There is a major school of thought in software development, of which I am a member, that says that programmers who work more than 40 hours a week for extended periods of time actually get less work done than programmers who are not in crunch mode all the time. This is well studied and documented in books like Peopleware by Timothy Lister and Tom DeMarco. When people work more than about eight hours a day at programming tasks, the quality of their work suffers so much that they need to do two hours of bug-fixing for every hour of coding that they do. The work they do after eight hours is actually negative work.

Another core belief of mine is that an experienced employee is worth much more than a new employee, and that it can take a new employee a year to get fully up to speed and be as productive as the senior members of the team. If ea_spouse is correct that EA’s employee turnover is running 50% a year thanks to the long hours, this company has a serious problem.

ea_spouse’s perspective is the human one, the perspective of the employees and their families, which is important.

But I’d like to point out that even if all you cared about was the employer’s perspective, if all you cared about was what Electronic Arts should do to maximize their profits, the permanent crunch time policy is still completely counterproductive.


Let’s do a little math.

When you force programmers to work 90-hour weeks, they can’t do all the little errands that are a part of everyday life. If they’re at work from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., 7 days a week, when are they supposed to get the emissions test for their car? When are they supposed to pay their credit card bills? Or call their mom?

I’ll tell you when: when they’re at work. All this stuff happens during work, so immediately subtract 10 productive hours from the real workweek. OK, we’re down to 80.

Now, those 40 hours of overtime? Probably worthless. Most programmers, when forced to stay at work until late, will use the extra time surfing the Web, chatting on IM, or doing anything but writing code, not because they are lazy sloths, but because their brain has shut down for the day. But I’ll give EA management the benefit of the doubt: let’s assume that somehow, all evidence to the contrary, you get 10 hours worth of coding done in those extra 40 hours. So now we’re down to 50 useful hours.

Now let’s add back the cost of recruiting to replace employees who burn out. Recruiting and training a new employee is usually estimated to cost about 12 months’ salary, total. This includes the actual recruiting expenses, but it also includes the decreased productivity of the new employee while they get up to speed, the time they soak up from other employees who have to interview them and show them the ropes after they’re hired, moving expenses and startup bonuses, etc., etc.

If EA is losing 50% of their employees every year, rather than the industry standard of about 5%, that extra turnover costs as much as having 45% more employees. Or to put it in terms of our 50-hour workweek, we’re down to a little bit more than 25 productive hours a week out of the average employee, because almost half of the employee population is still in their first year and therefore they haven’t yet earned back their startup costs.

So not only would 40-hour workweeks be more humane, they would actually be significantly more profitable for Electronic Arts. I’m not just saying this due to some misconstrued ideology: I have a software company of my own and we are pretty strict about 40-hour workweeks, so I’m willing to put my money where my mouth is.