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No Looking Back

The midday siesta is a faded memory for many ambitious foreigners seduced by the U.S. Net boom.

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Olivier Naimi is far from the seaside ramparts of his hometown, Antibes, France. These days, the 30-year-old senior production manager spends most days (and many nights) in San Mateo, Calif., inside a concrete office building shaped like a squat Tupperware container. Some of his co-workers enjoy views of the parking lot or the giant outdoor fountain that squirts water between wings of an abstract, metal swan, but not Naimi. His cubicle at Women.com is completely enclosed, windowless. When he's not staring at his computer screen, figuring out how to transform his department into a weapon of mass production, he's glancing at his poster of Monet's lilies or one of the pristine white beaches in his Hawaii 2000 calendar.



Frenchman Olivier Naimi knew he'd have to adapt his lifestyle when he moved to the Silicon Valley.
Photos: Anna Kuperberg

You might expect the Frenchman to complain—San Mateo is certainly no Antibes—but he doesn't. In fact, Naimi is downright plucky about Silicon Valley. After nearly two years of living here, he says you've got to run in the rat race to win first place. What about the stress, the obsession with initial public offerings and stock options, the round-the-clock work hours, the traffic, the obscene housing costs, the mad rush? Naimi claims he knew when he moved here that he'd have to adapt his lifestyle. It hasn't been a sacrifice, he says.

Something is wrong with this profile. The old saw states that Europeans separate their personal life from work, while Americans confuse the two spheres. Bygone days, says Naimi and many foreigners like him. The technology boom appears to be muddying traditional distinctions between American and foreign approaches to work and life. People from overseas immersed in high-tech professions here are acquiring All-American-Workaholic status faster than you can send an instant message. Americans looking to their immigrant co-workers for clues to the long-lost "meaning of life" or "inner peace" may be disappointed. Many foreign workers choose to join the race and risk becoming Americanized rather than balk and miss the excitement and potential windfall.

Golden days fade

Indeed, Naimi claims he doesn't miss the long lunches and midday aperitifs that characterize life back home on the Cote d'Azur. He does not think the gadget-obsessed Americans he works with have lost sight of "real life" or that the United States is headed toward collective burnout, the sort of "I've had it" malaise prophesied by social theorists like John Naisbitt, author of *High Tech, High Touch*. Naimi would be the last person to suggest that U.S. professionals set down their cell phones and smell the roses. He works weekends. He works on five different laptops at home. He thinks he is part of "the biggest thing ever." Why slow down? What's there to complain about?

It's the new fortitude, a particular way of life that may in years to come inspire a spate of nostalgic studies along the lines of the Peter Mayle potboiler, *A Year in Provence*, works with titles such as *Four Years in a San Mateo Office Park*, which will instruct readers on how to maximize each day the Northern California way, how to drink lattes on the go and gobble down "wraps" while clicking away at computer keyboards. Vacations, they'll learn, were the moments spent moving between the bus stop and the office door. It was all about efficiency living.

George Wachsmann, 25, of Sao Paulo, Brazil, is watching it happen. "Every day I have two things going on at the same time, and I have to choose which to do," he says. (Only two? Must be a newcomer.) Time was not such an issue back in Brazil, where Wachsmann was an investment manager for a bank. Now at Stanford University, he races to get ahead of the pack of master's students in his Management Science and Engineering program—he also networks with MBA students and professors, tackles interviews at Microsoft, Excite@Home, Sun Microsystems and other companies, and—oh yeah—hangs out with his wife. "There's definitely anxiety. I'm still figuring out how this works. It is something you have to learn how to deal with." Wachsmann arrived from Sao Paulo less than a year ago and is intent on working for a startup once he graduates.

Learning a faster rhythm

Even the most willing immigrants go through a period of adjustment before the pace of the New Economy begins to seem natural. The transition can be eased, however, with the help of friends experiencing similar transition woes, Alina Nylander, 28, just figured that out. In the two years since she arrived from Sweden, she has changed jobs three times, finally settling at Fuxito.com, a Cambridge, Mass.-based Internet startup targeting soccer aficionados. She chose Fuxito.com not because the environment was more relaxed but because she met employees there who share her outsider's perspective of the technology culture. She loves the hectic pace at Fuxito.com, but the

presence of other foreign workers puts her at ease as she tries to adjust to American ways.

Still, Nylander's mother worries that the United States is scrambling her daughter's priorities. She notices how exhausted Alina seems when she returns home to Sweden. She warns Alina not to lose sight of what really matters; she wants to know what books Alina is reading (none); she wants to hear that Alina is doing more than breezing through newspapers and watching television (she is: working). But Nylander's mother will soon need to police the world: Priorities appear to be shifting wherever technology is booming. Young professionals inside Sweden's new fleet of high-tech startups are likely as tired as Nylander is in America. Technology seems to be creating a kind of work-ethic parity, forcing people into new and faster work rhythms.



Naimi claims he doesn't miss the long lunches that characterize life back home in France.

Photos: Anna Kuperberg

Even Latin cultures, known for striking a healthy balance between the demands of work and family life, are caving to technology's temptations. The siesta is no longer sacrosanct, according to Roberto Estrada, 37, CEO of DrTango.com, an Atlanta-based startup and health care portal targeting Spanish and Portuguese speakers. In the high-tech industries, American and Latin American work ethics are now very similar, he says. Estrada grew up in Nicaragua and says that, in general, Latin Americans are more laid back and not as obsessed with making gobs of money. But that is changing with the onslaught of tech companies springing up there and the get-rich-quick culture they engender.

Some foreigners who have jumped into the U.S. Internet gold rush do complain about the frenetic work culture. Iliana Quinonez, a regional director of field sales engineering at BEA Systems, an ecommerce transaction server provider in San Jose, Calif., wishes she didn't have to bring work home every night. Back home in Mexico City, no one answered office email once they punched out—and certainly not at 1 a.m., which is when Quinonez finds the time. She would prefer, however, to relax over a two-hour lunch, and to enjoy more face time with clients and co-workers, instead of relying on teleconferencing and emailing. To remind herself that there are people in the world who don't care about ecommerce transactions or about the stock market, she calls family members in Mexico.

Still, many foreigners say life at the center of the New Economy is not better or worse than life back home, it's just different. The dot-coms are "re-interpreting and re-living the American Dream," effuses Tanyia Kandohla-Mullens, 34, of London. Kandohla-Mullens lives in San Francisco and works as a marketing consultant for technology companies. "Yes, people are focused on money, but it is all for the ability to live their true dreams sometime in the future."

After two years in the technology sector, Kandohla-Mullens admits she still struggles to maintain a clean division between work and play, something she did not have to do in the United Kingdom. "I have to stand my ground and be very clear with colleagues and clients when I will not be available. I have to provide the barriers." But she appears determined to make the best of her experience no matter where she lives. "There is no wrong or right way to live life. It's personal, not geographical."

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