

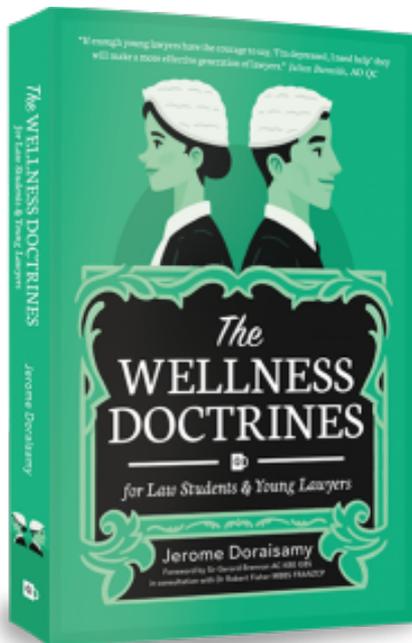
Diminishing returns

The law of diminishing returns was distressingly evident in an interview with a young lawyer on the [ABC's 7.30 report](#) last week. Jerome Doraisamy, the subject of the interview and author of a book on his experience, was sharing his journey and recovery from debilitating depression. In doing so he was talking to every one of us.

Being a high achiever is all very well, but not when the cost exceeds the returns. Being proud of being a workaholic may impress some colleagues. Badges of honour for being the last to leave the office are still prized. But the evidence is clear. As Harvard University researchers put it '[Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies](#)'.

Take care of yourself

As part of his recovery Jerome Doraisamy has published [The Wellness Doctrines](#), a book about his experience and ways to prevent falling into the trap. Soberingly, he records '86% of professionals note that they would rather suffer in silence than tell their colleagues or superiors about any mental health conditions they may be experiencing ...'



This accords with my experience in working with senior corporate managers and partners in professional services firms.

Read what [Sarah Green Carmichael](#) of Harvard writes and most will recognise themselves in one of these scenarios:

"Managers want employees to put in long days, respond to their emails at all hours, and willingly donate their off-hours — nights, weekends, vacations — without complaining. The underlings in this equation have little control; overwork cascades from the top of the organizational pyramid to the bottom. At least, that's one narrative of overwork...."

But there are other explanations ... There's another that says all of us, including senior managers, are basically flotsam [buffeted about](#) by the eddies of economic incentive, corporate culture, and technologies that keep the office just a tap away. In this version, there's no one really dictating the norms; we're all just reacting to macro forces

beyond our control ...

Then there's the version that looks at our psychology. In this one, we log too many hours because of a mix of inner drivers, like ambition, machismo, [greed](#), anxiety, guilt, enjoyment, pride, the pull of short-term rewards, a [desire to prove we're important](#), or an overdeveloped sense of duty. Some of these are negative ... but many are positive. In fact, multiple researchers have actually found that [work is less stressful than our home lives](#)."

Too much work produces diminishing returns

Carmichael again: "For starters, (overwork) doesn't seem to result in more output ... evidence shows that overwork is not just neutral — it hurts us and the companies we work for ... Work too hard and you also lose sight of the bigger picture ... as we burn out, [we have a greater tendency to get lost in the weeds](#) ... when you combine economic incentives, authority figures, and deep-seated psychological needs, you produce a cocktail that is simply too intoxicating to overcome."

Only you can control your work load

Take courage from the research of [Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter](#) who have shown that taking predictable time off from work (for which you may read *mandatory* time off work) results in 'higher reported job satisfaction, greater likelihood of visualizing a long-term career with (the) firm, and higher satisfaction with work/life balance.'

In other words, in your current role and in the rest of your career, you, your colleagues, and your organisation will be better off if you work less and in a more balanced manner.

Don't assume work needs to be your top priority all the time. Don't believe being 'always on' is essential to career success. Don't accept as true the idea that working in a hyper-competitive environment makes 50-60 hour weeks normal. These are traps – fallacies that have become part of the fabric of corporate and professional life.

As Perlow and Porter put it "... open up a conversation that everyone on your team wants to have ... *How can we work smarter? How can we work together more often, and how can we make sure we deliver without sacrificing work/life balance?*' ... In the end, the process creates efficiencies and promotes work/life balance – without sacrificing anything on the client side."

Put another way, the law of diminishing returns is not an inexorable truth. You can work smarter. This means you can work less – and produce more.

It's really a law of virtuous returns for those who are determined and smart enough to learn to work differently.

Further sources

If you want to delve into other aspects of this topic I suggest you read these earlier posts:

- + [To be a top performer, manage your energy not your time](#)
- + [The business of \(your\) life](#)
- + [It is possible to be happier, but not for the reasons you may think](#)