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Preface

When I moved to Brisbane in early 2004, a number of Sydney friends made it clear I should expect few visitors. To Australia's southern residents, the large north-eastern state of Queensland remains a curiosity, summoning images of sun-drenched lethargy, backward attitudes, conservative farmers, and corrupt law enforcement. The state capital Brisbane has long been regarded by residents and outsiders alike as a "sleepy little town." Indeed, in the period this book describes, glossy tourism brochures began to use this phrase as a slogan, adding, "can you blame us?" in an attempt to celebrate the developing night-time economy. In spite of such prejudice, I was one of the thousands of interstate migrants who moved to the Sunshine State for a full-time job in the past decade. And even though substantial newspaper coverage and government rhetoric placed great hope in these statistics, the experiences of actual workers largely went missing from the public record. This book captures just a few of them.

This research is based on a three-year Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship from 2007–9. *Working From Home: New Media Technology, Workplace Culture and the Changing Nature of Domesticity* aimed to offer empirical evidence of technology's impact on the work and home lives of employees in the information and communication spheres of the knowledge economy. Large organizations were chosen – in education, government, broadcasting, and telecommunications – to contrast the many depictions of self-employed, entrepreneurial workers at the leading edge of the "new economy." From four employers, 26 participants were recruited at

different levels of the workplace hierarchy. Employees were interviewed annually for the three-year period when this was possible. Their names have been anonymized for publication.

While constraints on time prevented extensive ethnographic engagement with workers, a number of wider social developments inform the reflections that follow. At the level of politics, a federal election with a strong emphasis on workers' rights saw the Australian Labor Party triumph in 2007 after 12 years in opposition. Within just a couple of months, the global economy endured a violent downward swing, which pushed Australia from prosperity to near recession, bringing unprecedented levels of national debt. Meanwhile the project's focus, communications technology, facilitated the tremendous uptake of social networking sites – from MySpace to Facebook, and a later surge to Twitter. In the final year of the study, the commercial release of the iPhone in Australia changed the telecommunications landscape significantly. The book now stands as an archive of this phenomenal rise of social media, and the growth of Internet use in everyday life.

In describing the lived impact of the new economy's "flexible" workplace, however, the project originates from an earlier downturn. The sustained glamorization of entrepreneurial business culture since the dot.com boom is the lasting legacy of a complex historical moment that few studies have interrogated sufficiently. Across any number of cultural artifacts today, computers and networked devices remain the resilient index of a variety of social changes, from family relations to commerce, even dating practices. But nothing has been more evident – and more absent from political discussion – than the way that online connectivity consummates the middle-class infatuation with work.

This book shows the extent to which new media technology encourages and exacerbates a much older tendency among salaried professionals to put work at the heart of daily concerns, often at the expense of all other sources of intimacy and fulfillment. The growing magnetism of mobile communication devices is one of the strongest indications that there is now a significant number of people for whom paid employment is the most compelling demonstration of virtue, accomplishment, and self-identity that society makes available. With a range of online subcultures also developing in support of these tendencies, the mutually reinforcing benefits of chronic connectivity among educated professionals are highly circular. At a time of declining civic participation, pressures on the institutions of marriage and the family, and persistent religious and racial intolerance in the West, this book offers a new lens for analytical attention. It

explains how ordinary workers may withdraw from a range of more complex human relationships to focus on a proven source of personal esteem – their job – since its rewards are so openly celebrated in the dominant register for modern relationships: the capitalist marketplace.

All books are difficult to write, but this one has been especially affected by my own implication in the phenomena under discussion. Coming to terms with work's intimacy has entailed moving states and cities more than once in search of what may be an elusive fit between personal and professional motives. On a more troubling level, it has also meant learning alongside others the grammar of hunched shoulders, clandestine drinking cultures, RSI prevention, and enforced leave. This project has presented a complex scholarly dilemma, which is the difficulty of distinguishing among participants' revelations about work, the behavior of peers and colleagues, and my own lived practice. It concludes with a strong conviction that the present generation of academics must be among the first to see their lives and loves as potentially open to change.

Introduction: Work's Intimacy

Performing Professionalism
Online and On the Job

No-one's job is safe.

<div style="text-align: right">

Australian Federal Industry Minister
Kim Carr, February 2009

</div>

This book provides an overdue account of online technology and its impact on work life. It moves between the offices and homes of today's salaried professionals to provide an intimate insight into the personal, family and wider social tensions faced by workers in a changing employment landscape. For any number of years now, new media technology has been marketed as giving us the freedom to work where we want, when we want, in flexible arrangements that apparently suit the conditions of the modern office. But little has been written to illustrate the consequences of this development, where work has broken out of the office, downstairs to the cafe, in to the street, on to the train, and later still to the living room, dining room, and bedroom.

Online technology has brought some significant problems to the work and personal lives of ordinary office workers – the information workers at the heart of the so-called "knowledge economy." This book describes the experiences of these employees, focusing on the information, communication and education ("ICE") professions that complement the heavy-hitting "FIRE" sectors of finance, insurance and real estate.[1] The latter have enjoyed their own chroniclers of late. The global economic downturn generated a predictable flurry of insider accounts of work cultures at the top end of town, as well

as the housing and loan schemes that precipitated much of the wider disaster. *Work's Intimacy* provides a different white-collar story. It reflects the lives of those in much more mundane office environments, in a city with a significant case of suburban sprawl. But in a digitally connected "network society" (Castells 2000), these workers' livelihoods are no less affected in the shift from prosperity to recession – and back again.

The following chapters demonstrate the increasingly intimate relationship salaried professionals have with their work, and how new media technologies are involved in this development. Most obviously, online technology changes our sense of availability in professional information jobs. Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence. This is a process we might describe the *presence bleed* of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply. Presence bleed explains the familiar experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations faced with a "to do" list that seems forever out of control. It not only explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours, but also captures the feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled – especially since there are not enough workers to carry the load. Throughout this book, workers will be shown to use online networks in the home to catch up on work that can't be finished in the office, as roles expand and employees are asked to do "more with less." With the increased use of digital technology, workloads that may have been acceptable to begin with are shown to accumulate further expectations and responsibilities that aren't being recognized – and never will be, if home-based work continues to go unremarked. Like the mobile devices facilitating this workload, the jobs themselves are subject to "function creep." The purported convenience of the technologies obscures the amount of additional work they demand. As one young librarian in this study explained: "They're not reducing any work load, they're just giving us more stuff to do. You kind of think something has to give, you know, you can't just keep piling work on us."

Presence bleed captures both the changing behavioral dimensions and professional expectations in communication- and information-heavy jobs. For the middle-class employees this condition affects, networked technologies are affordable enough to have in the home, so when online connections allow access to work beyond office hours, the possibility of being willing and able to work can manifest

as a compulsion that has to be monitored.[2] To some extent, this is a result of the sense of fulfillment and gratification many workers derive from their job, which makes them susceptible to letting professional duties spill into other times and spaces. But for just as many, the coerciveness of online technology allows employers to contact them beyond paid hours as a matter of course, whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged. In either case, consciousness of the always-present potential for engaging with work is a new form of affective labor that must be constantly regulated.[3]

The professionals in this book engage in work beyond the formal work day for a range of reasons. For some, it's to "keep sane" amidst a constant tide of communication requests that a hectic schedule cannot accommodate. For others, it's to maintain perceptions of competence and professionalism surpassing the call of duty – to reassure clients of their importance, or to keep the rest of "the team" happy. In the absence of formal policies regarding new media use, particularly when it comes to email response times, the stories they tell reveal online devices to be part of an armory of psychological preparedness that workers bring to their jobs even before the workday begins. Online technology allows workers to carve out strategies to cope with conditions that are highly intensified because they are taken to be individual rather than structural in nature.

In some ways, this behavior accords with ideas of neoliberal governance in which workers take responsibility for their actions and enjoy this as a form of freedom (Rose 1999a, 1999b). "Working from home" can perhaps be read as a kind of personal and professional cohesiveness employees establish to make individualized working conditions palatable. Retreating from an office environment that appears to obstruct the completion of core job tasks, workers choose to conduct some of the most critical parts of their professional practice from home. For women in particular, this appears to be a way of coping with the lack of flexibility in the performance, attendance and reward measures that continue to guide the formal workplace. Subsequent chapters show women are prepared to wait until the cooking and cleaning are done, and the rest of the house is asleep, to have time alone to work. Having time alone with one's paid work can even become a form of solace from other, dubiously recognized, labors.

"I can't work at work" is also a common expression for employees introduced in this book who find the workplace full of unnecessary deviations. What's interesting is that the bulk of these "distractions" come in the form of interaction with other employees. One of the greatest benefits of online technology is therefore to moderate

preferred levels of collegial engagement. Remoteness can be feigned in spite of physical presence, just as presence can be simulated when employees are actually out of the office. In either case, the coercive nature of "face-time" is one of the many "inefficiencies" of the office that play a role in driving employees home to work.

But as professional concerns claim a larger stake in the activities and priorities of the home, employees risk placing themselves in a position where employers will no longer feel obliged to provide effective compensation for their efforts. The lengthening workday can't be recognized in the spreadsheet formulae that calculate the hours served by modern employees. Moreover as economic conditions deteriorate – and employees are asked to accept reduced hours or pay cuts for the benefit of the company bottom line – an already large gulf between motivation, incentive and reward for salaried work comes in to play. The self-directed employee of the future may be less susceptible to the ties that bind their labor to an employer.[4]

The work/life ruse

In the years preceding the recent economic downturn, a range of commentators failed to appreciate the extent to which middle-class professionals had been encouraged to see work as the most significant demonstration of their success and identity. Feminists in particular seemed more interested in popular culture as a gauge for political accomplishments (or lack thereof) leaving workplace concerns to the dwindling ranks of union members and organizers.[5] While business was booming, men and women each worked long hours for firms that were more than happy to profit from their "sacrificial labor" (Ross 2004). The refusal to mount a sustained critique of long hours culture, and the gendered assumptions underpinning it, had the effect of making women feel grateful for so-called "flexible" work arrangements. These were conditions that allowed women to maintain traditional childcare and home maintenance expectations but only in addition to paid work (see chapter 2).

Sociologists, management literature and HR directives provided a powerful discourse encouraging employees to pursue "work–life balance" as a necessary corrective to the high performance demands of entrenched work cultures. That this trend coincided with an increased number of women in the workplace only served to imply such balance was their particular concern. It couldn't admit that work in itself might not be the problem; that many people enjoy their job for the sense of accomplishment it can bring. Nor could it

appreciate that leaders of organizations play a key role in generating, facilitating and maintaining workloads. The language of work–life balance in fact absolved management for the human resourcing decisions defining their employees' experience. Little wonder that it was taken up with such fervor in workplace training initiatives and a raft of complimentary "coping with stress", "dealing with change" and "time management" workshops. These well-funded measures were the ideological ruse disguising the concrete calculations being made to affect the bulk of employees' workloads. Their effect was to imply that individuals who could not cope with growing job requirements were at personal fault.

As a solution to workplace ills, "work–life balance" also ignored another momentous point. Well-off employees who gain pleasure from their work aren't likely to want to balance it with other things. Leisure pursuits or personal relationships may prove more difficult, costly, emotionally complicated, and altogether less satisfying for a range of personalities. As Arlie Hochschild (1997) has demonstrated, the work world offers a range of consolations when one's private life may demand more effort and less reward than the clearly defined, routine satisfactions of paid pursuits. Today's workplaces can be infinitely attractive to women who may not know how to improve the household division of labor without risking their marriage, but who can rely on legislation to ensure equity in the office (which she doesn't also have to clean). For middle-class women, equal opportunity in the public arena may have revealed how very few home-based pleasures can compete with the interest and excitement to be found in paid work.[6] The notion of "work–life balance" is inadequate "not only because it seems to arrive when women enter full-time employment" – which downplays the gender norms that were central to the Fordist economy (see also Pateman 1988; Mitropoulos 2006) – it also assumes "a classic (Marxian) understanding of work as alienating" (Adkins and Jokinen 2008: 144). But "only alienating work needs to be balanced out or mitigated against by home, family, and leisure time" (ibid.). In a cultural context that regularly celebrates the status and rewards of creative work – indeed, as new media jobs purposefully collapse the boundaries between work and play – a new vocabulary is needed.[7]

This book provides evidence to suggest that professional work generates forms of pleasure and accomplishment that rival the markers of identity favored in previous historical formations. This is what online technology and its growing list of applications finally allows us to see. These pleasures and intimacies underwrite professional workers' willingness to engage in work outside paid hours,

just as they provide justification for abandoning other forms of experience and fulfillment that stand in their way. The most successful online platforms of recent years, social networking sites, build on the deliberate confusion of work and friendship that have been hallmarks of professional middle-class office cultures for decades. The hegemony of the "contact" in office software packages worldwide promotes this deliberately blurry line between professional and personal etiquette. And in spite of numerous efforts to claim these developments as positive, onerous terms of service and obscure privacy settings of web platforms like Facebook showed the profits to be made from making bourgeois business culture the new normal.

If the language of intimacy helps to demonstrate work's enticing and seductive dimensions, including the social dimensions to work that will be elaborated in later chapters, it also forces recognition of the ease with which these aspects have been aligned with capitalist profits. Online culture's incredible capacity to quantify and instrumentalize friendship is one of the main trends this book highlights. Appreciating work's intimacy in this sense helps to pinpoint what is at stake in the move to work-centered identities and cultures. That is, if our capacities for intimacy are most regularly exercised in the pursuit of competitive professional profit, we face the prospect of being unable to appreciate the benefits of intimacy for unprofitable purposes. The consequences this poses for society are of course troubling, and so a backwards glance in time may help establish the extent to which this trend should cause us alarm.

A history of networking

The email-equipped mobile phone and wireless laptop are just the latest in a range of always-on devices offering ample opportunity for work to follow us out of the office. They pose new questions for the notion of professionalism as the workday adjusts to fit new surroundings. Should I answer that email tonight after my last glass of wine? Do I have to be friends with my colleagues on Facebook? Will my son know if I'm listening to him from the other room as I finish this overdue presentation? Does my boss even know when I am at work?

But just how different are these dilemmas from previous manifestations of office life? In the drive to understand the novelty of online culture, few have noted the links between social networking practices of the present and those of white-collar work in previous

decades.[8] This has had the knock-on effect of missing what may be unique about the cultures of online communities, as Part II of this book elaborates. In 1936, a modest self-help volume began to attract the attention of business readers seeking advice to navigate matters of etiquette and manners in professional contexts. Originally published to bring together a series of lectures by its author, Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* described a range of skills useful for life and business. The tips imparted in the book included how to deliver a compliment, how to appear friendly and genuine to colleagues, and how to apologize convincingly – all of which would help to ensure ongoing collegiality in the workplace. Carnegie's anecdotal approach may sound quaint to today's readers, but with sales of over 15 million, its effects have been lasting. This manual of pleasantries not only offers an important archive of white male business culture (particularly in its earlier editions); it also marks the beginning of an entire industry for what we might call *management* self-help.[9] Carnegie's book is a relic of a time when women were a rarity in the office, men survived on reputation and a job was ostensibly for life. As the television series *Mad Men* also illustrates, in this white-collar world, a businessman's main priority was to cultivate a reliable and likable personality that could be traded for a certain level of security. Before Human Resources policies and modulated induction training, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was part of a soon to be flourishing genre of business manuals that helped workers identify appropriate behavior for the workplace. This was a time when the very idea of professionalism for the growing middle classes had yet to take hold (cf. Liu 2004: chapter 2). Carnegie's classic provides an early precedent for understanding the deliberate confusion of friendship and business interests that are ongoing concerns of this book.

A number of authors in the years since, among them William H. Whyte (1963/1956) and C. Wright Mills (1951), advanced sociological understandings of the white-collar mindset. Whyte's "organization man" of the 1950s, for instance, was a diligent, mobile employee who could expect to move through a succession of "company towns" in tandem with his elevation up the career ladder. The mutual bond captured in the title of Whyte's book was as much a description of the kinds of loyalty expected between employer and worker as it was an indictment of mindless corporate ambition. In fact, Whyte's writing still speaks of a time when one could believe that a "social ethic" could be pursued through affiliation with an outstanding business. The worker could depend on a return on his investment in the company so long as the latter maintained a convincing

vocational narrative and enviable position within the community. Whyte distinguished between the "well-rounded man" of the organization, who is successful, but not *too* successful (1963: 125), and "the executive," whom he endearingly terms the "not-well-rounded man." The well-rounded worker followed the principle: "be loyal to the company and the company will be loyal to you," and he had particular insights to share:

> On the matter of overwork they are particularly stern. They want to work hard, but not too hard; the good, equable life is paramount and they see no conflict between enjoying it and getting ahead. The usual top executive, they believe, works much too hard, and there are few subjects upon which they will discourse more emphatically than the folly of elders who have a single-minded devotion to work.

> Whyte further observes:

> Out of necessity, then, as well as natural desire, the wise young man is going to enjoy himself – plenty of time with the kids, some good hobbies . . . obtrusive in no particular, excessive in no zeal. He will be the man in the middle. (1963: 127)

The executive, by contrast, is described in part three of Whyte's book, which has the telling title: "The Neuroses of Organization Man."

> Common to these men is an average work week that runs between 50 and 60 hours. Typically, it would break down something like this: each weekday the executive will put in about 9 1/2 hours in the office. Four out of five weekdays he will work nights. One night he will be booked for business entertaining, another night he will probably spend at the office or in a protracted conference somewhere else.

> On two of the other nights he goes home. But it's no sanctuary he retreats to; it's a branch office. While only a few go so far as to have a room equipped with dictating machines, calculators, and other appurtenances of their real life, most executives make a regular practice of doing the bulk of their business reading at home and some find it the best time to do their most serious business phone work ("I do a lot of spot-checking by phone from home," one executive explained. "I have more time then, and besides most people have their guard down when you phone them at home.")

Whyte's description predates the BlackBerry by, say, 50 years, but it is a fascinating portent of today's office cultures: "In one company, the top executives have set up a pool of Dictaphones to service