front of the bus.”

“All the moms in my group leave at 5:30. I keep shorter hours and I get my job done,” says Darcie, the ice-cream executive. “But it’s an internal struggle for me. How much do I have to worry about showing my face? I still wrestle with that. My husband doesn’t have this problem. He gets his work done and he’s totally comfortable with leaving early to coach our kid’s soccer game.”

The journey may be (a bit) longer, but you’ll get there

If you do your job, and you do it well, you will still get ahead even if you don’t get to the office at dawn and stay until your wastebasket is emptied. Your own biggest enemy may not be your boss, your meeting schedule, or the pinging sound of your e-mail inbox. Instead, it may be the little voice you’re hearing that warns you’ll be penalized for going against the grain—you know, pursuing that radical wish to see your kids for dinner.

When (and if) there is a cost to leaving on time or cutting your hours, it’s worth it. Just ask the experts—the parents who’ve been successful doing these things.

“It does have a cost,” says Henry, a law partner who decided to work a four-day week when his child was small. “The peace of mind you get from doing things like everyone else.” But, he adds, “It was the most wonderful decision I ever made. It gave me the magic of being with our daughter and being more involved than most men get to be.” (His wife rearranged her schedule to work four days, too.) Senior colleagues—men—took him aside and said, “You’re doing the right thing. The rest of us will lie on our deathbeds wondering why we spent so much time in the office.” Decades later, Henry heads a practice for his large firm.

You may worry that in addition to being viewed as “different,” you’ll also get docked on the promotion and salary front. But actually, while you may pay a small price, in the end things can even out—if you stay focused on the goal and continue to perform. Economist Robert Drago at Pennsylvania State University surveyed over 4,188 academics
at 507 colleges and universities to explore the costs of using family-friendly policies (and signaling a commitment to family). How much did family-oriented academics pay in career terms? About one year on the tenure clock—on average, these people got their professorships about one year after peers who did not make use of these policies. The parents we’ve met who readjusted their hours say the same: The price for saying no to 24/7 is surprisingly small and often negligible.18

Shirley Tilghman, now president of Princeton University, has had a long career as a pioneering research scientist in the field of molecular biology. Her work at the National Institutes of Health on the cloning of the first mammalian gene is considered groundbreaking, and she’s made numerous important discoveries in the fields of human genetics and biochemistry. She is also a mother of two now-grown children, whom she raised while working hard to advance in a field where few women make it to the top levels. Tilghman says she avoided late-night “macho” labs, noting that the extra hours on the job “are mostly spent socializing.”19

“I chose to go to a great company but not one with an eighty-hour week,” says Laura, who started her career at IBM and later ran several start-ups. “I said, ‘Okay, I’m gonna have my children, and I’m going to try to build my management credentials in an environment that would be conducive to making that possible.’” Laura notes that a lot of her peers took Wall Street jobs but found that “business has a macho culture that’s not even productive. But that’s not the culture in every place. If you know that there are better cultures out there, you can make a point of looking for a culture where you can have a family and succeed.”

“I took a financial hit for cutting back my hours, but I thought it was fair and worth it,” says Don (another law partner), who lowered his hours by about 25 percent after his last child was born. “I really wanted to get home by 6:30 p.m. so I could read to her.” Don later took his hours back up to the normal range at his firm. “Now, I probably work ten percent less than I did before we had kids,” but he says he’s still regarded as a high performer. How much more smoothly would your week go with just a 10 percent margin of added time? A
nice picture? According to one Catalyst study, dual-career couples don’t want radically less time on the job—they just need a few extra hours per week to get things in order.

“I have always seen work as a hairy monster at my front door,” says Henry, the lawyer who worked a four-day week. He loves his job, but he says, “You have to slam the door to keep it out. Lots of people don’t see it that way. They’re slaves to the hairy monster. They think, ‘I can’t say no or I’ll get fired.’ That is the unexamined attitude that keeps people from controlling their work.”

Do the math: pro-parent is pro-profit

There are jobs that need huge numbers of hours (at least for a time): being CEO, launching a product, running for office, stopping a forest fire, saving a patient. In some jobs, you get more money or promotions the longer you work. But, interestingly, some of the country’s most successful law firms—who compete on “billable hours”—are on the cutting edge of getting hours under control. Paradoxically, it’s all about profit.

Lawyers are doing better math than most of corporate America and quantifying just how much it costs when women who are active parents quit. And there is good reason for that. Young lawyers are leaving firms in record numbers—more than 75 percent of associates quit within five years, and work hours lead the list of complaints.20

What does this cost? The price is $1.5 million for every ten declarations of “I quit”—and that’s the low estimate. Experts say turnover costs one to two times the quitting person’s salary. Bosses, peers, administrators—they all drop what they’re doing to take over work that’s left undone, find a replacement, and scramble to figure out what knowledge and contacts are walking out the door.21

Women are now 70 percent of all CPAs so there’s no lack of supply, but allowing women to take half the big-firm leadership spots will take an attitude shift. In her book Mass Career Customization, Cathy Benko says we need to mainstream the idea that careers can move forward in many ways—not just the single way that leaves scarce time for family. Benko, vice chairman and chief talent officer of Deloitte, LLP, points
out that people who use flexible work arrangements suffer some: Only half think these arrangements will work and all say they have no idea how working differently will alter their promotion track. “We need to replace the career ladder metaphor with a career lattice—where, from time to time, you take a step sideways but don’t fall off the structure entirely.”

Change comes slowly, and a lot of managers start by saying, “Wow, we can’t do that,” Benko told us. “But this is becoming a cross-gender issue. Some of the Boomer-age male partners at Deloitte have said to me: ‘I want this, too.’ So I think a lot of people, men and women, want to be able to explore dialing down and dialing back up. If we can mass-customize M&Ms, why not careers?”

“MODIFIED HOURS”? MORE MOMS AT THE TOP

George is a senior partner at a large midwestern law firm that has made impressive gains retaining talented female lawyers. At George’s firm, women have been roughly half the new hires for many years. But the ratio of women fell to 29 percent at the senior associate level, the group considered for partner. And the share of female equity partners, as in many large law firms, seemed stuck around 13 percent. “Two-thirds of Phi Beta Kappa are now women,” George said. “Women are half of the law school students. We see this as a matter of institutional survival. We want the biggest brains and women represent the largest part of the talent pool. Women comprise fifty-two percent of our senior associates—they are sticking around in dramatically higher numbers. And the ratio of women in the partnership is edging up, too—now eighteen percent.

“We had tried a lot of things before that had not worked,” said George. “We realized we needed to get very granular, to figure out baby steps that would actually work.” For concrete advice, the firm looked to the Project for Attorney Retention (led by Joan Williams, the University of California law professor). The biggest change: a “modified hours” program. The firm calculates that attorneys can be profitable working at 75 percent of “standard” hours. So “modified hours” lawyers
Success Does Not Require 24/7

pick a percentage down to that floor for a two-year, renewable period. Many partners feared that there would be a rush of lawyers opting for shorter hours. But four years into it, fewer than 5 percent of the firm’s attorneys have chosen modified hours. They include some female partners and one man. As George says, “It has had a disproportionate effect on the number of women who are choosing to stay. They now know ‘if I need it, it’s there.’ ”

What about the fear that people working different schedules are a big administrative burden? “That’s crap and wrong,” says George. “One of our colleagues said, ‘Hey, I need my associates working on my case one hundred fifty percent of the time,’ but then another male partner pointed out, ‘None of us have any associate working for us full time—each associate works with multiple partners so actually all of our associates work part time from the perspective of any one case.’ ” Lawyers with modified hours know there will be times they have to surge—to work more than their percentage on an important case or to meet a tight deadline—but that they will get those hours back. Seeing how lack of clarity derails many retention efforts, the firm put out FAQs and formulas to make the program transparent. “We did not want to leave this program to the vagaries of the judgment of an individual office manager,” says George. Instead, two active partners oversee applications and make sure managers across the practice are effective using the program to keep talent at the firm.

The goal itself is not reduced hours. The goal is to have a critical mass of women partners in a reasonable period of time, to get women evenly distributed across the partnership so that women’s issues are institutionalized as firm issues. “Making these programs work is a matter of management discipline,” says George. “The question is how you enforce discipline in your top management.” Beyond modified hours, George’s partners have taken a number of other steps, like placing women in key governance positions—leadership of practice areas, business cultivation, the compensation committee (female retention impacts partner pay). “We think it’s possible that the leadership of our firm could be forty percent women in ten years,” says George. Can your employer say the same?
FOCUS THEIR EYES ON YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS— NOT YOUR HOURS

How do they do it, these people who win in defiance of round-the-clock work demands? Even Jack Welch, GE’s former CEO, concedes, “Most bosses are perfectly willing to accommodate work/life balance challenges if you have earned it with performance. The key word here is if.” MentorNet’s Carol Muller puts it another way: “Many jobs are really demanding but you deserve to be evaluated on what you accomplished, not how many hours you were behind a desk. When you know your job well, you find efficiencies and reap the gains. You get to decide whether you turn that gain into more money or more time.”

“I don’t sit quietly and do e-mails when I come in to the office. I use that time for things that need to happen face-to-face,” says Susan, the engineer who parlayed her long tenure at her firm into the right to work from home three days a week. “I definitely spend time managing my manager—letting him know what I’m doing and what my results are. But what it really comes down to is getting good products out on time and on budget.”

A woman who’d worked full time for a large security firm decided she wanted to work four days a week when she had children. Her boss didn’t like the idea though she’d been a strong performer for many years. “I’ll make you the same money in four days as I did in five. If that’s not true, the deal is off,” she told him. Outperforming her peers in fewer hours, she proved her point and her boss got what he wanted.

Producing a lot gives you leverage to work differently—so does producing something unique. So specialize. An employment lawyer we talked to made herself an expert on an obscure part of the federal code. She’s the go-to person for that at her firm, and her knowledge brings in a lot of business. She’d be hard to replace and her partners know it. So she gets latitude to do her work when and where she wants. A 2006 study of women on Wall Street found that successful women were those who were expert in a specific technical niche—their results were quantifiable and clearly attributable to them.22

If you’re the only person who still knows how your firm’s creaky accounting system works, if you’re the one who got your nonprofit the
biggest grants, you have unique value, and you can call more of your own shots.

How confidence beats the clock

When we are young, we think we’re doing a good job if we do exactly what we’re told. A lot of people never graduate from that way of thinking. Your job is to do what’s needed, which is often different from doing what’s asked for. But you have to take the risk of making those judgments yourself.

Many 50/50 dads told us stories showing how a little gumption has always gone a long way. Ed, a successful physician, worked in a large practice when his children were young. “When the kids were in preschool, we had a car pool and, several days a week, I picked up. Back in the 1970s, all the other drivers were women—I was the only man,” says Ed. “I’d race out of my office at eleven-thirty, get the kids home, and be back downtown at one. I did this for four years and I was never late for the kids and never late back to the office. I never made a point of saying what I was doing and no one asked. I found it amusing and was proud of the fact I was able to do it.”

Shelly was an associate at a large law firm for most of her career. When a judge said, “I need this brief tomorrow,” Shelly had been trained to say “Absolutely.” The result: She and her colleagues would toil all night to meet the deadline. At her new, smaller firm, she saw her partners would simply say, “Your honor, we need five days.” The judge would agree, clients were fine—and her firm was just as profitable. “When you convey to your clients that you are 24/7, you train them to abuse your time,” says Shelly.

No matter where you work, you can do this, too—it just takes courage. As one working mom said to us, “If I’m asked to do a meeting that conflicts with something important at home, I simply say, ‘We’re not available then. How about Tuesday?’” (Gumption alert: Listen to your male colleagues—how do you think they find so much time for midweek golf?)

Vicki, a salesperson, told us this: “When I was more junior, I did whatever my customers asked. I thought I was doing a good job for...
them by just hopping to it. But then you realize that clients, people in general, aren’t good at telling you what they really need. If you want to be great in sales, you have to probe, to figure out what’s really key for the customer and what’s not. That often gives you a chance to give a better result with more control over how and when you work.”

“I get as much done as a person working fifty-five hours a week,” says Meg, who runs a strategy team for a Fortune 500 company on about ten hours less than that. “I schedule twenty-minute meetings. People know that they have to be quick because I’m on to the next thing when time’s up.” When others ask her to come to their meetings, she asks them to articulate their goals for the meeting and then asks, “Do I really need to be there?”

“I move to end meetings. I keep things short. I drive for conclusions and demand clarity. ‘By when will you have that finished? Let’s decide now,’” another working mom told us. “Before I’d let things work themselves out. I don’t have time for that now.”

“Become dispensable,” advises Robin Wolaner, who ran several businesses at Time Warner. In her book Naked in the Boardroom, Wolaner writes, “At some point in [your] career or particular job, if you have to work a lot of hours either you don’t know how to delegate or you are in a business that’s not healthy enough.”

Use your clout to change the culture

Trish had been working only a few years when she went part time, rising steadily through a tough organization. Trish says, “People on my team get different kinds of opportunities working with me. When I’m out on Fridays, I let them take over and junior folks get much more exposure than they would working for someone else.

“Oh, I had no idea you worked part time,” other managers here would say to me—they were shocked. I had a high-profile job and the perception is that you can’t do part time in a job like mine. But now that’s changing,” says Trish, who has also helped a number of her direct reports go part time. “It costs a lot when people who have expertise leave. You go for months trying to hire someone, and then it takes frankly six months to get the new person up to speed and adding
value. Turnover at our company is about eighteen percent, which is in line with our industry. In my group, attrition is less than five percent. You gain more than you lose when you let people work part time. In my experience, someone working and getting paid eighty percent is usually producing about ninety percent as much as their full-time peers—they tend to be high performers and very effective with their time.”

“If you are a manager and you talk about balance but you don’t do it yourself, you don’t have a lot of credibility,” says Meg, who leaves at 5:15 each day. “I manage fourteen employees and I’ve recruited a lot of great people to my team. Women really like it,” she says of her commitment to work efficiently so that she—and her team—can leave on time, “and most of them aren’t even married. Men are surprisingly admiring of it.”

Susan has led successful engineering teams for almost two decades. “I have a top-performing team because it’s been steady for years—no one has left voluntarily for a very long time.” Why? “People like working for me. When there’s a new task, I ask myself, ‘Does it really have to be done? Is there someone else that can do it?’ I think there are win–wins—something’s not a good use of my time but it’s a great growth opportunity for someone else in the company. If you always ask yourself, ‘How can I have the biggest impact on the company in the most efficient way?’—that’s a valuable question for every employee to ask whether they are parents or not.”

Enlist the real men: How active dads turn the tables on 24/7

“A lot of people talking about family values are the same guys running the companies that make valuing families virtually impossible,” says Doug, the psychiatry professor. Worse, as a female executive points out, “A lot of senior men make such a wreck of their families they don’t even want to go home. And they dictate the rules to the rest of us who want to do right by our kids.”

If work were a democracy, the 24/7 mess makers would be voted out of office. Dual-career homes are now the single largest group of
families in the workplace. Factor in single-parent families and you have most of the labor force. In a referendum, pro-parent reforms would win in a landslide.

We can't evict the 24/7-ites by recall, but we can populate leadership with people more like ourselves: moms who are fully engaged at work and dads who are fully engaged at home. When there are enough of us speaking up together, we can build a new model of productivity and help people who represent us move higher, or we can move into management ourselves. "Revolution needs to start from the top," says MIT professor Lotte Bailyn, a pioneer in work/life research and author of Breaking the Mold. "If those with the most power—both men and women—demand change, organizations and social institutions will have to respond, for the benefit of all."

In 2000, a study polled over one thousand key executives at big companies like Citigroup, Marriott, and Dow Chemical to learn about work/life patterns and success. All respondents were at the top of their firm, reporting directly to the CEO or to the CEO's direct reports. "How many times in the last year have you put work before family or family before work?" the survey asked. Turns out, 32 percent of these hard chargers give family life equal priority with commitments at work—they are not work-centric or home-centric. They are "dual-centric."

Who are these leaders who prioritize family equally with their work? "Dual-centric people were as likely to be men as women," says Ellen Galinsky, who developed the study. "They work five hours fewer per week. They are more likely to take full vacations." Most surprising: Dual-centric executives feel most successful in their careers (more than even work-focused men).

"A lot of people are supportive of family in theory but they've never done any of this themselves so they don't know the subtlety," says Carol, who worked at the same big accounting firm as her husband, Eric, while their kids were young. "Eric was actively there doing his part at home, rather than just talking about it, even when he had a leadership role in his practice," says Carol. Eric not only set a better tone in the group he ran, he also helped Carol triage her own work-
load. “When I was managing partner, I would say yes to too much. Eric was great at helping me say no,” Carol recalls. “I would overcommit and Eric would say ‘you need to say yes to half and no to half.’”

In 2007, Gary Newman and Dana Walden became chairmen of Twentieth Century Fox Television (part of Rupert Murdoch’s famously pro-profit NewsCorporation). Newman and Walden had served together as presidents of the studio for a decade, thanks to a boss who saw that two (complementary) minds were better than one. Sharing this top job made Newman and Walden far more productive—and more available to their respective families. When Walden’s child broke an arm, she could get to the emergency room and let Newman take over for the day. “I have a greater freedom,” Newman said, “to be a participant in life.”

Working full bore no longer guarantees a job-for-life, a raise, a bigger bonus, or a promotion. It does guarantee that a father won’t see his family much. As more working moms find ways to stay in the workforce, and as more dads get hooked on the benefits of being equal parents, we can stop viewing 24/7 as the path to glory and see it for what it is: a big waste of time.

The 24/7 chink: A weakness you should exploit

The hairy monster that is 24/7 has one weakness: It needs warm bodies to stay alive. You and your spouse can choose to feed the beast—or starve it. “It’s getting harder to populate our jobs with only workaholics,” says one high-level executive who cut back his hours for a while when his kids were young. “I talk to clients all over the country—whether they are plant managers or executives, people in mainstream America are running around like crazy and have no time to see their families. At some point, people say ‘enough.’”

In 2001, Neil Patterson, CEO of a software firm called Cerner, sent a scathing e-mail to his managers: “The parking lot is sparsely used at 8 a.m.; likewise at 5 p.m. . . . NEVER in my career have I allowed a team which worked for me to think they had a 40-hour job. I have allowed you to create a culture which is permitting this. NO LONGER . . .”
Patterson warned that the parking lot would be his gauge, that it was to be “substantially full” on weekdays at 7:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. As for Saturdays, he expected it to be half full.

Someone leaked the e-mail to the press and Cerner’s stock tanked. Investors saw Patterson’s call for longer hours as what it was: a weak form of management and a sign there might be other trouble at the firm. You may not be ready to blow the whistle like the Cerner employee who hit “forward,” but recognize that you—and your husband—can advance the ball by bringing 50/50 to work with you (and taking it home again, at a reasonable hour).28

“That’s what the older men at my lab said ten years ago when the young men started going home to their families,” says Carla, a mother of grown children who leads a medical research team at a large institute. “The young men I work with have wives who expect them to share—to take care of the kids and the meal planning.”

Carla’s male peers grumbled a lot. “But they couldn’t do much about it because this was true of virtually all our young people—men or women,” Carla explained. “I’d say to these men, ‘Look, I have kids and this is what they’re going through, too. The old days aren’t coming back.’ And that’s a good thing.”

A better workplace: It all starts at home

When you and your spouse are both in charge of making money and caring for your kids, you find the confidence to tame the hairy work monster. You’ll give each other a great gift: perspective. Men are less likely to get swept away by the 24/7 storm when a working spouse provides ballast. When you share responsibility with your spouse, patterns emerge that stop that monster in its tracks, because you simply can’t do 50/50 and work 24/7.