02. Long-hours culture:
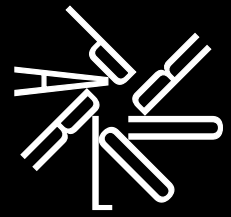
<u>Long working hours</u> are a huge issue in architecture. A culture of long hours is damaging to individual architects, to businesses, to the architect's professional standing and to the viability of the profession. It has major negative effects on those with commitments outside the workplace, and impacts particularly severely on women's careers. Although there are surprisingly few resources available and the issue can seem inevitable and intractable, there are also good examples of practices that don't fall into this pattern.

This guide challenges long-hours cultures in architecture. It examines the complex factors behind it and offers suggestions about how to manage workload and workplace culture for the benefit of all.

→
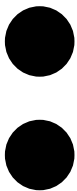
What is a long-hours culture?

Long-hours culture means the widespread acceptance of constant, excessive working hours (mostly unpaid). The belief in the long-hours model of work links to economic, management and professional identity issues.

Professional image A long-hours culture has become entwined with the self-image of many architects, and reflects larger professional beliefs about the responsibilities and commitments of architects. At university, design studios can firmly entrench the idea that being an architect involves personal sacrifice, and that long hours are required to produce good work – 'you do it because you love it'. This is often perpetuated in practice.

Economics Economic issues fostering a long-hours culture can intensify in slow economic climates. These issues include highly competitive business environments and concomitant low fees and fee undercutting, which can lead to practices depending on unpaid labour or unpaid overtime. It is the responsibility of practice owners to ensure that sufficient fees are put in place to cover the resources required to deliver a project, without relying on unpaid overtime.

Management Long hours often come about through management underestimating or ignoring the amount of time required to deliver work in relation to the experience or skill set of the staff member. Most employees want to produce high quality work and aim to deliver what is required. But sometimes employees have poor time management skills; sometimes workload and expectations are set unreasonably high within the available working hours.

Presenteeism A culture of long hours can mistakenly equate the amount of hours in the office with productivity.

Design as a never-ending process
A long-hours culture can be encouraged when design changes continue up until the last minute without systems to accommodate this process. All practices wish to develop their work to its best possible form, but it is important to recognise the impact of ongoing tweaks and variations on overtime if not accommodated in the project schedule.

Motivations The motivations that drive many architects to work long hours are complex. They include a strong sense of responsibility for the work, a desire to do well, and fear of losing jobs or not keeping up. It is important to disentangle these factors from the culture of excessive working hours, and to acknowledge that these desires and concerns can be met in other more effective ways.

The data Many architectural practices do operate successfully on more standard hours. However, our research indicates that long working hours, and substantial amounts of unpaid overtime, are widespread in Australian architecture.

The 2011 census finds that 39% of all those who identify as architects work over 41 hours a week (compared to 29% of all professionals), and that 22% work 49 or more hours a week (compared to 17% of all professionals). More than a quarter of the men (26%) work over 49 hours a week, as do 12% of the women.

The Parlour surveys of men and women architects also found long working hours, with most of the extra hours appearing to be unpaid. Only 6% of men and 7.4% of women respondents indicated that overtime was paid, while 14% of men and 17% of women had access to flexible practices such as time-in-lieu to offset overtime.
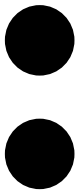
Why does it matter?

A culture of long hours can mask poor practice management, exhausted and miserable architects and failing businesses, not to mention an undervalued profession.

The consultation that accompanied the development of these guides identified 'long hours' as the second-most important issue facing women in Australian architecture. (Pay equity was the first). It was also nominated as the least open to change. Long hours is also the topic that has generated the most discussion on the Parlour website. This correlates to research elsewhere. A 2003 report by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada cites excessive work hours as one of the three key reasons young men and women leave the profession. A Royal Institute of British Architects' report from the same year also found that a long-hours culture and its flow-on effects on lack of flexibility and poor work/life balance were among the reasons for women leaving the profession.

Challenging and addressing long-hours cultures will make a huge difference to women in the profession, but it will also result in a more resilient, viable, healthy and respected profession for all.

Practices

Productivity Contrary to the perception that long hours equates to productivity, a long-hours culture and lack of work/life balance can quickly breed resentment and dissatisfaction among employees, leading to a decrease in productivity.

It can result in poor decisions or time-wasting indecision, reduced creativity, high staff turnover and a poor reputation that may mean the practice can't attract the best employees. It is also a sign of a poorly managed practice and may mask other serious business problems.

Demographics A culture of constant long hours can constrain the demographic of a practice – young employees may be prepared to put in the hours early in their careers, but this becomes untenable as they get older and gather more commitments.

This can result in a practice regularly losing experienced staff along with accumulated knowledge and incurring continual expenses related to training of new staff. Older architects also report the negative impact of continuing expectations of long hours on their health and lives.

Penalties Practices that do not remunerate employees for overtime expose themselves to prosecution and substantial fines.

In contrast, when practices and workloads are well-managed, staff will be much more willing to step up and help when the pressure really is on, and will be able to do so in more productive ways.

Employees

Health impacts Constant, excessive working hours takes its toll on employees and their families and can lead to fatigue, which results in other health problems. Common mental health issues associated with long working hours include depression, anxiety and low self esteem. This can then flow into other areas of work – for example, poor

decision-making, difficulties identifying priorities and weak negotiating skills. This is very problematic for both the architect and the employer.

Career impacts A long-hours culture limits the careers of those who have other commitments and means that many architects are disillusioned and disappointed by their careers.

Many of the women who responded to the Parlour survey identified the expectations of long hours as having a major negative impact on their ability to work effectively in the profession and it is a key reason for women leaving the profession. The reasons for this are complex, but include the difficulty of reconciling long hours with other responsibilities and being perceived as being less committed because they are unable to work long hours.

The profession

Professional regard If the profession wants others to value architecture and architects, then it needs to start by valuing itself. Expecting architects and other employees to contribute long hours of unpaid work undermines the industry and those who work in it. Good and talented people are lost to the profession because of burn-out, or they leave for careers in other sectors which are as rewarding and less exploitative.

What can we do?

The profession as a whole needs to step up to the challenge of changing long-hours cultures. Universities, practices, directors, employees, co-workers – all may be complicit in perpetuating this culture, so everyone has a part to play in finding a solution.

Challenging beliefs Cultural change also requires unpicking some of the myths around architecture. Remember:

- A long-hours culture does not equate to better work. Fatigued architects do not make better decisions and are not more creative.

- Architects who work efficiently within normal hours are no less committed as those who work long hours inefficiently.

- Being in the office for long hours does not mean that architects are actually working productively for all of those hours.

- Being a good architect involves engaging in the wider world. This isn't possible if you never leave the office.

- Managers have a responsibility to set reasonable workloads on architects.

- Architects tend to do whatever is required to make the project the best it can be, but this can lead to long hours and servicing over and above the negotiated fee. This is a trap that employers and employees need to keep in mind.

This does not mean that architects should never work extra hours. It does mean that working long hours continually for the sake of it is counterproductive and destructive.
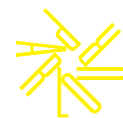
Practices

The good news is that not all practices have an entrenched culture of long hours – and many with more sensible working hours produce excellent work. Other practices have managed to implement management and resourcing changes that have significantly reduced amounts of overtime required while increasing productivity and maintaining the quality of their work.

It is important to distinguish between occasional long hours in response to specific, unforeseen situations and a continuing culture of crisis management that results in an entrenched long-hours culture. If your office tends towards the latter, you need to make changes and/or seek help.

Aim to build a resilient office that can accommodate both planned and unexpected absences, and can effectively absorb and respond to unexpected events without resorting to continual long hours.

Know your legal responsibilities

Employers have responsibilities relating to working hours under the Fair Work Act, the National Employment Standards, the Architects Award and other relevant Awards. Practices and directors can incur substantial fines for flouting these.

*See **Rights and responsibilities** at the end of this guide.*

Be serious about staff and workload management

Many (not all) architectural practices are undermanaged, with inadequate resources, time or consideration put into project and workload planning. This can lead to all kinds of problems, including a long-hours culture.

Directors, managers and team leaders have a responsibility to set reasonable workloads for architects, taking into account the experience level and the skill strength of each architect they are managing.

- Be clear about who is responsible for managing staff and workload. This should be part of someone's job. They need to be resourced properly, taken seriously and held accountable.

- Develop staffing strategies to allow the practice to respond flexibly to shifting priorities.

- Hours worked by employees should be recorded and regularly assessed. If employees are working continual long hours, ask them why: 'Are you struggling with the work? Is the deadline unreasonable?' This sends a clear message about expectations and helps open lines of communication.

- If employees are continually working overtime, managers should reduce their workload until the employee develops sufficient experience to tackle more complex work or to work faster.

- Set timelines and keep track of these.

- Set priorities. This allows employees to take responsibility for scheduling their work. In contrast, unclear priorities can mean the employees 'over work' as it seems that everything needs to be done at once.

- Make sure directors, managers and project leaders communicate effectively with teams to ensure issues are raised in a timely fashion.

Lead by example

Cultural change is much more effective when it is led from the top. Senior staff can be powerful change agents.

- Insist that senior staff mostly come and go at reasonable hours, occasionally work flexibly and take leave owed to them.

- Ensure that senior members of the practice discourage staff from excessive overtime.

Send clear messages about working hours

It's easy (and flattering) for employees to feel as though they're too valuable to be spared. Re-framing this attitude, while clearly valuing the employee, is part of creating a resilient office.

Practice leadership should send clear messages that the firm supports and expects reasonable hours of work, and values those who can work effectively in the hours available.

- Benchmark against the standard working week.

- Send clear messages to all staff that their work should be done within the standard eight-hour day – or within the terms of their alternative employment agreement – wherever possible.

- Keep an eye on competitive overstaying and after-hours work cultures in your office. Try to curb any excesses.

- Ensure that employees do not judge each other around working hours. Make it clear that the practice values productivity and does not simply equate long hours with greater commitment.

- Make sure to thank those who do work long hours to meet a short-term need.

- Note on your website that you don't accept applications from those offering free labour.

Manage resource allocation

Manage resources and time, and keep developing knowledge about this. Strategies for doing this will differ according to the size of your practice.

Coping with occasional circumstances – a particularly pressing deadline or an unexpected change – is a different matter to larger management problems associated with long-hours cultures, and a resilient office will be able to manage these.

- Audit the practice's performance in relation to time and budgets. Every project can run into unexpected problems, but if all jobs routinely demand long hours there may be a problem with scheduling and workloads.

- Track projects to build knowledge about time taken, number of drawings required, budgets and so on. Use this to improve and update ongoing projections about the staff resources required for different types of projects.

- Ensure that labour and time resources are adequate for the development of a project.

Manage overtime

Expecting staff to provide regular unpaid overtime 'for the good of the business' is a breach of workplace regulations and a sign of a poorly managed practice. It also often results in employees moving on.

- Discourage staff from doing overtime unless absolutely necessary.

- Use paid overtime or flexible hours as a fair exchange for long hours. Putting in long days and sharing the stress is much more tolerable when the benefits are shared.

- Flexible work arrangements rather than long hours are likely to yield a win/win situation for the practice and staff. This is a much better alternative to high staff turnover and a long-term failure to hang on to your best talent.

- Remember that once a pattern of long hours has started, it can quickly become the norm.

Monitor productivity

A long-hours culture equates the physical presence of a team member with 'productive contribution'. In reality, an exhausted team member is unlikely to be doing their best work, and may be doing little of value at all. Ensuring employees are alert, engaged and productive is far more effective.

- Keep an eye on the productivity of staff.

- Remember that those with external responsibilities often work smarter rather than longer. Don't assume that those who stay late are the most dedicated employees.

- Ensure that those who achieve reasonable workloads within their agreed working hours are rewarded for their effectiveness.

- Assess and reward staff by outcomes, not time spent in the office.

- Provide chronic over-stayers with assistance in time management. Ensure that they are working efficiently and that hours in the office are not wasted.

Be aware of perfectionism

Some employees are under-confident in their abilities, regardless of the quality of their work. This may lead to over-working.

- Be aware of under-confidence that may lead some to work excessive hours.

- Assess the quality of the work, not the employee's perceptions of it.

- Try to bolster and nurture the confidence of underconfident employees, especially early in their careers.

- Be aware of the corrosive effects of long hours on those experiencing confidence and self-esteem issues.

Educate your clients

Some clients place significant demands on a practice – including clients who have made public commitments to equitable workplaces. This can be difficult to manage in the competitive world of a service industry. However, it is worth making parameters clear – if you don't demonstrate that you respect your staff and work environment, no one else will.

- Encourage your clients to respect the workplace structures and systems in place in your office and, where possible, avoid accepting unreasonable demands within inadequate timeframes.

- Discourage clients from making demands of your employees that they would not make of their own staff or of other consultants.

Be careful of low fees

Under-quoting and fee-cutting accelerate in the tight economic climates, and may mean that practices are unable to complete work without expecting staff to work unpaid overtime.

The problem of low fees is beyond the scope of the guidelines, but it is important to bear in mind that these short-term survival strategies produce longer-term difficulties for the financial sustainability of individual practices and the whole profession.

Seek advice

Not all architects are great business people, and some struggle with the management side of running a practice. Many practices experience growing pains as they increase in size, without adequate management systems and business planning. This can affect the culture that develops in an office and the expectations placed on staff. If this applies to your practice, consider seeking advice from an expert.

- Consider using a business coach or management advisor who can help put systems in place to create a more effective workplace and a better work culture.

- Find a mentor. Mentors are not only for young architects. Those managing a practice may benefit from a mentoring relationship with someone more experienced or skilled in the business and management of architecture.
  *See Parlour guide: **Mentoring**.*
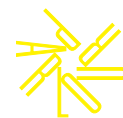
Employees

As an employee it can seem impossible to change an entrenched culture, but employees do have some power and may be able to initiate change or at least to encourage directors and senior staff to see the problem. (Nonetheless, real change also needs leadership from the top.)

It is also important to acknowledge that employees can be complicit in perpetuating a long-hours culture – particularly in the early part of their careers when other commitments may be less time-consuming.

Long hours in the office can be addictive, and the collegiate atmosphere of pulling all-nighters is often exciting and recreates the camaraderie of the university design studio. But long term, it is not healthy, and it can result in a judgmental office culture that discriminates against those who are unable or unwilling to participate.

Know your rights

Understand your rights.

- Remember that the Architects Award stipulates that extra hours must be recompensed by the employer in one of three ways (outlined in the Award).

- Remember that under the *National Employment Standards* all employees have the right to refuse unreasonable additional hours.

*See **Rights and responsibilities** at the end of this guide.*

Identify fair employers

This point is reiterated throughout the set of guides – employers who are poor in one area are also often weak in others.

*See Parlour guides: **Recruitment, Pay equity** and **Career progression**.*

- Research the practices you would like to work for. Look for fair workplaces that offer time-in-lieu or other compensatory conditions. Avoid those with a reputation for poor management and a long-hours culture.

Be part of the solution, not the problem

Many architects genuinely love their work and sometimes there is nothing else they'd rather be doing. But not everyone feels this way all the time. And long hours that feel 'compulsory' are unappealing, even when you love your job.

- Pre-empt potential long hours by requesting additional resources when required to meet a deadline.

- Understand that long hours are more or less viable at different stages of a career. If you are young and keen, don't judge others who are less able to stay late. Remember, it could easily be you in a few years.

- Value your colleagues for the quality of the work they produce and for what they bring to the workplace, rather than assessing them on the number of additional hours they put in.

- Learn to recognise a long-hours culture. Working extra hours on a challenging and rewarding project is not necessarily a bad thing, nor is stepping up during a particular pressure point, but this should be separated from participating in an unforgiving culture of long hours for the sake of it.

- Don't get involved in competitive overstaying.

- Challenge your own reasons for working overtime. What is motivating you?

- Design work can be a very open-ended activity, and this can also encourage long hours – but remember that insight often comes when you step away and give your mind time to reflect. Exhaustion and fatigue lead to poor decisions and a loss of creativity – and therefore poorer design outcomes.

Communicate, seek advice and ask questions

As an employee you may feel powerless at times when facing an existing long-hours culture, and it may seem impossible to challenge it single-handed. But suffering in silence can also exacerbate the problem.

- Communicate clearly with your employer/ manager about any unexpected hiccups or difficulties with a project and the impact this has on workload and hours. Seek advice about strategies to deal with this.

- If the overtime is occurring because of lack of staff resources on a project, discuss this with management. Request additional staff or extended time frames if this is the case.

- Speak to your mentor/s about workplace productivity and ask for advice on how to avoid developing a habit of working long hours. They may also be able to help you identify when enough work has been done on a task.

- Ask your employer questions about what is considered a reasonable amount of hours to be working on a weekly basis.

- Don't agree to additional tasks if it means excessive hours. Discuss how these tasks can be completed.

- Don't apologise for being unable to work late on a consistent basis.

- Speak up if you are overwhelmed by a punishing workload. Senior staff are busy people and may not have noticed that you have been given more work than is reasonable. A non-confrontational way to do this might be to list the tasks you have and ask which ones they want prioritised.

Offer creative alternatives

If overtime is unavoidable due to a particular issue in a specific project and you have responsibilities outside the office, try coming up with creative suggestions on how you can contribute.

- Discuss options. Is it possible to leave and come back? Work remotely from home? Come in early the next morning?

- Working overlapping shifts on a project can be more productive than having everyone there at the same time.

- Adjust client expectations of timelines and scope of work.

Beware the slippery slope

Long hours can seem like a way to demonstrate your commitment to a practice and the profession, but you might be the only one to remember or recognise this. Over time this can lead to bitterness and disappointment.

- Don't assume that by working long hours when you are young you are 'banking hours' for the future. Many employees who have put in long hours find that this is hardly remembered later when it comes to promotions, redundancy or negotiating flexible or part-time hours.

Don't underrate yourself

Some employees work excessive hours due to worry and a lack of confidence about the quality of their work. Long hours are unlikely to help and may exacerbate the problem.

- Ask yourself if you really need to over-work, or is it a method to manage anxiety and low confidence. If the latter, there will be other, more effective remedies.
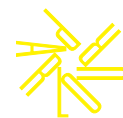
The profession

Professional organisations can play a significant role in advocating for reasonable, inclusive and ethical workplace cultures. This is particularly important in relation to long-hours culture, which is often tied to low fees and fee-undercutting as well as cultural factors. Changing the expectations around fees is difficult for individual practices, so professional bodies have extremely important roles in articulating the value of architecture and advocating for the fair treatment of architectural employees. This include challenging long-hours cultures.

Promote ethical workplaces

Professional bodies should clearly advocate for their member practices to be ethical workplaces. For example, the Royal Institute of British Architects has declared that practices that use unlawful unpaid intern arrangements will be struck off the list of chartered architects.

Teach students well

Universities and educational institutions should set students up with effective, productive work habits, rather than inculcating a long-hours culture.

- Reduce the availability of 24-hour studios. Limiting access can help students to learn appropriate time-management skills.

- Structure projects so that there are a number of smaller deadlines for work rather than a big one at the end.

- Monitor for competitive overstaying and ensure that individual staff members do not implicitly encourage it. This can help to deter a long-hours culture in the studio.

Rights and responsibilities

Ordinary hours of work as set out in the *National Employment Standards* cannot exceed 38 per week and must be worked between 8 am and 6 pm Monday to Friday inclusive. The spread of hours may be altered by mutual agreement between the employer and the majority of employees in the establishment, section or sections concerned.

Under the *National Employment Standards* all employees have the right to refuse unreasonable additional hours.

The Architects Award includes clear provisions for overtime and states that, 'an employer must compensate an employee for all time worked in excess of normal hours of duty'. This can be done in one of three ways:

– Time-off-in-lieu, which must be taken within six months or paid for at the rate of time-and-a-half.
– Payment at time-and-a-half.
– Another agreed arrangement, so long as it is not entered into for the purpose of avoiding Award obligations and does not result in unfairness to the employee.

Alternative arrangements must be recorded. Typically employers will offer an 'annualised salary', which will cover both ordinary hours and overtime. It is important for employees to keep a record of their hours of work in order to be able to work out whether the arrangement is fair or whether the employee would be better off being paid 'hour for hour' for all overtime worked. The periodic review of this type of arrangement is very important.

Note: This is offered as an overview only. Readers are reminded that legislation may change and they are advised to check current legislation at the time of reading.

Further resources

National Employment Standards
Fair Work Ombudsman

http://www.fairwork.gov.au/employment/national-employment-standards/pages/default.aspx

Hours of Work
Fair Work Ombudsman

http://www.fairwork.gov.au/employment/hours-of-work/pages/default

Conditions of Employment Fact Sheets
Fair Work Ombudsman

http://www.fairwork.gov.au/Resources/fact-sheets/conditions-of-employment/Pages/default

Architects Award 2010
Fair Work Commission

https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/modern_awards/award/MA000079/default.htm

Further reading

'Why Working for Free is Not OK'
Warwick Mihaly, Parlour, 2013

http://www.archiparlour.org/why-working-for-free-is-not-ok/

'Work/Life/Work Balance'
Andrew Maynard, Parlour, 2012

http://www.archiparlour.org/worklifework-balance/

'Against Work-Life Balance'
Amanda Kolson Hurley, Parlour, 2013

http://www.archiparlour.org/against-work-life-balance/

See Parlour : for further articles about workplace issues in Australian architecture.

http://www.archiparlour.org/topics/workplace/

www.archiparlour.org