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TITLE: Go home. Get outa here. Spend some family time

AUTHOR: Josh Fear

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In a classic Looney Tunes cartoon of the 1950s, Ralph E. Wolf and Sam Sheepdog would clock on at the same time every day at the sheep meadow. When their shift ended, Ralph would stop trying to abduct Sam's precious sheep and they would both clock off again. Their work done for the day, Ralph and Sam would exchange pleasant chit chat and trot home.

If this kind of thing seems quaint today, perhaps it is because the boundaries between work and life are increasingly blurred. Many of us don't only do our jobs, we are our jobs – regardless of what time it is or where we happen to be.

Australians work more than two billion hours of unpaid overtime each year. This prompted The Australia Institute to launch national Go Home On Time Day in 2009. Now in its third year, the aim of the day is to raise awareness of the extent of overwork in Australia and the serious health and social consequences it can have.

For employees who do not have the power to insist on clear boundaries between work and life, the hyper-connectivity which characterises contemporary work practices can be a curse rather than a blessing. For these people, "free time" is in fact "polluted time" which cannot be used as it otherwise would.

Polluted time could be described as those periods in which work pressures or commitments prevent someone from enjoying or otherwise making the most of their non-work time. Time can be polluted by needing to do work tasks outside of normal working hours, being on call to come into work if necessary, or simply thinking about work to the extent that affects the way free time is used or experienced.

Polluted time is one of the many consequences of a labour market which has become increasingly "flexible" over the past few decades. All too often, the benefits of such flexibility have flowed to employers, while employees see less flexibility than they would like.

In the modern, technology-driven work environment, it is now possible for managers to dictate what employees do when they are outside the workplace as well as in it. These new demands on non-work time represent a form of soft control over workers and a new frontier

in unpaid overtime. They also inevitably have negative consequences for individual and family wellbeing.

Because employers undoubtedly reap the dividends of the extra work done outside the workplace, they can therefore be disinclined to intervene. Meanwhile, employees sometimes work more than required to stake a claim to future benefits like a pay rise or promotion (or maybe just to keep their job).

When the tendency to work too much is combined with relentless connectivity, the use of technology can get out of hand. In theory, technology is supposed to make workers more efficient and productive. In practice, it may in fact often do precisely the opposite. Rather than workers using these new tools to do their jobs more effectively, they are now increasingly beholden to those very tools.

Just because technology has made work easier in certain respects does not mean that its effects have been consistently beneficial. While the marketing and advertising of IT products tends to focus on the working utopia that their purchase will usher in, in reality the use of smartphones, laptop computers and the like can actually add to the workload of many workers by putting them perpetually “on the grid” and habituating them to a new and more demanding lifestyle.

Recent research conducted by The Australia Institute demonstrates how widespread time pollution is. Survey results suggest that in a workforce of 11.4 million people, some 6.8 million workers experience some degree of time pollution in any given week, while 1.75 million workers regularly have their free time polluted by work demands. Polluted time is an affliction that is more likely to be experienced by people on middle and higher incomes – that is, people in skilled jobs.

Some workers may have made a conscious decision to allow their free time to be interrupted in return for a higher wage (or extra pay for being on call), while some may simply enjoy their jobs so much that they don't mind spending more time working than they need to.

For others, however, working during evenings or on weekends may be less a matter of choice than necessity – perhaps because it is expected by their manager or in their vocation, or because certain tasks can only be carried out by them. Or maybe there is simply too much work to be done.

While employers often insist on limiting personal use of technology at work, they also make explicit or implicit demands on their employees' free time by providing them with those very same technologies for use outside the workplace. This is a fast track to low morale and high staff turnover.

For their part, workers should beware of bosses bearing gifts. Although hi-tech gadgets are attractive, in a work context they often come with conditions attached.

Josh Fear is Deputy Director of The Australia Institute and author of [Polluted time: Blurring the boundaries between work and life](#), available to download at www.tai.org.au