



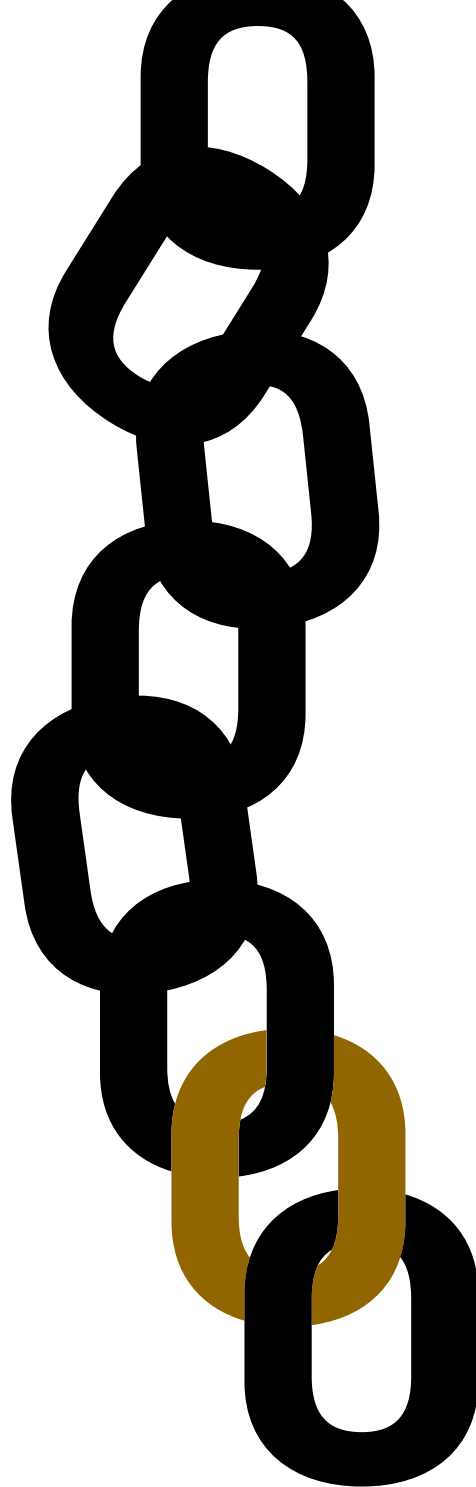


are

you

a

workaholic?



THE TERM WORKAHOLIC USED TO BE RESERVED FOR OUTLIERS, BUT NOW TOILING
TIRELESSLY AND AFTER HOURS HAS BECOME THE NEW NORMAL, THANKS TO CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY
AND CAREER INSECURITY. AS RESEARCH SHOWS THAT WORKAHOLISM IS A REAL ADDICTION
WITH DIRE IMPLICATIONS AND NO EASY REMEDY, IT'S TIME TO ASK:
ARE WE ALL WORKING OURSELVES TO DEATH?

BY TOM FOSTER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW BETTLES

AT LEAST THREE DAYS A WEEK, BRENDAN GAHAN wakes to his alarm at 3 A.M., opens his laptop, and starts “pounding coffee,” he says, as he spends the next four hours creating a presentation or developing a strategy for one of his clients. At seven, he’ll “try and do something to get moving around, maybe go for a run,” and “come back, shower, and power through the rest of the day and do as much work as possible.” A YouTube marketing consultant whose clientele includes major brands like Bud Light and Mountain Dew, Gahan is based in Los Angeles, but he spends weeks at a time on the road, office-squatting in New York City or attending conferences in the Bay Area, Austin, and Europe. He is never alone in bed—his laptop and phone are always on the mattress beside him. He puts in at least one full day’s work on the weekend, often two, sneaking laptop time between unavoidable social commitments. He drinks up to eight cups of coffee in a day, and he’s working on curbing his Red Bull habit—but he has a bigger addiction to battle.

Gahan is, by his own admission, a workaholic. According to Bryan Robinson, a psychotherapist, a professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the author of the book *Chained to the Desk*, 20 to 25 percent of Americans are workaholics. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the bible of mental diagnoses, doesn’t recognize it as a distinct condition (it’s considered a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder), but Robinson, who provides private therapy for those who struggle with work addiction, defines it as “the process of overworking, the inability to stop, and the inability to bring balance to your life.”

Of Gahan’s routine, Robinson says, “I hear about that kind of schedule a lot. One of my clients, who works 16 hours a day, six days a week, has crying jags on the one day he takes off. His wife sits with him, and he just cries. He can’t put his finger on what it is, but of course it’s because all he’s doing is working.”

Gahan isn’t prone to tearful breakdowns, but then he often doesn’t have a shoulder to cry on. “Pretty much every girl I’ve dated has ended up frustrated that I spend the majority of my time working and prioritize it over her,” he says. “I’m trying not to sound like a psychopath here, but why would I break that momentum to go spend time hanging out with her?”

According to Robinson’s research, marriages with at least one workaholic partner are 40 percent more likely to end in divorce. Another recent study showed that overworkers are as much as 80 percent more likely to develop heart disease. And “it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that working around the clock leads to poor exercise and eating habits,” Robinson says.

From the outside, the signs of work addiction—frenetic pace, outsize ambition, ceaseless drive—look like the building blocks of success rather than the symptoms of a disease that, in addition to ruining your relationships and health, can destroy (God forbid) your career. Propelled by their compulsion and further stoked by a combination of 24-7 connectivity and career uncertainty,



WHERE DO YOU FALL ON THE WORK-ADDICTION SPECTRUM?

Test yourself with this quiz, based on the Bergen Work Addiction Scale: For each of the following statements that apply to you, give yourself one point, then see how at risk you are.

- ⊙ You regularly cancel plans to work out, meet friends, or spend time with family when your office responsibilities start piling up.
- ⊙ When you lie in bed at night, your thoughts inevitably drift toward the next day’s tasks.
- ⊙ When people ask, “What’s new?” you have trouble responding with anything that doesn’t pertain to work.
- ⊙ If you’re feeling especially anxious or depressed, work provides a welcome distraction from whatever’s bothering you.

RESULTS: IF YOU SCORED . . . 12 POINTS

42 | Percentage of workers who have changed jobs because of stress, according to a survey by Monster.com

DIMINISHING RETURNS

A STUDY BY BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE CONCLUDED THAT WHILE A BURST OF INCREASED HOURS CAN ENHANCE WORK OUTPUT IN THE SHORT TERM, LONG HOURS WILL EVENTUALLY DECREASE PRODUCTIVITY. RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT TWO MONTHS OF 60-HOUR WEEKS PRODUCED NO MORE WORK THAN 40-HOUR WEEKS WOULD HAVE, WHILE AN 80-HOUR WORK-WEEK CAUSED BURNOUT IN LESS THAN A MONTH.

addicts enter a downward spiral of behavior, according to research by Gayle Porter, a Rutgers University business-school professor. As coworkers learn to avoid workaholics, the addicts’ workloads increase. Ultimately, the organization’s results suffer and office morale is poisoned. “I’ve treated many people over the years who’ve been fired because of their workaholism,” Robinson says. “They bring in staff on weekends and push them to work like they do, thinking upper management is going to like that.” What they get instead are a bunch of bitter coworkers—and their own job security suffers.

Brad Klontz, a financial psychologist at Kansas State University, has found that workaholics tend to equate their self-worth with their net worth. That’s why, he says, “when they get fired, they can become suicidal. They’ve lost their whole identity.”

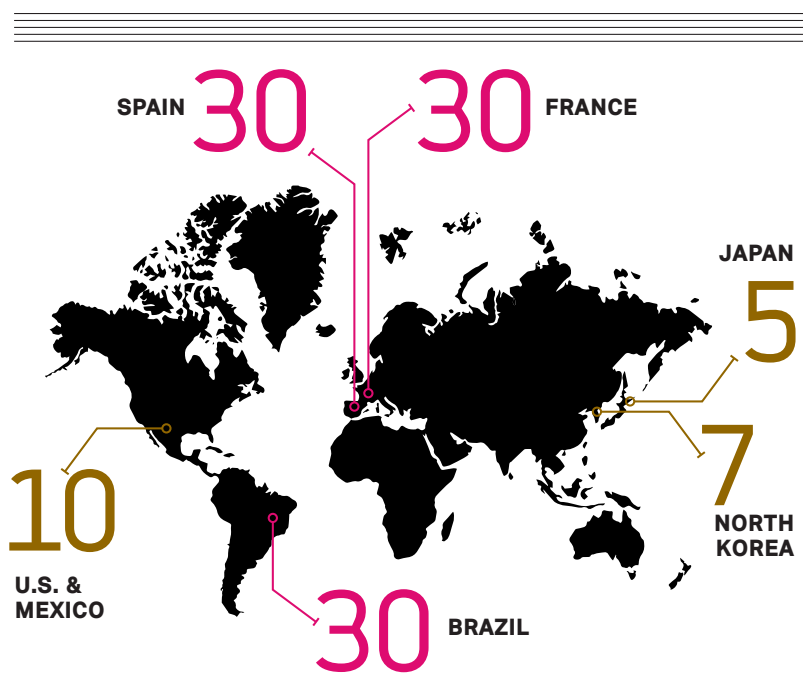
FOR THOSE OF YOU KEEPING SCORE AT HOME, YOUR relentless quest to succeed in the workplace could leave you jobless, dumped, and dead. Still not convinced that workaholism is real? Just ask the Japanese.

In Japan, where people take an average of five vacation days a year (it’s ten in the U.S.), there is a word for death by overwork. *Karoshi* is a legally accepted phenomenon—people just dropping dead at their desks, their hearts calling it quits—and companies can be held liable and required to pay damages to the families of victims. An estimated 1,000 people a year die of *karoshi* in Japan, some in their thirties. Meanwhile, suicide is the leading cause of death among men aged 20 to 44, and studies have estimated that among those suicides that were work-related, overwork was the most common reason. In China, the comparable term is *guolaosi*, and the statistical impact is even more staggering—according to one estimate, overwork kills 600,000 Chinese each year.

Without an equivalent word for *karoshi* or *guolaosi* in English, when an American workaholic drops dead of a heart attack or a stroke, the cause is considered just that—a heart attack or a stroke. The reality is more sinister. Like alcoholics, workaholics can develop a chemical dependency. The sympathetic nervous system creates a stress response that leads the body to secrete adrenaline, cortisol, and other hormones. The result is a high that’s

- When you plan to spend another half-hour at the office, you often find yourself staying several hours instead.
- You're happiest when you're staying late to work on an exciting project.
- As you're beginning a large team project, you often take on more tasks, or tougher tasks, believing that others might not complete them as well.
- You've looked at a breakup as a great opportunity to focus on your career.
- You close out each year with a surplus of vacation days.
- Before leaving the office for a day off, you remind all your coworkers that you are "totally available on e-mail whenever you need me," then give them your cell number, just in case.
- If you haven't received an important work e-mail two days into your vacation, you start feeling panicked and passed-over.
- You've been told that your attitude in the office can be aggressive or off-putting.
- As your career has progressed, you've tightened up your circle of friends to include only those who understand your rigorous schedule.
- You've changed to an ostensibly less stressful job but find yourself back in the rat race, as
- it's easy to outshine your new, laid-back coworkers.
- You regularly log fewer than seven hours of sleep a night—because you are working late or start your evening plans late because of being on the clock.

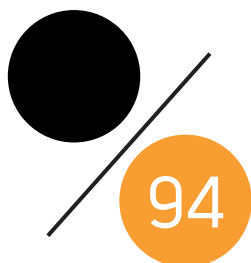
OR MORE: FULL-BLOWN WORK ADDICT. 9 TO 11 POINTS: AT-RISK ABUSER. 5 TO 8 POINTS: BALANCED ACT. 4 POINTS OR FEWER: SAFE AND SOUND.



- Countries whose workers take the most days off, according to an Expedia survey
- Countries whose workers take the fewest days off

11:00:00

LENGTH OF WORKDAY THAT WILL DOUBLE YOUR RISK FOR DEPRESSION, ACCORDING TO A STUDY PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL *PLOS ONE*



Percentage of professionals who work 50 hours or more a week, according to a study published in the *Harvard Business Review*

not unlike the one from a bump of cocaine or from a compulsive gambler's run at the craps table. Over time, the sustained rush of stress hormones can lead to clogged arteries and high blood pressure, heightening the risks of stroke and heart failure.

So are you hurtling toward *karoshi*? The simplest test, called the Bergen Work Addiction Scale, developed by researchers in Norway and the U.K., consists of seven criteria. Some are straightforward—do people tell you to slow down but you don't?—but a few get at why we work the way we do: Do you often work in order to "reduce feelings of guilt, anxiety, helplessness, and depression?" Do you "become stressed if you are prohibited from working?"

Think about that. If you're an alcoholic, chances are you feel guilty *for drinking*. If you're a workaholic, you feel guilty about *not working*. As a society, we might celebrate drinking, but we don't honor alcoholism. Workaholics, on the other hand, are national heroes, the Ur-examples of our Protestant work ethic and proof that the American Dream is alive, bootstraps and all. "People roll their eyes if you have a cocaine addiction," Klontz says, "but if you have a work addiction, you are valued."

Remember the Cadillac ad that aired during the Sochi Olympics that scoffed at lazy Europeans who sip espresso and take the month of August off? "Why aren't you like that?" the successful narrator asks in the ad. "Why aren't we like that? Because we're crazy, driven, hard-working believers, that's why." He strides from the swimming pool of his glass-and-wood palace to a new Cadillac in the driveway. His rejoinder: "As for all the stuff, that's the upside of only taking two weeks off in August." Whether you agree with the ad's argument or not, it's a dead-on depiction of the American myth.

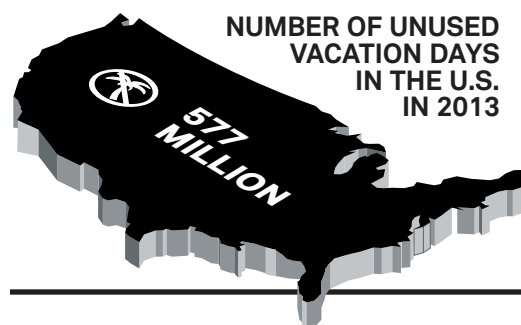
Klontz, who identifies himself as a recovering workaholic, says he remembers watching the ad and thinking, Yeah, that's right! He says it was "speaking to an entire culture of people prone to workaholism. We work a lot more than other countries, and we don't feel shame about it. In fact, we have scorn for other cultures that don't value work the same way." For workaholics, he says, flashy houses or cars are not just rewards for hard work but symbols of self-worth, because they tend to be hung up on status and money. It gets worse: Not only

do workaholics toil long hours to afford those symbols, but they also tend to overspend—Klontz's research has shown that workaholics carry greater credit-card debt, which, of course, leads to a vicious cycle of needing to work and earn even more. "But you can never get enough stuff to make you happy," he says. "That's the hamster wheel you get stuck on. Meantime, society is heaping praise on you for how hard you're working and how much money you're making."

It comes down to this: We want swimming pools so we can lounge in luxury, but our value system—not to mention the economic reality of stagnant wages—impels us to get off our asses and work. We want to live like the French, but we work like the Chinese to get there, and in the process we disdain those who don't have to do it that way. And let's face it: The poolside lifestyle is a mirage, because we will never have the time to enjoy it.

Even if you do find yourself stretching out on a chaise, chances are you're answering e-mails on your phone. The consulting firm McKinsey & Co. recently found that 28 percent of people's work time is spent dealing with e-mail, and that doesn't include their supposed off-hours. Porter has studied the links between employee work habits and smartphones and, as you might expect, has found that people with employer-provided smartphones report being more productive. But the flip side is that they log much longer hours. When physical presence isn't required for work, you're always at work. Studies have shown that workaholics experience withdrawal symptoms much as alcoholics do, and Porter's research supports the supposition that mobile connectivity can act as a form of temporary relief, a quick fix that only feeds the addiction.

Since we're on the topic of technology, let's also blame



Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk and the rest of our new class of Silicon Valley moguls, or at least the false promise their examples create. When a guy simultaneously revolutionizes the car industry and, oh, space flight, it's natural to feel like you're not doing enough with your so-called free time, isn't it? Congratulations—you're now thinking like a workaholic. A whole generation of young people finish college (or don't bother), put on their hoodies, and start pulling all-nighters with their eyes on making their first billion before 30.

The reality, of course, is that every one of the kids coding at some San Francisco start-up accelerator has about as good a chance of founding the next Facebook



A Field Guide to the North American Workaholic

Work addicts come in various shapes and sizes and can be found all around us—if you know what to look for.

The Salaryman

Habitat: Twenty-plus years in the same corporate office park

Habits: Inserts "working" before every one of his three meals, plus coffee

Identifiers: Hunched posture, lonely wife

Note: An increasingly endangered species in the U.S.; still abundant in Japan

The Bossaholic

Habitat: Just over your shoulder

Habits: "I'm going to need you to come in this Saturday."

Identifiers: Bitter team members

Note: Coworkers' low morale results in poor work product

The Midnight E-mailer

Habitat: Kitchen table

Habits: Terse missives from late-night laptop sessions, prompt response expected

Identifier: Venti red eye

Note: Often confused with Early Riser and Procrastinator

The Early Riser

Habitat: Kitchen table

Habits: Sends dozens of pre-dawn e-mails before the kids wake up

Identifier: Enthusiastic participation in morning meetings

Note: Leaves office promptly at five

The Stand-up

Habitat: Stand-up desk, treadmill desk

Habits: Drinks yerba mate, actually uses the company yoga room

Identifier: Vibram foot gloves

Note: Currently training for a marathon

The Networker

Habitat: SXSW, Blue Bottle

Habits: "Ping me and let's grab a coffee."

Identifiers: Strong "personal brand," multiple daily Instagrams

Note: Has one planned non-work conversation per day

The Jargonator

Habitat: Open-plan office in Flatiron district

Habits: "Let's dialogue about best practices and deliverables. And is this scalable?"

Identifier: Harvard M.B.A.

Note: Vacations in Jackson Hole, skis faster than you do

The Procrastinator

Habitat: Empty office surrounded by Chinese takeout

Habits: Thrives on last-minute deadline pressure

Identifiers: Disheveled hair, crazy eyes

Note: Results are consistently late, if not great

The Daytripper

Habitat: Departure lounge, TSA Pre-Check line

Habits: Full-volume phone negotiations in close quarters with fellow travelers

Identifiers: Bluetooth headset, expandable laptop case with wheels, inflatable neck pillow

Note: Knows dozens of Admirals Club bartenders by name

The Work Hoarder

Habitat: Cubicle

Habits: Refuses to delegate

Identifier: "Inbox exceeds current limits."

Note: Will never rise above middle management

The Hobbyist

Habitat: TechShop's hackerspace, RadioShack

Habits: Hates his actual job and works every spare moment on passion projects

Identifier: Hard-shell combat-style iPad case

Note: Surprisingly successful and well-liked at work

The Incubator

Habitat: Coworking space

Habits: Stares at laptop all day, actually spends most of his time on Facebook

Identifiers: Toms shoes, two-day stubble

Note: Secretly listens for start-up ideas



or Instagram or Snapchat as he does of becoming the next LeBron James. There's nothing wrong with aiming for greatness; it's the most American thing we do. But let's not lose sight of the fact that a never-ending professional sprint is more likely to lead to a crappy kind of existence—or even, worst case, *karoshi*—than a life of contentment and fulfillment. Balance, people.

WORK ADDICTION IS NOT NEW, OF COURSE—IT HAS existed as long as work has. Think of the generations of zombified medical residents sleepwalking through endless hospital shifts or those striving law-school grads logging 80-hour weeks for seven years in hopes of making partner by their mid-thirties.

That's not about to change. But the so-called gig economy has opened a tantalizing escape hatch: self-employ-



ment—by choice or by necessity. Behind all those glowing Apple insignias in your local (locally roasted!) coffee shop is an army of people who appear, at first glance, gloriously unshackled from the cubicle farm. Their office is wherever their laptop is, they can wear whatever they want, they never have to attend a morning status meeting.

There are at least 42 million “independent workers” (about 30 percent of the workforce) in the U.S.—and likely quite a lot more, according to the Freelancers Union, since that number dates to pre-recession 2006, the last time the government counted. Private studies estimate that as much as 50 percent of the labor force will spend time as independent workers in the next decade.

To Nate Cozi, a software engineer in Portland, Oregon, who has switched back and forth between freelance and full-time for years working for Nike as well as tiny start-ups, there's little difference between being on staff and not. He turned to freelancing after a long stint working 60- and 70-hour weeks in Manhattan that led him to early burnout. He moved to Portland to seek work-life

balance (a.k.a. hipster retirement: the practice of taking refuge in the Pacific Northwest). As a freelancer, though, he quickly found himself scrambling for new projects even as he completed a current one—“You never know if there's going to be work next month”—and spending his evenings studying new technologies to make sure he was on top of advances in the field.

Whether you're self-employed or not, Cozi's experience likely sounds familiar: Work doesn't stop at the office (or coffee-shop) door, especially when you consider all the things you should be doing to build your “personal brand” or keep up with changing technology. Are you active on Instagram? How big is your Twitter following, and are you keeping them engaged? Did you go to SXSW this year (you know, to network), and have you downloaded the latest version of Adobe Creative Suite?

Recognizing that work and personal life have become inseparable, a growing number of companies have moved to make the workplace function more like a full-service apartment building. You can't have a start-up these days without a Ping-Pong table, catered lunches, and shag-carpeted lounge areas. Google's Googleplex is the model, with its meditation rooms, volleyball courts, free laundry, and on-site haircuts. On the one hand, gosh, it seems a lot cooler than what you'd get working at a law firm (and it is!). But could it also be a 21st-century Trojan horse that's designed to keep you in the office even longer?

One popular new perk being offered by start-ups is unlimited vacation—yet, as critics point out, at start-up companies, no one's work is ever done, so employees might take even less vacation. Even among companies with traditional vacation policies, a recent study found, about 40 percent of employees don't use all their allotted time. Last year, Goldman Sachs, of all companies, issued a new policy that forbade junior bankers from working on Saturdays. Rumors quickly surfaced that, to some ambitious bankers, it was an irresistible opportunity to get ahead of the competition by secretly working on Saturdays, like junkies hiding a stash in the sock drawer.

On the plus side, there are companies—the productivity-app-maker Evernote, for instance—that have started paying incentives for people to use their vacation time, on the theory that a rested employee is a happier, more productive one. But when you have to be bribed to step away from work, there's something weird going on.

SAY THIS FOR GAHAN, COZI, AND MANY OTHERS LIKE them: At least they love what they do and don't complain about the hours. “I don't know what to do with myself if I'm not overloaded,” Gahan says. “I like the pressure.” But Robinson, the psychotherapist, says that doesn't mean they're not workaholics—in fact, what Gahan is talking about is the adrenaline high that's a signature trait of the work addict. “Alcoholics feel great when they're drinking too,” Robinson says. At least the fix is clear if you are addicted to alcohol or coke (or video games, for that matter): You can quit. With work addiction, going cold turkey is not an option. As therapists and support



86

Percentage of American workers who sit at work all day

2

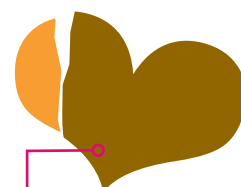
Hours of sitting it takes to start reducing blood flow, raising blood sugar, and lowering good cholesterol

six

Hours of sitting per day it takes to raise a man's risk of dying from heart disease 18 percent

21.8

Minutes by which life expectancy is reduced per hour of sitting, on average



79 Percentage of men who say stress at work has taken a toll on their relationships outside the office

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM GORMAN.

BRAIN DRAIN

ACCORDING TO A STUDY PUBLISHED IN THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY, EMPLOYEES WHO WORKED 55 HOURS A WEEK SHOWED DECREASED VOCABULARY AND REASONING SKILLS AS COMPARED WITH THOSE WHO WORKED A 40-HOUR WEEK.



Percentage of executives who log on to work e-mail at night and on weekends

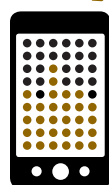
82

Percentage increase in post-vacation job performance, according to a survey done by former NASA scientists



60

Percentage of professionals with smartphones for business who put in more than 13.5 hours of work per day



groups will tell you, the goal is to manage your habit—to become, in effect, a functioning workaholic. And no matter how much we point to technological and cultural and economic factors that lead us to slip into perpetual work mode, Robinson says (in proper self-help-speak), we must learn to take charge.

The first step is recognizing that it's a problem. "That can be very difficult," he says, "because sometimes you get so used to it, you don't see the water you're swimming in. Except the people around you are on the river bank. Your wife or girlfriend—they see that you're being swept away by the current." As with alcoholics, too often the self-realization comes only after a painful crash—a physical illness, a broken relationship, getting fired. "It forces people finally to look at the situation with clear eyes."

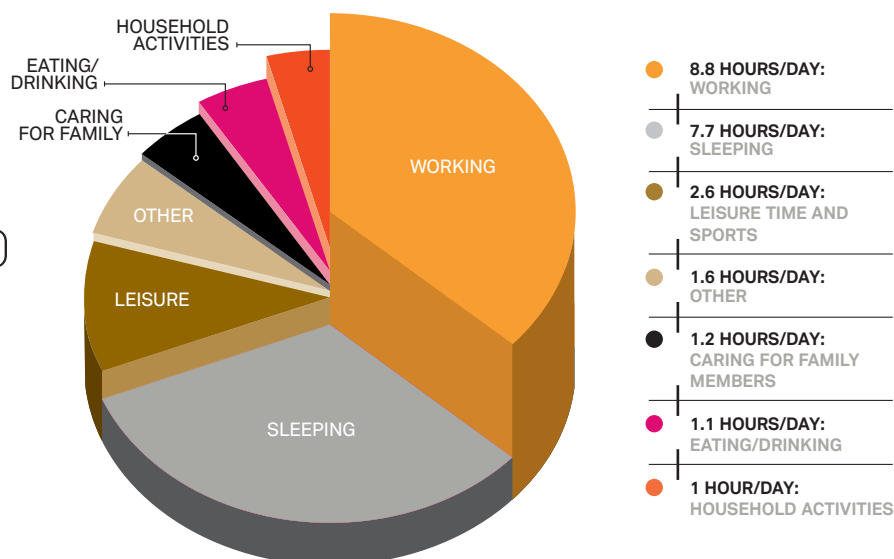
If all this is starting to sound like a 12-step program,

be really up-front with my family and with my employer," he says. He made a rule that he would leave the office just after five each day, come home, get dinner on the table, put the kid to bed, and only then get back on his computer. Recognizing that sometimes, despite all the discipline in the world, you simply have to dig in and meet a deadline, he outlined two work modes that his wife and boss could expect from him: "I said, 'There's normal mode, and there's push mode.' There are times when you need 14 hours of sustained focus, and an eight-hour day with lunch and two coffee breaks simply doesn't apply."

Gahan has taken a different tack and, in an attempt to at least maximize the product of his addiction, picked up a few time-management strategies from his buddy Tim Ferriss, the author of the runaway best seller *The 4-Hour Workweek*. Gahan hired a virtual personal assistant, who

A DAY IN OUR SO-CALLED LIVES

According to a survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of American workers between 25 and 54 with children



that's because it is. There's a group called Workaholics Anonymous that follows a system much like AA's. (Step 7: Humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings; Step 8: Make a list of people you've harmed and become willing to make amends to them.) Founded in 1983, WA has chapters in 32 states (plus Washington, D.C.) and more than 15 countries. Its official Tools of Recovery suggests tactics like avoiding multitasking (and not because studies suggest it can reduce productivity by as much as 40 percent). Another admonition: Never add something to your agenda without taking an equally time-consuming priority off the list. Ultimately, though, the point is to start creating boundaries. If you're a freelancer, Robinson suggests, find a way to separate your workspace from your home, whether that means using a coworking office or renovating the shed in your back yard. Regardless of whether you work independently or in an office, find a way to define different times of day as work-appropriate or not. Cozi, the Portland programmer, forced himself to draw some hard lines after he became a father. "I had to

now arrange his travel, prepares research reports, and sometimes books restaurant reservations (there may be hope yet for his future relationships). The assistant tracks deadlines and appointments and sends frequent reminders, which helps Gahan use his time as wisely as possible. The strategy is only a first step, but it adheres to one of Workaholics Anonymous' primary tenets: "Realize we don't have to do everything ourselves."

There are some simpler tricks, too, like implementing an after-work e-mail curfew. When the news hit this spring that France had outlawed work e-mails after 6 P.M., the Internet lit up with jealous Americans (and more than a few "lazy Frog" digs). That the reality was quite different—it was not a law but an agreement between unions and employers covering only certain kinds of contract workers, and the 6 P.M. cutoff was fictional—hardly mattered. For a moment, there was hope that maybe governments would institute a new world order that would force us to better calibrate the ideal work-life balance. Then, like addicts after a brief cleanse, we all got back to work. ■