



## The full-on part-time job

“You forgot the money!” For the second time in two months, Prue had been about to walk away from the ATM machine, too tired and distracted to pick up the notes it had issued. It was another reminder that she must do something about a work situation that had started so promisingly, yet within a year had become a nightmare of over-commitment and impossible targets.

She often had headaches, mouth ulcers, and cold sores which she attributed to work overload, but she hadn't taken a sick day in six months. She had kept going while battling colds and other ailments, because time off, with her deliverables, wasn't an option. She hadn't even taken time off when her children were ill, guiltily working from home between doctor's visits and trips to the sick bed.

At last, there was to be a new appointment to the team she worked in. But was it too late to fulfil her ambition to become second-in-charge – or even regain some semblance of work/life balance?

A year ago, Prue was a newly-recruited senior policy analyst in the newly-established Boards and Other Bodies (BOB) team at the Canzalian Ministry of Administrative Affairs (CMAA).

BOB was established in early 2008 to rationalise a number of disparate activities relating to statutory authorities, including monitoring performance and managing appointments to boards. Unlike most Canzalian government departments, which had a single focus, the Ministry was involved with a number of portfolios for a range of Ministers.

Careful planning went into the set-up of the new group, for which a manager was recruited in January 2008. Marcus Carrad brought a background with statutory boards and management. After some inherited work was “handed over” during a one-month transition period, BOB became a functional unit from 1 June 2008. By then, Marcus had recruited his two key staff, an

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analyst and a senior analyst. Neither had direct experience of working with statutory authorities, but Marcus believed in “hiring for attitude and training for skill” and felt both were committed and motivated at the challenge of establishing a new team.

Prue, the preferred candidate for the senior analyst role, applied to take what was intended to be a full-time role, on a part-time basis. She explained that she had several dependents reliant on her, and commitments to post-graduate study. Prue had been working successfully part-time for several years, and she emphasised her ability to be flexible according to work demand.

Marcus appointed Prue, feeling that her high skill level, qualifications and attitude would balance her slightly limited hours. He agreed that she would work in the office from Monday to Wednesday, take Thursdays off work, and work from home on Fridays, with her remuneration pro-rated accordingly. He signed a “study assistance” agreement giving Prue paid leave to attend lectures (about six days per half year).

Joining MAA and the BOB, Prue felt she had found an excellent employer that provided good training, subsidised meals, health and wellbeing programmes, and supported out of school care. Managers freely interacted with staff, in contrast to the bullying and power dynamics Prue had seen in other departments.

The BOB formed effectively, starting “in the deep end” with a busy work programme but with time allowed for staff training to address skill gaps. Stakeholder feedback soon confirmed that BOB performance was good, and its deliverables were consistently timely and of a high standard.

After a few weeks, Marcus told Prue he would prefer her to work from the office rather than from home on Fridays, in case urgent work came up. Wanting to emphasise her commitment to being flexible, Prue agreed to spend a fourth day in the office. Remote work was not critical while her pre-school children and her mother (who had a terminal illness) were well.

### **“Doing more with less”: the pressure begins to build**

Towards the end of 2008 Prue found herself working longer hours as well as spending four days in the office. Marcus had reluctantly accepted that a new area of policy fell within the team’s responsibilities, but he was unhappy it hadn’t been sized, planned, or resourced for. While the majority of the new work went to Prue, Marcus himself shouldered some of the load, both of them squeezing extra tasks into already tight workplans. Talking it through, they accepted that new resource was scarce in the modern public service operating environment, and everyone had to get used to “doing more with less”.

As the pace of work cranked up several notches, unrelenting deadlines put paid to any quiet patches between deliverables. The team became adept at dealing with tight turn-arounds and the ensuing pressures, but they had no time to plan, catch up on routine tasks, or meet informally to de-pressure and re-connect. Pressured exchanges between team members increased, but fortunately did not escalate.

In late 2008 Marcus told Prue he was concerned that between her work, study demands and busy home life, she had no time off, and he could see a further increase in work ahead. Pointing out

that Prue had become emotional and tearful during difficult patches when all her commitments conflicted, he said he was unlikely to support her to study at her current level for 2009.

Prue acknowledged Marcus's concerns for her wellbeing and work/life balance. But her study was very important to her, personally and professionally – and she was getting A+ grades. Prue resolved to continue at her current level but offered to Marcus to halve the number of paid study leave days in 2009, making up other lecture days by returning to the office on her unpaid days. Discussions about the situation challenged Prue and Marcus's working relationship, but they "got on with it".

A change of government brought new pressures as new Ministers were inducted to their portfolios. To keep up with the relentlessly increasing workload Prue started coming in at weekends, as well as putting in extra hours. Calling a meeting with Marcus, in February 2009, she said her work expectations were simply unachievable within the timeframe available; she was unable to sleep, had tightness in her chest and a racing pulse.

Marcus could relate to Prue's situation; he was equally "snowed under" himself, taking on significant work while also managing the team, because he had neither enough time nor resource available to meet all demands. However, he agreed to explain the situation to the Minister's staff, and subsequently gained approval to take several more months over one of their key deliverables. Marcus also secured some funding for a contractor to undertake a discrete work item.

By March 2009, Prue had several weeks of leave owing. She applied, four months in advance, for a fortnight's leave to visit her family overseas. Marcus indicated he was likely to decline the leave, which fell during two appointment processes. Although Prue had planned work around her absence, the team would be very exposed if any factors changed, he said.

Prue again made an impassioned case for the leave, saying that, as always, she would do her utmost to ensure all work was delivered on time. Her track record showed she could be relied upon. Recently she had even taken on an urgent assignment for another team at her senior manager's request, which meant extra weekend work, and more pressure. Although senior managers thanked her for her extra effort, both by email and in person, Marcus did not. However, after consulting his group manager and thinking further, Marcus reluctantly approved the leave, and Prue was able to book her travel.

In May, Marcus at last advised that senior management had approved him hiring another permanent resource for the team. Prue was pleased, but unsure whether this was enough. From a personal perspective, she was also concerned that, in accommodating extra work for so long, she had compromised some of her employment benefits.

Prue wanted to be Marcus' second in command, to share some of the learnings she had gained and, over time, to create a strong career at CMAA that would utilise her full capability. But Marcus hadn't shown any inclination towards this, and given the water under the bridge, Prue wasn't sure how to raise her ambitions without antagonising him.

As his team member, she wavered between wanting to acquiesce, simply “get on” with the job, and constructive resistance – trying to actively achieve improvements in the situation. Did the arrival of the new team member present a threat or an opportunity?