

# All work and no play

Owner-managers of small firms need drive to succeed, but must also learn when to let go. By **Sandra O'Connell**

# is bad for business

SHOULD running your own business be classified as seriously damaging to your health? The tale of one former entrepreneur suggests it should.

He set up a contract cleaning business in Dublin during the 1980s. At its peak, the firm had more than 80 employees and he was working 14 hours a day, six days a week. "I'd leave the house at 6.30am and get home after 10pm. I was out there every day chasing work, protecting existing jobs and trying to get the money in so that everyone would get their pay packet every Friday."

After 15 years of apparent success, severe stress, poor diet and physical exhaustion took their toll. "I had pains in my stomach for a long time. Eventually, I ended up in hospital."

That still didn't stop him and he continued to direct operations over the phone. "When you run a business, you really think you are indispensable."

It was only when his doctor told him he was "heading for a box" — and soon — that the severity of his health problems hit home. That, and pleadings from the family he had scarcely seen for over a decade, proved to be the turning point.

Today he works as a landscape gardener. The work is physically demanding, but he's self-employed and it's a picnic compared to the mental pressure of his previous business.

"Not in a month of Sundays would I go back. Now I can see I was half-dead, it was a rat

race. I'm just sorry I didn't change my ideas about work before, but when you're running a business you think, 'this is my livelihood, what else can I do?'"

If a recent survey of business owners conducted by the company O2 is anything to go by, quite a few entrepreneurs feel the same way.

Large numbers of owner-managers are staying late, working weekends and not taking annual leave, according to the survey. When they are at home, chances are they have taken work with them. And when they finally snap the laptop closed, what do they do? They slouch in front of the television.

Paul Farrell, the head of marketing at O2, was surprised by some of the results. "First, by the extent to which running a business eats into personal time and the number of family events, such as birthdays, business-owners miss out on," he says. "Just under half don't take their full allocation of holidays. They seem to forgo a lot of things others take for granted."

His work brings him into regular contact with small business owners. "You can see they are under pressure," he says. "They're very focused and they don't waste time. They'll agree to meet, but only if you've got a very good story to tell, which means you have to do your homework first."

"Many exist on a hand-to-mouth basis. They haven't got the safety net of a big company behind them when times are hard."

Steve MacDonogh, the founder of Brandon Books and Mount Eagle publishing, knows all about pressure. "If I were employed as a senior editor in a publishing company, I could leave by about 7pm every day. As it is, I just can't do that."

He has the added pressure of being synonymous with his company. "It can create certain expectations. People get used to dealing with me personally," he says. "If I hire a publicist, the media think they are being downgraded. And authors have a tendency to see me as a financial adviser, psychologist and social worker."

In 1992, the stress of keeping authors happy and the wolves from the door resulted in physical collapse. The catalyst was a High Court action surrounding a book by Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein. "I have a tendency to fight my corner when actually I should have said, 'Okay, we've lost that one'," he says.

In the slow recovery that followed, he discovered a love of the remote hills of North Africa. Today he considers the visits he has since been paying there to be fundamental to his continued mental and spiritual wellbeing.

"Getting ill is a shock because it reminds you of your

mortality," he says. "Following that episode, I make a point of doing things that are satisfying to me."

Travelling provides him with a balance to the obsessive way he approaches his work. "It's not so much about relaxation as about exercising different parts of the self."

Get the balance wrong and it isn't just your wellbeing that is at stake. Through his work as a financial adviser, Eddie Hobbs has seen the family lives of many business owners ruined. "Entrepreneurs, with few exceptions, are obsessed. They are driven people," he says.

Few are in it for the money. "What they get a kick out of is

doing business. They love it. I have seen the distress this can cause their families."

Contrary to popular belief, owner-managers don't have to be single-minded to succeed in business, says Hobbs.

What they do need is to revisit their definition of success. "Success for an entrepreneur should come not just from their business, but also from having a happy marriage and kids," he says.

There are certain stages at which business owners are at an increased risk of losing their sense of perspective, according to Catherine Goodman, the SME programme director at the Irish Management Institute.

"There are key points along the business development cycle to watch out for," she says. "In the early stages, you need those enormously long hours and you have to be tough and dogged. That can take its toll on relationships but, when things

get established, you then tend to have employees to share the burden."

Making the transition from operator to manager is equally difficult terrain. "It is very stressful because you don't yet know if the people around you are good enough to take over, or whether you can trust them enough," she says.

The next stage involves deciding whether to become a professionally managed business. "The big question then is whether you are the right person to lead this. This is very stressful too."

Whatever stage they are at in the growth cycle, a primary stress factor for any owner-manager is isolation.

In this respect, finding a network of peers, whether in a professional association or through local chambers of commerce, can be invaluable, she says.

She also advises clients to

## BATTLE BURNOUT

- Don't obsess about things beyond your control
- Identify the stressors
- Don't be afraid to delegate
- Schedule some time out for yourself and take it
- Don't forget your family and friends
- Look for new challenges and opportunities
- Make sure you have the resources to do the job
- Seek expert advice
- Keep tabs on your health