Myth of the Ideal Worker
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Roger and Lynda get out of their minivan and trudge through the large parking lot of a Southern California high school. Lugging fold-up chairs and travel mugs of coffee they make their way across fields of brightly colored team jerseys, milling parents, and young siblings running after balls or glued to iPads. They have driven over an hour early on a Saturday morning to attend an all-day lacrosse tournament and are eagerly discussing how their middle-school aged son is doing, and whether his team has a chance at winning today. They find a spot to put down their chairs and Lynda pulls out her iPhone. As he is setting up the chairs Roger glances up and says, “Don’t post on Facebook that we’re here. Ok?”

“Why not?” She asks, looking a bit taken aback.

He laughs and says, “There’s that Karate tournament today and I don’t want the guys to know I’m here.” She looks at him quizzically. Roger shrugs his shoulders and says “I told them that I had a work thing today.” He pauses, then adds, “It was just easier.”

Lynda raises her eyebrows, shrugs, and mumbles “Ok.” She then looks down to respond to a text from their teenage daughter.

Roger’s fib is both instinctive and revealing. For, even if he could have told his Karate buddies that he was prioritizing the lacrosse games with his wife and son, and even if they would have likely accepted his actions (perhaps after a bit of good-natured ribbing), “it was just easier” to lie and say he had a work retreat. For, on some level, work is deemed the only legitimate excuse for missing the gathering with his friends. Even when we don’t abide by it, the myth of the ideal worker is an accepted narrative by which commitments are prioritized, and time is allocated.

Who is the ideal worker? The person who stays late, works from home in the evenings, is available on the weekends, and is ever responsive to incoming texts and emails: this imaginary worker has no desires or commitments other than to be a dedicated worker, competent colleague, and organizational citizen. He or she is willing to put work obligations before family and self. This impossible ideal is both emulated and subtly glorified in popular culture: work is important, work is necessary, work takes precedence. While we may question these assumptions in our own lives, they pervade our understanding of broader cultural values. Aspirations for professional success and feelings of obligation (to co-workers, bosses, and the organization as a whole) are the underpinnings of what it means to be an ideal worker. Mobile devices perpetuate the ideal worker image by providing a veneer of control and suggestion that what is fundamentally impossible (constant availability and total commitment) is, in fact, achievable.

In the specific example above Roger is subtly invoking this myth in his attempt to avoid personal responsibility in choosing his family over his friends. However, he is forced to come to terms
with this myth in more immediate ways in his everyday work life. As a 40 something senior manager in a large hotel, he is perpetually trying to portray himself (to his boss, his subordinates, and his clients) as a version of the ideal worker. Like everyone in our study, the myth of the ideal worker figures into his everyday life in innumerable ways. SLH allows him to maintain his preferred location and live a two-hour commute from his job. He regularly takes conference calls from his car on the way to work and spends two to three nights a week at the hotel. On the one hand, the organization heralds the importance of family, physical health, and emotional well-being and, in so doing, celebrates Roger’s non-work activities. Roger is passionate about exercise—he wakes up at 4:30am to train for an upcoming Iron Man before driving into the office and spends several lunch breaks a week biking with a colleague. On the other hand, he is expected to be on-site for long hours and at-the-ready on nights and weekends. Getting up at 4:30am means that a 9pm email from his boss asking for an updated spreadsheet requires Roger to get out of bed to send the email, an intrusion that produces both anger and begrudging submission. Roger’s life is a complicated dance that reveals the contortions, frustrations, and moments of pride that he experiences in his ongoing attempts to engage as some version of the ideal worker while simultaneously upholding his desires to keep his family stable and be a literal Iron Man.

In this chapter we examine what work actually looks like—not in our offices, but in the evening and on the weekend. Professionals are often "at the ready" even while spending time with their families; and, when necessary, the ideal worker narrative requires us to cancel family dinners, miss school performances, and stay up late nights. Even if the Food Network is on in the background, work is still work. Yet we also see work pushed aside, families made primary, and individuals taking time to exercise, cook, and engage. We see how Roger’s use of social media makes his life more visible, and thus more accountable, to those around him, yet also how he manages such intricate ties to ultimately focus on his family. We explore how these experiences are shaped by gender roles, technology, and corporate hierarchy. Even in this company, one that espouses work-life balance, the male leaders are held up as superheroes who radiate the ideal worker image with their iPhones in hand. Roger’s story and others from SLH reveal our deep belief in individual achievement and professional success despite our desire for other types of engagement. They also suggest a deep ambivalence about whether it’s all possible, a nagging feeling to which we will later return.