BY JIM CARROLL



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age of leisure

AH YES, THE SIX-HOUR WORK WEEK

Observe, for a moment, your briefcase. If you are like many business travellers, you will have it jammed full with the accoutrements of the digital age. Your laptop computer, cell phone and electronic organizer. You are in touch, in tune and a true citizen of the wired world. You are also a great disappointment to the early believers of the computer revolution. You see, you probably work too hard.

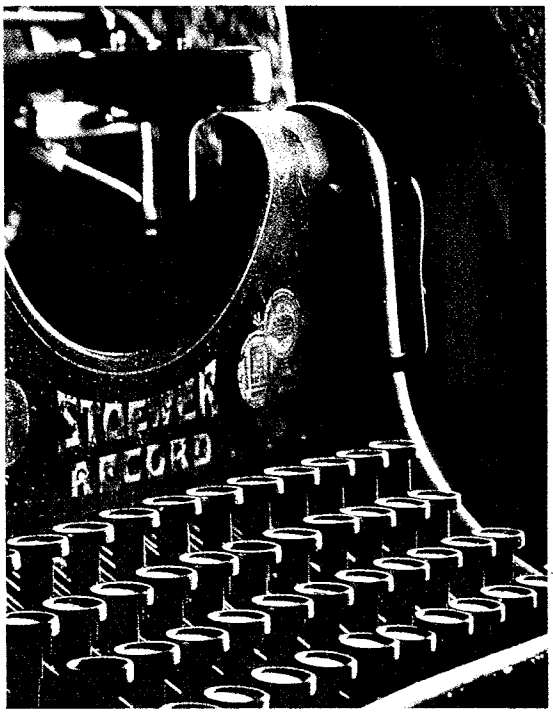

Photo: Uwe Starke/Masterfile

HARD WORK WAS MEANT TO DISAPPEAR ALONG WITH TYPEWRITERS.

YESTERDAY

How wonderful it was all supposed to be! In the early 50s, citizens of the world were told of the magic of the forthcoming computer revolution. Gosh, computers were to be so great that leading futurists of the time positively gushed about the forthcoming "leisure age," a fascinating new period of time in which people would work no more than two hours a day, three days a week. Indeed, many people wouldn't have to work at all — computers would do it on their behalf. We were even told that computer driven robots would vacuum the floors, wash the windows and clean the toilets. We believed, and we celebrated our new technology religion by tuning in to the *Jetsons*, a popular cartoon about the modern space age family of the 21st century.

Enter Donald N. Michael, a social psychologist, to burst our bubble. On February 12, 1962, *Newsweek* picked up his warnings of the dark side of the computer age. Far from seeing any good in the age to come, he predicted that computers would begin a slow but inevitable takeover of everything that man did, providing for massive unemployment, loss of human values and deep social unrest. Yes, there would be a leisure age, he said, but it would not be a pleasant one.





Photo: Kirsten Hildebrant/Masterfile

YOU'RE PLUGGED IN AND WORKING HARDER THAN EVER BEFORE.

He even foresaw that this new era would lead us to significant marital stress. The reason? From his perspective, the man in the family (who, in the politically incorrect 50s, was the sole breadwinner) would suddenly find himself at home a great deal, a casualty of the leisure age. He would be far too involved in his wife's space. (Back then, wives stayed home.) Stress and marital breakdown would ensue.

What a time it was! All too soon, the gilded computer age was offering a mixed and confusing message. We weren't reassured when our first experience with the technology involved the punch card, a piece of cardboard that threatened us: "Do Not Fold, Spindle or Mutilate." More than a few of us promptly expressed our distrust of this new era by seizing the nearest card and folding it in half.

TODAY

Jump forward some 30 years or so. You're plugged in, wired, constantly in touch and working harder than ever before. The fact of the matter is that, far from providing you with a leisure lifestyle, technology has come to rob you of much of your free time. The concept of the six-hour workweek remains but a quaint myth, a relic of the over-enthusiastic expectations of those early days.

It is supremely ironic that the very technology that was supposed to free us has instead bound us more firmly than ever. E-mail, fax machines, telephones, cell phones, laptop computers — all of these devices conspire to ensnare us in a global web of constant communication. We've managed to put ourselves in a situation in which people can get hold of us at any time, anywhere. This wired life of ours is hurried and rushed.

Clearly the early promoters of the computer revolution had it wrong. Even Donald Michael's prediction has failed to come about. Today's phenomenon is the



Photo: Miles Ertman/Masterfile

YOU'LL STILL WORK HARD, BUT CHOOSE YOUR OWN LOCATION.

working wife, not the house husband: a great many women have left the home in order to make their contribution to a two-income family. Far from spending too much time together at home, couples may instead find family time reduced to a fleeting and precious moment.

Maybe computers are taking revenge on us for all those mutilated punch cards.

TOMORROW?

Still, is the concept of the "leisure age" but a myth? Maybe not. And perhaps Donald Michael was at least right in predicting that the computer would allow for more family time — although not in as negative a way as he supposed.

In a wired world, it creates the possibility for people to work from anywhere at any time. One likelihood is that an increasing number of professionals will take advantage of this opportunity. They'll make career decisions based upon the lifestyle afforded by being plugged in. They will choose to become nomadic workers, offering their skills and capabilities to the corporate world from wherever they might choose to live. The "electronic cottage" will have become a reality. Yes, they will still be working, but they will come to enjoy their own personal version of the "leisure age." They'll be able to spend more time with their children, and more time with each other, as a result of working at home.

As for all those punch cards? No doubt we will discover some very astute people in the future. They will have foreseen that a healthy collectibles market was bound to emerge in these paper relics of the dawn of the computer age. They'll make a killing.

And the rest of us will regret each and every punch card that we so carelessly spindled. ■

Jim Carroll, C.A., expresses his continuing study of computer and Internet issues through corporate speaking engagements, a weekly column in the *Globe and Mail*, and numerous books. E-mail your comments to: jcarroll@jimcarroll.com