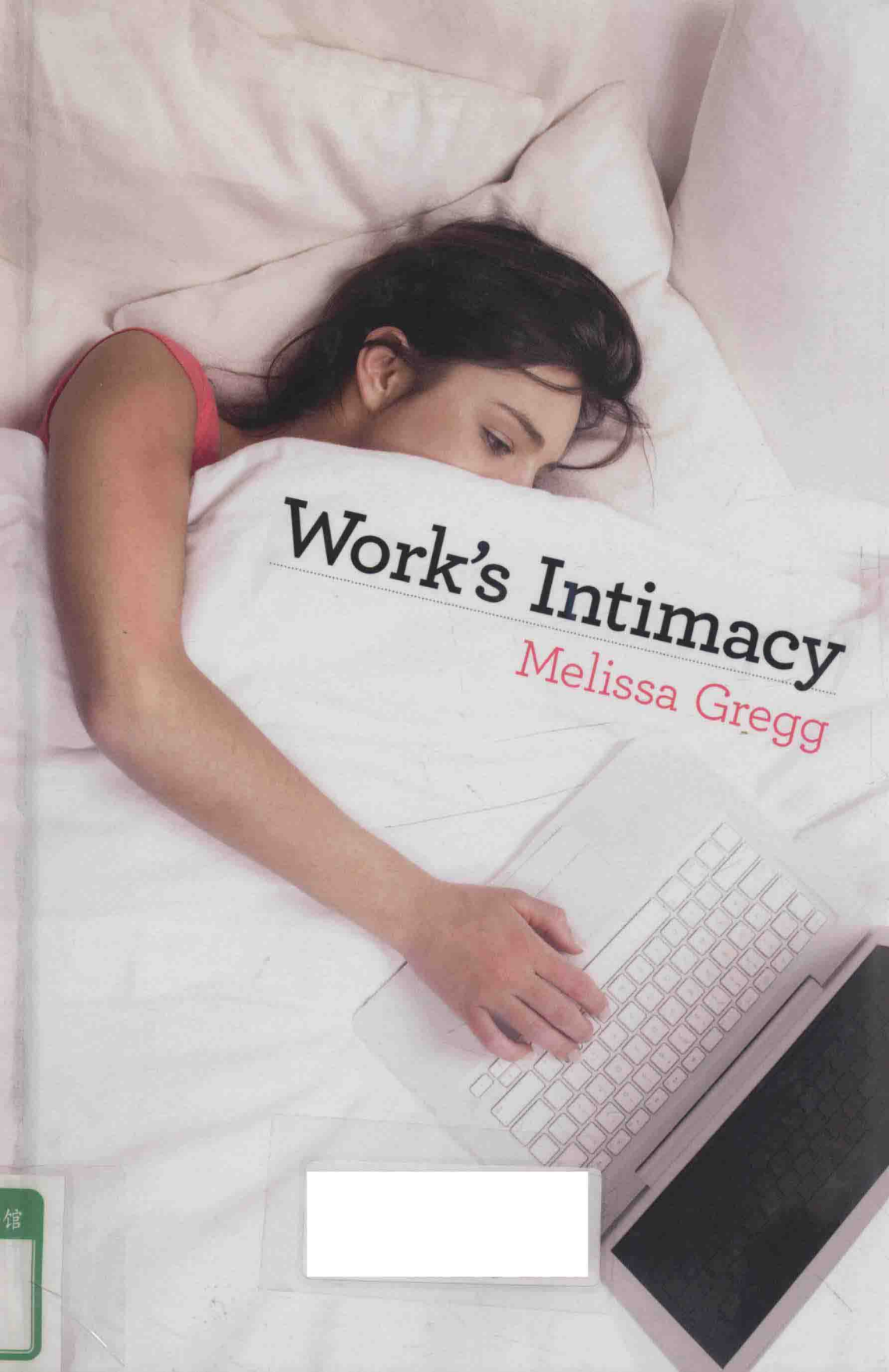
Work's Intimacy
Melissa Gregg

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Preface

When I moved to Brisbane in early 2004, a number of Sydney friends made it clear I should expect few visitors. To Australia's southern residents, the large north-eastern state of Queensland remains a curiosity, summoning images of sun-drenched lethargy, backward attitudes, conservative farmers, and corrupt law enforcement. The state capital Brisbane has long been regarded by residents and outsiders alike as a "sleepy little town." Indeed, in the period this book describes, glossy tourism brochures began to use this phrase as a slogan, adding, "can you blame us?" in an attempt to celebrate the developing night-time economy. In spite of such prejudice, I was one of the thousands of interstate migrants who moved to the Sunshine State for a full-time job in the past decade. And even though substantial newspaper coverage and government rhetoric placed great hope in these statistics, the experiences of actual workers largely went missing from the public record. This book captures just a few of them.

This research is based on a three-year Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship from 2007–9. *Working From Home: New Media Technology, Workplace Culture and the Changing Nature of Domesticity* aimed to offer empirical evidence of technology's impact on the work and home lives of employees in the information and communication spheres of the knowledge economy. Large organizations were chosen – in education, government, broadcasting, and telecommunications – to contrast the many depictions of self-employed, entrepreneurial workers at the leading edge of the "new economy." From four employers, 26 participants were recruited at

different levels of the workplace hierarchy. Employees were interviewed annually for the three-year period when this was possible. Their names have been anonymized for publication.

While constraints on time prevented extensive ethnographic engagement with workers, a number of wider social developments inform the reflections that follow. At the level of politics, a federal election with a strong emphasis on workers' rights saw the Australian Labor Party triumph in 2007 after 12 years in opposition. Within just a couple of months, the global economy endured a violent downward swing, which pushed Australia from prosperity to near recession, bringing unprecedented levels of national debt. Meanwhile the project's focus, communications technology, facilitated the tremendous uptake of social networking sites – from MySpace to Facebook, and a later surge to Twitter. In the final year of the study, the commercial release of the iPhone in Australia changed the telecommunications landscape significantly. The book now stands as an archive of this phenomenal rise of social media, and the growth of Internet use in everyday life.

In describing the lived impact of the new economy's "flexible" workplace, however, the project originates from an earlier downturn. The sustained glamorization of entrepreneurial business culture since the dot.com boom is the lasting legacy of a complex historical moment that few studies have interrogated sufficiently. Across any number of cultural artifacts today, computers and networked devices remain the resilient index of a variety of social changes, from family relations to commerce, even dating practices. But nothing has been more evident – and more absent from political discussion – than the way that online connectivity consummates the middle-class infatuation with work.

This book shows the extent to which new media technology encourages and exacerbates a much older tendency among salaried professionals to put work at the heart of daily concerns, often at the expense of all other sources of intimacy and fulfillment. The growing magnetism of mobile communication devices is one of the strongest indications that there is now a significant number of people for whom paid employment is the most compelling demonstration of virtue, accomplishment, and self-identity that society makes available. With a range of online subcultures also developing in support of these tendencies, the mutually reinforcing benefits of chronic connectivity among educated professionals are highly circular. At a time of declining civic participation, pressures on the institutions of marriage and the family, and persistent religious and racial intolerance in the West, this book offers a new lens for analytical attention. It

explains how ordinary workers may withdraw from a range of more complex human relationships to focus on a proven source of personal esteem – their job – since its rewards are so openly celebrated in the dominant register for modern relationships: the capitalist marketplace.

All books are difficult to write, but this one has been especially affected by my own implication in the phenomena under discussion. Coming to terms with work's intimacy has entailed moving states and cities more than once in search of what may be an elusive fit between personal and professional motives. On a more troubling level, it has also meant learning alongside others the grammar of hunched shoulders, clandestine drinking cultures, RSI prevention, and enforced leave. This project has presented a complex scholarly dilemma, which is the difficulty of distinguishing among participants' revelations about work, the behavior of peers and colleagues, and my own lived practice. It concludes with a strong conviction that the present generation of academics must be among the first to see their lives and loves as potentially open to change.

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Introduction: Work's Intimacy

Performing Professionalism Online and On the Job

No-one's job is safe.

Australian Federal Industry Minister
Kim Carr, February 2009

This book provides an overdue account of online technology and its impact on work life. It moves between the offices and homes of today's salaried professionals to provide an intimate insight into the personal, family and wider social tensions faced by workers in a changing employment landscape. For any number of years now, new media technology has been marketed as giving us the freedom to work where we want, when we want, in flexible arrangements that apparently suit the conditions of the modern office. But little has been written to illustrate the consequences of this development, where work has broken out of the office, downstairs to the cafe, in to the street, on to the train, and later still to the living room, dining room, and bedroom.

Online technology has brought some significant problems to the work and personal lives of ordinary office workers – the information workers at the heart of the so-called "knowledge economy." This book describes the experiences of these employees, focusing on the information, communication and education ("ICE") professions that complement the heavy-hitting "FIRE" sectors of finance, insurance and real estate.[1] The latter have enjoyed their own chroniclers of late. The global economic downturn generated a predictable flurry of insider accounts of work cultures at the top end of town, as well

as the housing and loan schemes that precipitated much of the wider disaster. *Work's Intimacy* provides a different white-collar story. It reflects the lives of those in much more mundane office environments, in a city with a significant case of suburban sprawl. But in a digitally connected "network society" (Castells 2000), these workers' livelihoods are no less affected in the shift from prosperity to recession – and back again.

The following chapters demonstrate the increasingly intimate relationship salaried professionals have with their work, and how new media technologies are involved in this development. Most obviously, online technology changes our sense of availability in professional information jobs. Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence. This is a process we might describe the *presence bleed* of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply. Presence bleed explains the familiar experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations faced with a "to do" list that seems forever out of control. It not only explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours, but also captures the feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled – especially since there are not enough workers to carry the load. Throughout this book, workers will be shown to use online networks in the home to catch up on work that can't be finished in the office, as roles expand and employees are asked to do "more with less." With the increased use of digital technology, workloads that may have been acceptable to begin with are shown to accumulate further expectations and responsibilities that aren't being recognized – and never will be, if home-based work continues to go unremarked. Like the mobile devices facilitating this workload, the jobs themselves are subject to "function creep." The purported convenience of the technologies obscures the amount of additional work they demand. As one young librarian in this study explained: "They're not reducing any work load, they're just giving us more stuff to do. You kind of think something has to give, you know, you can't just keep piling work on us."

Presence bleed captures both the changing behavioral dimensions and professional expectations in communication- and information-heavy jobs. For the middle-class employees this condition affects, networked technologies are affordable enough to have in the home, so when online connections allow access to work beyond office hours, the possibility of being willing and able to work can manifest

as a compulsion that has to be monitored.[2] To some extent, this is a result of the sense of fulfillment and gratification many workers derive from their job, which makes them susceptible to letting professional duties spill into other times and spaces. But for just as many, the coerciveness of online technology allows employers to contact them beyond paid hours as a matter of course, whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged. In either case, consciousness of the always-present potential for engaging with work is a new form of affective labor that must be constantly regulated.[3]

The professionals in this book engage in work beyond the formal work day for a range of reasons. For some, it's to "keep sane" amidst a constant tide of communication requests that a hectic schedule cannot accommodate. For others, it's to maintain perceptions of competence and professionalism surpassing the call of duty – to reassure clients of their importance, or to keep the rest of "the team" happy. In the absence of formal policies regarding new media use, particularly when it comes to email response times, the stories they tell reveal online devices to be part of an armory of psychological preparedness that workers bring to their jobs even before the workday begins. Online technology allows workers to carve out strategies to cope with conditions that are highly intensified because they are taken to be individual rather than structural in nature.

In some ways, this behavior accords with ideas of neoliberal governance in which workers take responsibility for their actions and enjoy this as a form of freedom (Rose 1999a, 1999b). "Working from home" can perhaps be read as a kind of personal and professional cohesiveness employees establish to make individualized working conditions palatable. Retreating from an office environment that appears to obstruct the completion of core job tasks, workers choose to conduct some of the most critical parts of their professional practice from home. For women in particular, this appears to be a way of coping with the lack of flexibility in the performance, attendance and reward measures that continue to guide the formal workplace. Subsequent chapters show women are prepared to wait until the cooking and cleaning are done, and the rest of the house is asleep, to have time alone to work. Having time alone with one's paid work can even become a form of solace from other, dubiously recognized, labors.

"I can't work at work" is also a common expression for employees introduced in this book who find the workplace full of unnecessary deviations. What's interesting is that the bulk of these "distractions" come in the form of interaction with other employees. One of the greatest benefits of online technology is therefore to moderate

preferred levels of collegial engagement. Remoteness can be feigned in spite of physical presence, just as presence can be simulated when employees are actually out of the office. In either case, the coercive nature of "face-time" is one of the many "inefficiencies" of the office that play a role in driving employees home to work.

But as professional concerns claim a larger stake in the activities and priorities of the home, employees risk placing themselves in a position where employers will no longer feel obliged to provide effective compensation for their efforts. The lengthening workday can't be recognized in the spreadsheet formulae that calculate the hours served by modern employees. Moreover as economic conditions deteriorate – and employees are asked to accept reduced hours or pay cuts for the benefit of the company bottom line – an already large gulf between motivation, incentive and reward for salaried work comes in to play. The self-directed employee of the future may be less susceptible to the ties that bind their labor to an employer.[4]

The work/life ruse

In the years preceding the recent economic downturn, a range of commentators failed to appreciate the extent to which middle-class professionals had been encouraged to see work as the most significant demonstration of their success and identity. Feminists in particular seemed more interested in popular culture as a gauge for political accomplishments (or lack thereof) leaving workplace concerns to the dwindling ranks of union members and organizers.[5] While business was booming, men and women each worked long hours for firms that were more than happy to profit from their "sacrificial labor" (Ross 2004). The refusal to mount a sustained critique of long hours culture, and the gendered assumptions underpinning it, had the effect of making women feel grateful for so-called "flexible" work arrangements. These were conditions that allowed women to maintain traditional childcare and home maintenance expectations but only in addition to paid work (see chapter 2).

Sociologists, management literature and HR directives provided a powerful discourse encouraging employees to pursue "work–life balance" as a necessary corrective to the high performance demands of entrenched work cultures. That this trend coincided with an increased number of women in the workplace only served to imply such balance was their particular concern. It couldn't admit that work in itself might not be the problem; that many people enjoy their job for the sense of accomplishment it can bring. Nor could it