



The thin line between work and play

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IN the name of productivity and cost effectiveness, organisations always strive to remain lean, squeezing the maximum out of their employees. To keep up with the competition, there must be continuous improvement. This invariably translates to demanding more and better output per unit of input. Engineers are centre to such activities to make them happen. Like it or not, we often end up working long hours. The super-efficient ones might still get away... provided that they lie low as otherwise more work will descend!

Even in the academia, the situation is no different. A Korean visiting professor shared with me that he would not go home for a week while writing research proposals, an American professor wrote a complaint to his graduate student about not seeing him work in the weekends, a Malaysian Vice-Chancellor implied that academic staff members toiling late into the night are worth emulating...

Well, perhaps these engineers truly enjoy their work, so much so that work and play are one. But it is hard to fathom that this is the lifestyle that we desire, or one that we wish for our children who brave themselves to follow our footsteps.

On top of these, we have professional bodies, in which participation is voluntary. But there is inherently some degree

of compulsion, or 'duty of care'. All meetings and activities involve deadlines, many of which are not flexible, e.g. events or routine publications. When stretched between demands at the workplace and demands at the professional body, again long hours follow if we continue to care deeply for both. Is this work or play?

As psychologists would argue, a healthy dose of stress is good for us. It improves our performance. Beyond a threshold, performance deteriorates, ultimately leading to a breakdown, both mental and physical. How many amongst us have crossed that limit?

Such muddling between work and play is not our monopoly. In competitive sports, for example, it is no longer about keeping ourselves healthy while having fun. It is increasingly about being faster, stronger, higher, and also the number of wins. The mantra is 'going beyond the past record' in all things measurable.

Perhaps it is time we pause to reflect. What does our civilisation achieve from this? Are we sacrificing the intangible parts, such as leisure and happiness? As summarised succinctly by Swedish professor Magdalena Svanström, the ultimate challenge ahead is 'to produce 10 billion happy people'. Or is this just another goal that brings more work? ■

