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Research that matters.

Polluted time

Blurring the boundaries between work and life

Josh Fear

T**AI**

Policy Brief

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Summary

In recent decades technology has revolutionised the way companies do business and workers do their jobs. From the very top of organisations to the most menial and low-paid roles, the great majority of employees now use information and communication technology to some extent for work. Some spend their entire working lives in front of a screen of some sort. In theory, technology is supposed to make workers more efficient and productive. In practice it may in fact be doing 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.

In the modern, technology-driven work environment, it is now possible to dictate what employees do when they are outside the workplace as well as in it. While one's 'free' time should normally be free of work demands, the ability to contact someone at any hour of the day by email or telephone often means that it is often interrupted by work. These new demands on non-work time via technology represent a form of soft control over workers and a new frontier in unpaid overtime.

This paper documents the growing phenomenon of 'polluted time' - periods or moments 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 carry out work-related 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.

To explore the phenomenon of polluted time, in July 2011 The Australia Institute carried out an online survey of 1,384 Australians, of which 845 reported being in paid work.

Most respondents (60 per cent) reported doing some kind of work task outside of their normal working hours in the past week.

- One in four (23 per cent) said that working at home outside of normal hours was expected in their workplace, while 15 per cent said that it is necessary to do such work often in order to meet the expectations of their job. By contrast, only 8 per cent of respondents indicated that working outside normal hours was discouraged in their workplace.
- 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.
- One in four respondents (24 per cent) indicated that their employer had provided them with some kind of technology or device that allowed them to work outside the workplace, such as a mobile phone or laptop. These people were twice as likely to say that they *often* needed to work outside of normal working hours than those whose work did not provide them with such technology (25 per cent compared with 12 per cent).
- Seven out of eight respondents with a device provided by their employer (83 per cent) said that they had worked outside of normal work hours in the past week, compared to around half of those without a device (52 per cent).
- Email was the most commonly reported intrusion on free time – more than phone calls, meetings, travel and other types of work.

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Our survey findings 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. Although there are many factors contributing to time pollution, survey results clearly show that the use of information and communication technology for work purposes plays a major role.

Without information on the nature of polluted time in the past, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the contamination of free time by work has changed since employers began to embrace information and communication technology, or whether particular kinds of time pollution have been replacing others. What is certain is that some workers who were happy with their work/life balance a decade ago are now less satisfied with the expectations of their job, because certain technologies that contribute to polluted time simply did not exist until relatively recently.

Solutions to the growing problem of polluted time must come from both sides of the employer/employee relationship. For employers, simply recognising polluted time as a negative phenomenon (rather than regarding it as free labour) is a significant step. Employers may think that they are delivering flexibility by providing workers with mobile phones and laptops, but rather than alleviating stress they are often contributing to it. For individual workers, insisting on proper boundaries between work time and free time is equally critical. Where someone's free time is polluted to the extent that they cannot do what they otherwise would have done, or cannot properly appreciate it when they do, then they should recognise that the situation has gone too far. Moreover, workers should beware of bosses bearing gifts. Although hi-tech gadgets are attractive by design, in a work context they often come with conditions attached and may best be avoided.

1 Introduction

In recent decades technology has revolutionised the way companies do business and workers do their jobs. From the very top of organisations to the most menial and low-paid roles, the great majority of employees now use information and communication technology to some extent for work. Some spend their entire working lives in front of a screen of some sort.

In the modern, technology-driven work environment, it is now possible to dictate what employees do when they are outside the workplace as well as in it. While one's 'free' time should normally be free of work demands, the ability to contact someone at any hour of the day by email or telephone often means that it is often interrupted by work. Sometimes this kind of disruption is innocuous – for example, the occasional telephone call to deal with something urgent or unexpected. In other cases, where someone is essentially on call all the time, it can be a constant source of distraction or irritation. Most likely the real situation for many workers lies somewhere along this spectrum, between slight interruption and total domination of free time by work. Whatever the case, these new demands on non-work time via technology represent a form of soft control over workers and a new frontier in unpaid overtime.

For employees who do not have the power to insist on clear boundaries between their work and other aspects of their lives, or those who perform roles in which such boundaries are less meaningful, 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. For the purposes of this paper, polluted time is defined as periods of time 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:

- Undertaking work-related tasks outside of normal working hours;
- Needing to check emails or answer phone calls outside of normal working hours;
- Being on call to come into work if necessary; or
- Thinking about work to the extent that it 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.

The term *workaholic* is a familiar one, denoting someone who either enjoys their job so much that they work even when they don't need to or, more troublingly, someone who works long hours in order to avoid other situations that they would otherwise need to confront, such as relationship problems. Workaholism has been described as 'the respectable addiction',[1] because its consequences can be beneficial in a certain narrow sense. Because employers undoubtedly reap the dividends of the extra work, 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). Sometimes overtime can become a compulsion in itself, and if things reach this point workers can attend meetings of Workaholics Anonymous, which now has branches in Australia and many other countries.[2]

When the tendency to work too much is combined with relentless connectivity, the use of technology can get out of hand and affect people in unexpected ways. While 'internet

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[1] Killinger, B. 1991. *Workaholics: The Respectable Addicts*. Firefly, Buffalo.

[2] <http://www.workaholics-anonymous.org> accessed 25th October 2011.

addiction' has been identified in various contexts,[3] the compulsive use of technology for work has been recognised both in popular culture and in academic research. In 2006, 'crackberry' was awarded the Webster's New World College Dictionary Word of the Year. The term 'crackberry prayer' refers to the hunch that smartphone users adopt when they are reading or composing emails.[4]

It has even been suggested by a practicing psychiatrist that compulsive emailing and text messaging warrants inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, with symptoms including:

1. Excessive use, often associated with a loss of sense of time or a neglect of basic drives;
2. Withdrawal, including feelings of anger, tension, and/or depression when the computer is inaccessible;
3. Tolerance, including the need for better computer equipment, more software, or more hours of use; and
4. Negative repercussions, including arguments, lying, poor achievement, social isolation, and fatigue.[5]

These symptoms are reflected by myriad anecdotal evidence, with sufferers using their devices at funerals, in the shower, in bed, at the gym and on holiday. There are even stories of children stopping whatever they are doing when they hear the distinctive tone of a new email from their parent's smartphone.[6]

This paper explores the factors that contribute to polluted time, including but not restricted to increased use of technology outside the workplace. After describing key facts about 'traditional' overwork – that is, excessive overtime undertaken in the workplace – the results of new survey research on polluted time are presented. The paper concludes with some observations about how both employers and workers might alleviate the negative consequences of polluted time.

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[3] Buyn, S., Ruffini, C., Mills, J., Douglas, A., Niang, M., Stepchenkova, S., Lee, S., Loutfi, J., Lee, J., Atallah, M. and Blanton, M. 2009. 'Internet Addiction: Metasynthesis of 1996-2006 Quantitative Research', *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, Vol.12, No.2, pp.203-7.

[4] Crackberry is the 2006 Word of the Year' <http://crackberry.com/crackberry-2006-word-year> accessed 25th October 2011.

[5] Block, J. 2008. 'Issues for DSM V: Internet Addiction', *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 165, No. 3, pp. 306-7.
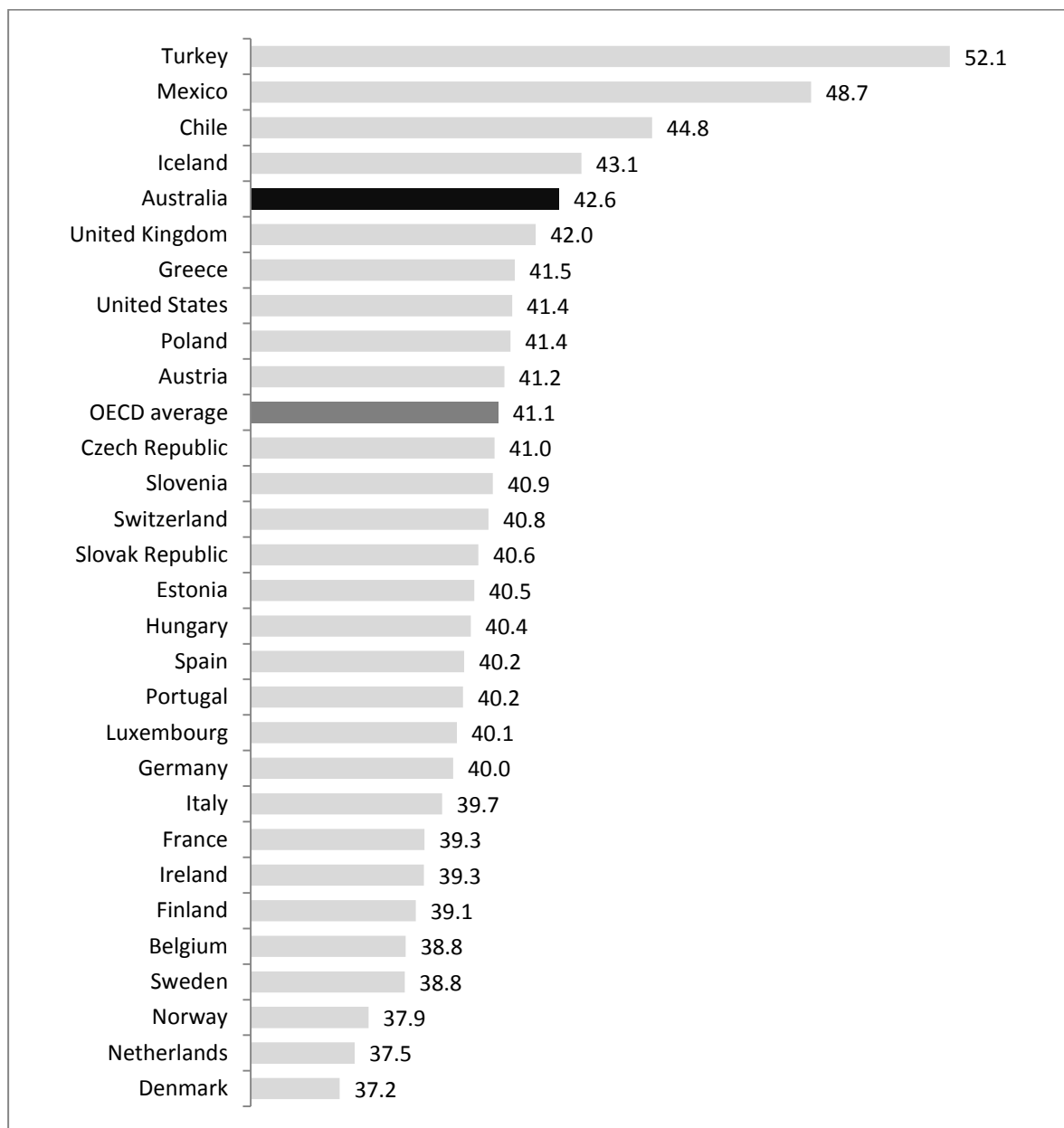
[6] Stern, J. 2007. 'BlackBerry Addicts Can't Shake the Habit', *Laptop Magazine*, 4th December. <http://www.laptopmag.com/mobile-life/blackberry-addicts-cant-shake-the-habit.aspx> accessed 25th October 2011.

2   Overwork in Australia

Facts on overwork

Australians already work some of the longest hours in the developed world. As Figure 1 illustrates, in 2010 full-time employees in Australia worked an average of 42.6 hours a week, more than the OECD average and much more than the supposedly 'standard' working week of 38 hours.[7]

Figure 1: Average hours worked by full-time employees in OECD countries, 2010

Country	Hours
Turkey	52.1
Mexico	48.7
Chile	44.8
Iceland	43.1
Australia	42.6
United Kingdom	42.0
Greece	41.5
United States	41.4
Poland	41.4
Austria	41.2
OECD average	41.1
Czech Republic	41.0
Slovenia	40.9
Switzerland	40.8
Slovak Republic	40.6
Estonia	40.5
Hungary	40.4
Spain	40.2
Portugal	40.2
Luxembourg	40.1
Germany	40.0
Italy	39.7
France	39.3
Ireland	39.3
Finland	39.1
Belgium	38.8
Sweden	38.8
Norway	37.9
Netherlands	37.5
Denmark	37.2

Source: OECD 2011. Figures relate to full-time employees and exclude self-employed persons. Comparable data are not available for Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Israel or the Russian Federation.

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[7]   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2011. 'Average usual weekly hours worked on the main job', *OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics*, OECD. <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx> accessed 3 November 2011.

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Previous research by The Australia Institute has shown that a substantial amount of the extra time that Australians spend working is unremunerated. Forty-five per cent of all Australian workers, and more than half of all full-time employees, work more hours than they are paid for on a typical workday. In fact, Australians work more than two billion hours of unpaid overtime each year – three times as many hours as Australians volunteer to community organisations. In 2009, employees forwent $72 billion in wages, equivalent to six per cent of GDP. This 'free' labour that workers 'give' to their employers every year is just one part of the costs associated with overwork for individuals and for the broader community.[8]

Other research by The Australia Institute has documented the phenomenon of 'time poverty' – the predicament of not having enough time to meet all your commitments and ambitions, despite being financially secure. Only one in five Australian workers are working the number of hours they would prefer to work, even taking into account the effects on income of working different hours. Half of all workers would prefer to work fewer hours, while 29 per cent would prefer to work more. Meanwhile, one in two Australian workers report that work prevented them spending time with family and friends over the previous week, while a similar proportion report that work had prevented them from doing physical exercise.[9] Time poverty has clear consequences both for physical health and for general wellbeing: long working hours and time pressure have been linked to lifestyle illnesses such as obesity, alcoholism and cardiovascular disease, while anxiety disorders and depression can also be caused by job-related stress.[10]

The role of technology in overwork

In theory, technology is supposed to make workers more efficient and productive. In practice, the extent of overwork in Australia suggests that information technology is not necessarily freeing up workers' time, and may in fact be doing 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.

Prior to the internet age, organisations commonly used computers to carry out distinct tasks with greater efficiency – tasks such as word processing, accounting, data entry or design. Only those workers who used such machines needed to know how to use them; others could still function effectively in the workplace with low levels of computer literacy. Similarly, before the turn of the century mobile phones were clunky, expensive and prone to drop out. Landline phones were usually the way to talk to someone on the phone in a professional capacity.

Of course, computers are still used for the kinds of discrete tasks that will always need to be done. But technology is now also used in the workplace for a host of other things that can only be achieved through instant connectivity to colleagues, to clients, to suppliers and of course to the internet. The rise of cloud computing means that even conventional kinds of work can be carried out from outside the workplace. Meanwhile, the explosion in the use of

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[8] Fear, J. and Denniss, R. 2009. *Something for Nothing: Unpaid overtime in Australia*, Policy Brief No.7, The Australia Institute, November.

[9] Fear, J., Rogers, S. and Denniss, R. 2010. *Something for Nothing: Unpaid overtime in Australia*, Policy Brief No.20, The Australia Institute, November.

[10] Dawson, D., McCulloch, K. and Baker, A. 2001. *Extended working hours in Australia: counting the costs*, commissioned by the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations, Adelaide, Centre for Sleep Research, 2001; Bent, S. 1998. 'The psychological effects of extended working hours' in *The Twelve Hour Workday: Emerging Issues*, Kathryn Heiler (ed.), Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training Working Paper No 51, University of Sydney; LaMontagne, A., Louie, A. and Ostrey, A. 2006. 'Job stress & health: A review of the epidemiologic evidence', in VicHealth, *Workplace Stress in Victoria: Developing a Systems Approach*, Report to the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

smartphones means that workers are perpetually contactable by phone and email outside of 'normal' working hours.

Organisations and individuals have apparently adopted information technology in part because of the promise that it will make things easier: that they will complete tasks more quickly, be more productive or efficient, or be able to abandon tedious activities altogether by automating them. This is true to some extent, particularly where the magnitude of the tasks involved are predictable and contained. But 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, mobile 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.

3   Survey on polluted time

In July 2011 the Australia Institute carried out an online survey of 1,384 Australians, of which 845 reported being in paid work. These respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the intrusion of work on their free time. The survey results are set out below.[11]

Job expectations

The majority of respondents (60 per cent) reported doing some kind of work outside their normal working hours in the past week. As Table 1 shows, the likelihood of needing to work during one's leisure time rises with income.

Table 1: Proportion of respondents working outside normal work hours in the past week, by income[12]

	Less than $40K	$40K - $80K	More than $80K	All
Worked outside normal working hours	48%	57%	65%	60%
Did not work outside normal working hours	52%	43%	35%	41%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Base = 845. Question wording: 'In the past week, have you needed to do any of the following for work purposes outside of your normal working hours (eg evenings, weekends)? [Read emails/Respond to emails/Make phone calls/Answer phone calls/Meet someone in person/Travel somewhere else/Some other work task/None of these]'

A majority of respondents (60 per cent) reported that it was necessary to work outside of normal work hours in order to meet the expectations of their employer. For 15 per cent of workers this was *often* the case, for 30 per cent it happened *sometimes*, and for another 15 per cent they needed to work outside normal hours only *rarely*. Workers on higher incomes were more likely than others to need to work during their free time to meet job expectations.

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[11] The survey sample was sourced from an independent online panel provider. Survey respondents were provided with a small incentive to encourage participation. The survey sample was broadly representative of the broader Australian adult population by age and gender. The results reported in this paper have been post-weighted to precisely match the population profile by age and gender.

[12] When referring to survey results, 'income' refers to household income before tax. The survey did not collect information on personal income so as to avoid asking overly sensitive questions. While household income is not as reliable an indicator of occupational category as personal income, it is a reasonable approximation for statistical purposes, particularly in the context of survey in which all respondents were in paid work.

Table 2: Need to work outside of normal working hours to meet job expectations, by income

	Less than $40K	$40K-$80K	More than $80K	All
Often	11%	12%	18%	15%
Sometimes	28%	31%	30%	30%
Rarely	10%	15%	16%	15%
No	49%	41%	34%	38%
Not sure	2%	2%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 845. Question wording: 'Do you feel that it is necessary to work outside of normal work hours in order to meet the expectations of your job?'

One in four respondents (23 per cent) said that working at home outside of normal hours was expected in their workplace, while a further 37 per cent said it was not expected, but also not discouraged. Only 8 per cent of workers reported that working outside of normal hours was discouraged in their workplace (with another 29 per cent indicating that this kind of practice was not applicable in their situation). As Table 3 shows, workplace expectations about working during free time were more demanding for those on higher incomes. By contrast, workers in low-income households were much more likely to indicate that such situations did not apply to them.

Table 3: Workplace expectations of working outside normal working hours, by income

	Less than $40K	$40K-$80K	More than $80K	All
Expected	13%	19%	27%	23%
Not expected, but also not discouraged	36%	35%	40%	37%
Discouraged	-	10%	9%	8%
Not applicable	49%	32%	23%	29%
Not sure	2%	5%	2%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 845. Question wording: 'In your workplace, is working at home outside of normal working hours…?'

Effects of polluted time

Two in three respondents (70 per cent) said that in the past week they had thought about work outside their normal working hours. As Table 4 demonstrates, high-income workers were more likely than those on lower incomes to have thought about work in their own time.

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Table 4: Proportion of workers who thought about work outside normal working hours in the past week, by income

	Less than $40K	$40K-$80K	More than $80K	All
Yes	55%	67%	74%	70%
No	40%	31%	22%	27%
Not sure	5%	2%	3%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 845. Question wording: 'In the past week, have you found yourself thinking about work outside of your normal working hours (e.g. evenings, weekends)?'

When asked about whether thinking about work *made it more difficult to enjoy their free time*, around a quarter of respondents (24 per cent) said that it always or often made it more difficult. One in five (21 per cent) said that when they need to do something for work in their free time, they always or often *think about it for a long time beforehand*, while 14 per cent said that they always or often *think about it for a long time afterwards*.

Table 5: Effects of thinking about work on free time

	Makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	Think about it for a long time beforehand	Think about it for a long time afterwards
Always	9%	5%	3%
Often	15%	14%	11%
Sometimes	41%	34%	30%
Rarely	25%	23%	29%
Never	10%	19%	23%
Not sure	1%	4%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Base = 589. Includes respondents who reported thinking about work in the past week outside their normal working hours. Question wording: (a) 'When you think about work outside of work hours, does this make it more difficult to enjoy your free time?'; (b) 'When you need to do something for work in your free time, do you tend to think about it for a long time beforehand?'; (c) 'When you need to do something for work in your free time, do you tend to think about it for a long time afterward?'

Survey results suggest that parents of young children are somewhat more affected by work-induced time pollution than others. Twenty-six per cent of respondents with children under 18 in the household said that thinking about work *always* or *often* makes it more difficult to enjoy their free time, compared with 22 per cent of those without children in the home.

Table 6: Effects of thinking about work on free time by family status

	Children under 18 in the household	No children under 18 in the household	All
Always makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	11%	8%	9%
Often makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	15%	14%	14%
Sometimes makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	38%	42%	41%
Rarely makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	26%	25%	25%
Never makes it more difficult to enjoy free time	9%	11%	10%
Not sure	-	1%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Base = 589. Includes respondents who reported thinking about work in the past week outside their normal working hours. Question wording: 'When you think about work outside of work hours, does this make it more difficult to enjoy your free time?'

The role of different technologies in polluted time

Email was the most commonly reported intrusion on free time, with 38 per cent of respondents nominating email as the task they spent most time doing outside of normal working hours. A further 25 per cent nominated phone calls as the task that took up most free time, 10 per cent said they needed to travel, while 6 per cent attended meetings.

One in four respondents (24 per cent) indicated that their employer had provided them with some kind of technology or device that allowed them to work outside the workplace. Seventeen per cent had a work-provided mobile or smart phone, 17 per cent had a mobile computer (such as a computer or iPad), and 9 per cent reported that their employer provided their home internet connection.

Workers whose employers provided a device were much more likely to experience polluted time. Seven out of eight respondents with such a device (83 per cent) said that they had worked outside of normal work hours in the past week, compared to around half of those without a device (52 per cent).

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Table 7: Proportion of respondents working outside normal work hours in the past week, by work-provided technology

	Mobile/ smart phone	Mobile computer	Home internet connection	Any work device	No work device	All
Worked outside normal working hours	86%	84%	82%	83%	52%	60%
Did not work outside normal working hours	14%	16%	18%	17%	48%	41%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

* Base = 845. Question wording: 'In the past week, have you needed to do any of the following for work purposes outside of your normal working hours (eg evenings, weekends)? [Read emails/Respond to emails/Make phone calls/Answer phone calls/Meet someone in person/Travel somewhere else/Some other work task/None of these]'

People with work devices were more likely to report that working outside normal hours was *expected* (35 per cent) or *not expected, but also not discouraged* (42 per cent). By comparison, only 18 per cent of workers without such a device said they were *expected* to work outside normal working hours.

Table 8: Workplace expectations of working outside normal working hours, by work-provided technology

	Mobile/ smart phone	Mobile computer	Home internet connection	Any work device	No work device	All
Expected	35%	39%	34%	35%	18%	23%
Not expected, but also not discouraged	41%	41%	37%	42%	36%	37%
Discouraged	11%	9%	10%	11%	7%	8%
Not applicable	10%	9%	15%	10%	36%	29%
Not sure	3%	3%	4%	2%	3%	3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 845. Question wording: 'In your workplace, is working at home outside of normal working hours…?'

Not only is the provision of information and communication technology associated with polluted time, it also appears to increase the frequency with which time is polluted. People with work-provided devices were twice as likely as those without them to say that they *often* needed to work outside of normal working hours (25 per cent compared with 12 per cent). As Table 8 shows, two in three workers who have work-provided technology for use beyond the workplace (67 per cent) reported *often* or *sometimes* needing to work outside normal working hours, as against 38 per cent of people whose employers had not provided a device.

Table 9: Proportion of respondents who need to work outside of normal work hours to meet job expectations, by work-provided technology

	Mobile/ smart phone	Mobile computer	Home internet connection	Any work device	No work device	All
Yes - often	25%	29%	27%	25%	12%	15%
Yes – sometimes	42%	41%	36%	42%	26%	30%
Yes – rarely	15%	12%	8%	13%	16%	15%
No	16%	16%	26%	19%	44%	38%
Not sure	2%	2%	3%	1%	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 845. Question wording: 'Do you feel that it is necessary to work outside of normal work hours in order to meet the expectations of your job?'

On call work

Around one in four respondents (26 per cent) indicated that their job sometimes required them to be available 'on call' if needed. Most of these people (58 per cent) said they were not paid extra to be on call, while a further 29 per cent were paid extra only if they were called into work. Only 13 per cent of on-call workers said that they were paid extra regardless of whether they were called into work. Workers on higher incomes were more likely than other workers to receive extra pay regardless, while those on middle incomes were more likely to receive extra pay only if they are called in to work.

Table 10: Extra pay for on call workers, by income

	Less than $40K	$40K-$80K	More than $80K	All
Paid extra regardless of whether I am called in to work	2%	12%	18%	13%
Paid extra only if I am called in to work	29%	36%	22%	29%
Not paid extra	69%	53%	60%	58%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 359. Includes workers who indicated that their job requires them to be on call if needed. Question wording: 'Are you paid extra to be "on call"?'

When asked about the last time they were on call, 13 per cent of on-call workers said they thought about being called into work *the whole time*, while 25 per cent said they thought about it *some of the time*. Thirty-three per cent said they thought about being called into work *only a little*, while 28 per cent *didn't think about it*.

On-call workers were asked about the effects on their free time of being on call. Twelve per cent said that being on call limited how they spent their free time *a great deal*, while 31 per cent said it limited them *to some extent*. Higher-income workers were most likely to report that on-call work limited their free time a great deal, suggesting that such people are on call more often, are called into work more of the time, or both.

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Table 11: Effects of being on call on free time, by income

	Less than $40K	$40K-$80K	More than $80K	All
A great deal	7%	10%	14%	12%
To some extent	31%	31%	32%	31%
Not much	36%	32%	29%	32%
Not at all	26%	27%	25%	25%
Not sure	-	1%	-	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Base = 359. Includes workers who indicated that their job requires them to be on call if needed. Question wording: 'Does being "on call" limit how you spend your free time?'

Polluted time

4   Conclusions

The survey results reported above demonstrate how widespread the problem of time pollution is in Australia. Most respondents (60 per cent) reported doing some kind of work task outside of their normal working hours in the past week. One in four (23 per cent) said that working at home outside of normal hours was expected in their workplace, while 15 per cent said that it is necessary to do such work often in order to meet the expectations of their job. By contrast, only 8 per cent of respondents indicated that working outside normal hours was discouraged in their workplace. In a workforce of 11.4 million people, our survey results suggest that 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.[13]

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 because there is simply too much work to be done. Where polluted time arises for reasons beyond someone's immediate control, it is likely to be detrimental to their wellbeing and possibly to their loved ones.

Although there are many factors which can lead to polluted time, our survey results clearly show that the use of information and communication technology for work purposes plays a major role. One in four respondents (24 per cent) indicated that their employer had provided them with some kind of technology or device that allowed them to work outside the workplace, such as a mobile phone or laptop. These people were twice as likely to say that they *often* needed to work outside of normal working hours than those whose work did not provide them with such technology (25 per cent compared with 12 per cent). Seven out of eight respondents with a device (83 per cent) said that they had worked outside of normal work hours in the past week, compared to around half of those without a device (52 per cent). Email was the most commonly reported intrusion on free time – more than phone calls, meetings, travel and other types of work.

Employers have already anticipated some of the risks associated with providing internet access to their workers in the workplace. The internet is a great way to 'kill time' for workers who are inclined to do so. For this reason, many companies have policies that restrict the use of social networking and webmail sites, while some organisations just block such sites altogether. These kinds of workplace policies can be counterproductive: in sending a message that workers cannot not be trusted to do the right thing, restrictions on internet use may in fact reinforce negative perceptions of management. Moreover, while employers often insist on limiting personal use of technology at work, they are willing to make explicit or implicit demands on their employees' free time by providing them with those very same technologies for use outside the workplace.

Without information on the nature of polluted time in the past, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the contamination of free time by work has changed since employers began to embrace information and communication technology, or whether particular kinds of time pollution have been replacing others. What is certain is that some workers who were happy

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[13] As at September 2011 there were 11,441,800 people employed in Australia. Source: ABS 2011. - *Labour Force, Australia*, *September*, Cat. No. 6202.0, October. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6202.0Main+Features1Sep%202011?OpenDocument> accessed 2 October 2011.

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with their work/life balance a decade ago are now less satisfied with the expectations of their job, because certain technologies that contribute to polluted time simply did not exist until relatively recently.

Some experts have suggested that employers may eventually be held legally responsible for the ways workers use technology outside the workplace. According to Gayle Porter and her colleagues at Rutgers University: 'Unfortunately, many organisations are adopting new [information and communication technology] much more rapidly than they understand how to organise social life around it or how to guard against negative consequences… As evidence accumulates that such heavy technology use brings on problems outside the workplace, employers might anticipate an impending search for someone to blame.'[14] Whether that blame will ultimately rest with employers who encourage technology use outside the workplace, employees who take their work home with them or some combination of the two remains unclear. In any case, the pollution of free time by work, facilitated by technology, is likely to become more common in the future.

Given the problems described in this paper, what can be done to restore the boundaries between work and life that are under threat from polluted time? The solutions will be as varied as the circumstances of individual workers, but they must come from both sides of the employer/employee relationship.

For employers, simply recognising that polluted time as a negative phenomenon (rather than regarding it as free labour) is a significant step. Employers may think that they are delivering 'flexibility' by providing workers with mobile phones and laptops, but rather than alleviating stress they are often contributing to it and in the process stoking resentment amongst staff. While some workers will always need to be contactable, if managers emphasise the limits on what is expected outside of working hours they will at the same time convey the message that they value their employees' wellbeing. If it becomes clear that polluted time is commonplace for a particular individual (for instance, if he or she is in the habit of sending emails late at night or on weekends), then employers know that intervention is required – if only for the sake of staff retention.

For individual workers, insisting on proper boundaries between work time and free time is equally critical. Where someone's free time is polluted to the extent that they cannot do what they otherwise would have done, or cannot properly appreciate it when they do, then they should recognise that the situation has gone too far. While most people would undoubtedly agree that there are more important things in life besides work, the fact that some are in the habit of working on their own time– either by choice or because they feel compelled to do so – might suggest otherwise. Moreover, workers should beware of bosses bearing gifts. Although hi-tech gadgets are attractive by design, in a work context they often come with conditions attached and may best be avoided. If a laptop or phone is part of the job, then setting clear limits on when and how they will be used will ensure that they do not take over one's free time.

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[14] Kakabadse, N., Porter, G., Vance, D. 2007. 'Addicted to Technology', *Business Strategy Review*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, Winter, pp.81,85.

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Appendix – Survey questionnaire

The following questions are about work/life balance.

Q1a. In the past week, have you found yourself thinking about work outside of your normal working hours (e.g. evenings, weekends)?

  Yes
  No [skip Q3]
  Not sure [skip Q3]

Q2. In the past week, have you needed to do any of the following for work purposes outside of your normal working hours (eg evenings, weekends)? *Please select all that apply.*

  Read emails
  Respond to emails
  Make phone calls
  Answer phone calls
  Meet someone in person
  Travel somewhere else
  Some other work task
  None of these [skip Q4]

Q3. When you think about work outside of work hours, does this make it more difficult to enjoy your free time?

  Always
  Often
  Sometimes
  Rarely
  Never
  Not sure
  Page break

Q4. In the past week, which of these did you spend the most time doing outside of work hours?

  Email
  Phone calls
  Meetings
  Travelling
  Other
  Not sure

Q5. In your workplace, is working at home outside of normal work hours…?

Expected
Not expected, but also not discouraged
Discouraged
Not applicable
Not sure

Q6. Do you feel that it is necessary to work outside of normal work hours in order to meet the expectations of your job?

Yes - often
Yes – sometimes
Yes – rarely
No
Not sure

Q7. When you need to do something for work in your free time, do you tend to think about it for a long time beforehand?

Always
Often
Sometimes
Rarely
Never
Not sure

Q8. When you need to do something for work in your free time, do you tend to think about it for a long time afterwards?

Always
Often
Sometimes
Rarely
Never
Not sure

Q9. Does your job sometimes require that you be available 'on call' to work if needed?

Yes
No<if no skip to end of section>

Q10. Are you paid extra to be 'on call'?

Yes – regardless of whether I am called in to work
Only if I am called in to work
No

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Q11. Does being 'on call' limit how you spend your free time?

A great deal
To some extent
Not much
Not at all
Not sure

Q12. When you were last 'on call', how often did you find yourself thinking about being called in to work?

The whole time
Some of the time
Only a little
Didn't think about it
Not sure