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Extreme Jobs and the Reps Who Love Them

Seventy to eighty-hour work weeks, relentless travel, unpredictable schedules with principal drop-ins, high risk, high stress – does this sound like your worst nightmare? Maybe, but it's reality for most manufacturer's reps. Read on and find out why reps are the industry's workaholics.

Sunday, May 13, 2007 was a slightly more rigorous workday than usual for Joe Repman, a tireless and dedicated outsourced sales professional in the frantic global world of electronics. He just landed in Las Vegas to attend the industry's premier Electronics Distribution Show (EDS). After working until 10 p.m. the previous night, the industry veteran headed to the Paris Hotel to start his week-long meeting marathon. He loves it! The show doesn't officially start until Tuesday, but rep councils, interviews and sales meetings often precede the formal activities, not to mention reunions with industry friends and colleagues. It's just another 16-hour day in the life of Joe Repman. He clocked out at 1 a.m.

Sure, this was a little over the top, even by the notoriously excessive standards of selling, but it wasn't so far off the charts of his normal day. Joe wasn't looking to receive any medals for dedication and loyalty. He knows that thousands of other reps do precisely the same thing – some a little more, others a little less – but all the reps that Joe knows seem to be married more to their jobs than to their wives. One thing for sure, reps typically spend far more time with customers and principals than with their understanding and indulgent families. Joe might be a grizzled workaholic, but realistically, he anticipates putting in

90 to 100 hours a week and anything less is a bonus for Mom and the kids (grandkids included).

New Model

There was a time when toiling 60 hours a week signaled that you were a perfect sales warrior, willing to put work at the top of your life's priorities. Now, with two-thirds fewer reps and an ever-shrinking TAM/DTAM, the balance of reps are forced to shoulder the load. The once hot U.S. job market for engineers and technicians is now a bit frosty! Millions of American workers have been replaced with low-wage labor from China and India. These people are the original "Extreme Workers" and now Americans must emulate them. Our factory workers, what's left of them, go home early at their own peril. Co-workers up and down the corporate food chain are often logging grueling hours, not because they're passionate about their work, but more because they're afraid not to.

The undeniable effects of globalization, technology, and competition have combined to create another class of jobs whose demands have amped these requirements up by several degrees. Selling, with its relentless demands for performance, travel and reporting, fits into this league. Now there is a whole range of jobs that require constant communication and coordination with

the Far East. Manufacturing in China as well as software development and data centers in India have now joined these ranks. It's pure folly to think that the U.S. will ever recoup these lost jobs from the clutches of the Dragon or the Elephant. From all indications, the next century appears to be in the hands of what were once third-world countries.

The Challenge

Like daredevil athletes, our industry colleagues, who gravitate toward these sales jobs, thrive on the challenge. Bombarded by information and tethered to technology that links them to global partners, vendors, and customers around the clock, they labor extraordinary hours, log staggering numbers of air miles, and juggle mind-boggling schedules. Their jobs are often high stress and high risk -- the corporate version of an upside-down double-spin on a half pipe. Sure, the money's a big part of the allure; these people don't exactly live paycheck to paycheck. Still, many of them are happier than a snowboarder in a foot of fresh powder. Welcome to the world of Extreme Jobs.

Reps often view their jobs similarly – at high altitude and high risk. Two elements in the word 'extreme' speak to their lives and businesses: One is the intensity – the feeling that you were pushed to the limits of your selling

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resourceful and physical endurance – not in a brutal, but in an exhilarating way. The other is ego gratification – “I convinced him to see it my way.”

Personally, I can count on the fingers of one hand the days in my career when I didn't look forward to a day's work.

The Dark Side

The North American electronic market hasn't exactly been a lot of laughs during this decade. Globalization has sucked billions of dollars and millions of jobs from our economy. This is no revelation if you have the stomach to read your local newspaper's business section or the op-eds in the New York Times. That's my version of reality!

The percentage of people who inhabit this strange world of Extreme Jobs is still small. The Bureau of Labor Statistics says that only about 17% of managerial employees worked more than 60 hours a week in 2006, and they don't even track data at the upper fringes of the curve. However, anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that it's a trend on the rise. “The 40-hour workweek is now a bit of a myth,” says Allan Schweyer, executive director of the Human Capital Institute. “The 50- to 60- hour workweek is now the norm.” Recent data from the Families and Work Institute indicate that women's reported workweek has risen to 44 hours from 39 in 1977, while men report spending 49.9 hours on the job, up from 47.1 hours. And those are just the rank and file.

James Waldroop, who co-developed Career Leader, the interactive career-assessment program that is used by hundreds of MBA programs and corporations, says work-hour inflation is growing. And it's not just in the United States, but globally. Last summer, he stated, the newspapers in Madrid were ablaze with reports of the demise of the siesta, as Spanish workers scrambled to keep up with their E.U. counterparts. In Germany, workers at Siemens grudgingly agreed to an extension of their workweek to 40 hours. The French government is contemplating lengthening the 35 hour workweek established in 1998. In Japan, thousands of official cases of “karoshi,” or “death from overwork” occur each year.

Stewart Friedman, who runs the Work/ Life Integration Project at the Wharton School, says he's seeing more students and workers who are looking for career tracks that don't require such sacrifices. “The problem is that they have certain unquestioned assumptions about what's required to be successful,” he says. They share a common belief that “I gotta do the 24/7/365 BlackBerry travel around the world”. Aren't they perceptive?? It certainly applies to our business!

Summary

Work is an important part of our lives, and not just because of the money. Work helps give meaning and purpose to life and even plays a critical role in our mental and physical health. Those of us in this electronic industry have survived and thrived on chaotic change; and guess what, it will continue to accelerate. The world of Distribution and Repdom will become even more complex, but we are bigger than the challenges we'll face. The one inescapable requirement for success is that we all must change with the times, and the best and the brightest will.

May this be your best EDS ever. ■