

An A to Zzzz of Workdays

By

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The midnight oil - or should that be midnight FuelWatch - was burning brightly in the Canberra bureaucracy this week, but tales emanating from the private sector suggest bankers, lawyers and accountants have long been accustomed to missing their share of shut-eye.

While three public servants from Treasury worked 35-hour shifts to rush through the drafting of the government's FuelWatch legislation, their counterparts at the likes of Macquarie Group and Citigroup claim it's not unusual to work 100-hour weeks at the pointy end of major deals.

In legal circles, Allens Arthur Robinson partner Cameron Rider says colleagues work around the clock on mergers and acquisitions and debt refinancing projects, particularly on the Symbion-Healthscope merger last year.

"I think people who haven't worked in a law firm or a merchant bank don't really appreciate the huge hours that people put in and it is a bit of a shock when you're told what it involves," he said.

"When important transactions are going through it's not uncommon for lawyers to be working 20-hour days for weeks at a time."

Stories surfacing from the private sector about overworked and underslept employees include a fire alarm (or alarm clock) waking a snoozing lawyer at their desk in the early hours of the morning and professionals using the sick-bay bed for power naps.

Another "sworn true story" is of an investment banker colleague who was so exhausted he arrived at work wearing his pants back to front, after labouring at the office for two days without a break.

One woman in the finance industry notes: "A colleague and I were working next to each other for two days straight and, as you can imagine, he wasn't exactly at his freshest so I politely had to suggest to him that he go home and have a shower."

Mr Rider says Allens hired hotel rooms for employees who were working crazy hours to have a brief snooze and shower.

"It's the way the work is done in that area. If you're not prepared to work on those terms you probably have to move to some different area," Mr Rider says.

But aspiring lawyers and bankers are usually informed about the commitment expected before they start.

It took Prime Minister Kevin Rudd six months to make a similar declaration when he said last week: "Well, I suppose I've simply got news for the public service - there'll be more." "The work ethic of this government will not decrease, it will increase."

That might conflict with Treasury's people management principles, which state: "Staff will be assisted in achieving appropriate work and private life balance."

But a former Treasury official now working in the finance industry in Sydney suggested that if the government's unrealistic demands continued, his former

colleagues could consider following his footsteps to the private sector, where the pay more adequately reflected the number of hours chained to the desk.

Not that it's healthy. Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen warns that while managers in the professional services industry "really demand their pound of flesh", it leads to "enormous rates of burn-out and exhaustion and disillusionment among employees and a very high churn rate of employees".

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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