

Till death do you work?

Overdoing it at the office gives one pause

By **LARRY BALLARD**
Gannett News Service

A famous philosopher (OK, it was my dad) once said: "A little hard work never killed anybody."

Someone should tell Kenichi Uchino. Except, he's dead.

The late Mr. Uchino was a middle manager at a Toyota auto plant in Toyota City, Japan. That is, until he dropped dead at age 30.

His lawyer claimed Uchino had worked more than 80 hours of overtime per month for at least six months — 114 hours of overtime in a 30-day period — before he expired, presumably at his desk, while filling out a time card.

The lawyer, whose name

may or may not have been Cha Ching, decided that someone had to be held responsible. So he sued. And he won.

A judge in November blamed the Japanese government for its promotion of a workplace culture that results in *karoshi*, which has nothing to do with knowing all the words to Aretha Franklin's "Respect." That would be karaoke. And while karaoke can also be fatal, *karoshi* translates, roughly, to "death due to overwork."

The court decision puts Uchino's spouse (and lawyer) in line for a big pile of yen. And it has also triggered a debate that is bound to wash up on America's shores.

A dangerous idea to export

The Japanese government has since acknowledged 147 suspected cases of *karoshi* last year. Richard Wokutch, a management professor at Vir-

ginia Tech University and recognized expert on the subject, said there are probably more incidences of "death due to overwork" than officially reported because the Japanese are not a litigious bunch.

So, it's plain to see that this could be a huge, huge problem here in the United States of Lawsuits. If the idea of *karoshi* can be exported like electronic gadgets and hot dog-eating champions, we're in for big trouble.

Fortunately, Steve "Personal Development for Smart People" Pavlina will be waiting to tell the other side of the story.

Pavlina ("I don't really have a formal title. Never needed one.") lives in Las Vegas, where he writes books, maintains a blog, and crafts newsletters on how to be a more valuable employee and person.

His philosophy on hard work can be summed up in two words: *Karoshi*,

schmaroshi.

Hard work good for you?

"Success literature going back hundreds of years espouses the benefits of hard work. But why is it that some people seem to feel that hard work is a dirty word nowadays?" he asked. "A problem occurs when people think of challenging work as painful or uncomfortable. Does challenging work necessarily have to be painful? No, of course not. In fact, a major key to success is to learn to enjoy challenging work. Most people will do what's easiest and avoid hard work, and that's precisely why you should do the opposite."

"As for working yourself to death, that's obviously a bad idea."

Like many other bad ideas (we're thinking here of the Spice Girls), the idea of blaming death on work has its roots in the United Kingdom.

A study published last

year in the British Medical Journal identified hard work as a "major risk factor" for heart disease, diabetes and something dubbed "metabolic syndrome," which includes high blood-pressure and cholesterol.

Stressed-out workers, the British study concluded, are also more likely to gain weight and drink alcohol — which brings us full circle to karaoke, if not *karoshi*.

"The problem with *karoshi* is it's ambiguous and it's political," Virginia Tech's Wokutch wrote. "Was the person going to have the heart attack anyway? Or was the death a result of overwork?"

We contend it's impossible to tell. And that's why we must protect our borders from an invasion of "death due to overwork" believers.

Concept has spread

There are already troubling signs that the con-

cept has spread.

Some guy in China named Hu Xinyu, an engineer at Huawei Co., became a labor movement cause celebre in May after he died from exhaustion allegedly brought on by too many overtime hours. (The Chinese call it *guolaosi*.)

And we saw a T-shirt the other day that said: "Maybe hard work won't kill you. But why take the chance?"

If hardworking Americans won't heed Pavlina's advice, maybe they'll accept the words of legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, who said: "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour is the moment when he has worked his heart out and lies exhausted on the field of battle, victorious."

Or maybe they'll listen to my dad, who added: "And when they drag that guy off the field of battle, it wouldn't kill you to mow it, either."

VOICES

Business 101 asked several Salinas-area business and government leaders what they think of the Japanese concept of *karoshi*, death from overwork:



Joe Pezzini

"You want people to be productive, but there's a limit to that. We as employers have to be aware of the signs of overwork."

"There are state and federal laws on the books to prevent this kind of thing from happening. I don't know what the laws are in Japan. Apparently, they're different."

—**Joe Pezzini**, vice president of operations, Ocean Mist Farms in Castroville and chairman of the California Leafy Green Product Handlers Marketing Agreement's board



Mary Ann Leffel

"I think that it's possible that we all have our own internal mechanisms to deal with stress. I believe that we can become very tired, but I think it's a combination of things."

"I'm 62, and I work a lot. If that (*karoshi*) were true, I should be dead. I'm planning to keep going for another 30 years."

—**Mary Ann Leffel**, vice president, Wells Fargo Bank and president of the Monterey County Business Council



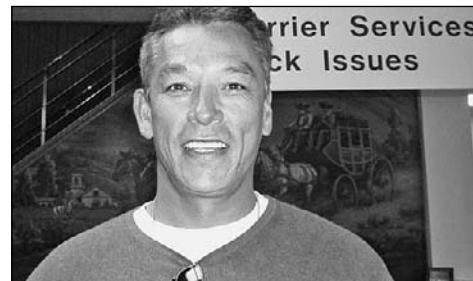
Victor Mehia

"I definitely think it's possible to work yourself to death. It's certainly possible to work yourself into illness."

"From a business owner's standpoint, it's part education, it's part capacity. You have to be able to see when you're overworking employees to the point where they're becoming ill."

"The bottom line is a sick employee is a less productive employee."

—**Victor Mehia**, executive director of Salinas United Business Association



Bob Eggers

"I would think anything's possible. There's only 24 hours in a day. You need to eat, you need to sleep, you need to rest."

"You could have somebody work 20 hours a day, but if they're not productive, what's the point?"

—**Bob Eggers**, Salinas police commander and member of the Salinas City Elementary School District Board of Trustees