

Stress can be too much to bear for startups

By *Ottawa Business Journal Staff*
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Gord Harling was once asked how to achieve a healthy work-life balance. The founder and chief executive of Elliptic Semiconductor was unequivocal in his answer.

"I said, 'If you think there's such a thing as balance, don't go near a startup'."

In fact, people who want to achieve balance in life while working at a startup will never succeed, Mr. Harling says definitively.

"It has to be 100-per-cent work. And that's it for the foreseeable future."

Mr. Harling points to his experience with Goal Semiconductor, a Montreal-based chip design house he founded in 1992. At that time, Mr. Harling travelled constantly between Montreal and Waterloo, where some of his first customers were located.

Almost every Friday, he would sleep in the Waterloo-bound car driven by his wife. Upon arrival, he would drink coffee and work up to 40 hours straight before heading back to work in Montreal for Monday.

For the first few years at Goal, the sleep-deprived businessman never took a day off. He worked weekends and holidays, including Christmas. After three years, he started taking Sundays off and, after four years, took full weekends.

When asked what kind of toll it took on his physical and mental condition, Mr. Harling only laughs.

The main source of "startup stress", he says, is all about money and whether it's going to run out before the company is able to launch a product, get acquired or find an investor. He recalls a time when his RSPs were tapped and his five credit cards were maxed, all to finance Goal's operating costs.

According to Pauline Fleming, Mr. Harling is not alone. The chief coaching officer of PRO-Active Possibilities says the financial strain experienced by startup founders is often too much to bear.

"They don't have enough time and money and they're living and breathing their business," she says of some of her clients who go to her west-end home that doubles as a retreat and where they have a chance to regroup and receive objective guidance.



Pauline Fleming, chief coaching officer of PRO-Active Possibilities.

Putting in 80-hour weeks will inevitably lead to burnout, especially if an entrepreneur is focusing on admin work rather than on personal strengths vital to the company's survival, she says.

"They may not see it initially because their passion and drive are so strong. But that can only last so long," Ms Fleming says of the constant grind.

One result of entrepreneurs over-extending themselves is a business that fails after two years of hard work, she says. Or, if entrepreneurs start to see success, they may want to spend even more time on the business. But that's when they risk physical illness, she says.

While Patti Church agrees startup founders often live and breathe work, she paints a slightly different picture than does Mr. Harling.

Ms Church co-owns JIG Publishing with her husband and runs the business out of the couple's west-end home. Currently, the two are focused on launching a line of stickers called "Jibblits", which resemble single-frame comic strips that tickle people's funny bones while leaving them with an underlying message they can use to improve their daily lives.

"Because our product is very light-hearted and fun, it's very easy to integrate into our lives," Ms Church says during a coffee break with her four-year-old.

She receives a lot of valuable feedback on sticker designs and messages from her children and their friends, who act as focus groups.

"We do live and breathe it, but we all have a good time ... which helps achieve balance. Our product works with our lifestyle. We've designed it that way," she says.

Mr. Harling also found ways to cope with startup stress, including hiring "jacks of all trades who can put their hands to everything so you have no infrastructure whatsoever".

"(At a startup), you have to do everything yourself, so you have to have people around you to create the infrastructure you need," he says.

This is consistent with Ms Fleming's advice to surround yourself with capable people at a very early stage. Some people think they know it all or don't trust anyone enough to partner with, she says, adding those are the people who get stuck.

"Then there's the group who realize they know a lot, but definitely don't know it all. They surround themselves with experts. And that's when you know a startup is going to make it."

While finding partners may have taken the load off to some extent, Mr. Harling found other challenges in partnering that he wouldn't have confronted going it alone.

While he ran Goal by himself to start, he gradually took on two partners in Waterloo and one in Montreal. Very quickly, he got to know the "absolute worst" sides of his partners as they dealt with each other under intense conditions.

"It's very hard to remain friends with the people you start a startup with. You have to be ready to forgive and forget," says Mr. Harling.

The two Waterloo partners couldn't handle not knowing whether their investment was going to pay off and bowed out after some coaxing from their wives, says Mr. Harling.

Nonetheless, Mr. Harling and his Montreal partner stuck with it for five years until Mosel Vitelic, the 10th largest manufacturer of DRAM memory chips, bought them out. The pair continued to work under Mosel for another three years, but quit after becoming "pretty tired".

"After that, I bought a farm and I took about a year of quiet time," Mr. Harling says.

Ms Fleming cautions that, even if the startup becomes a multimillion-dollar company, the founder's "life picture" must receive attention.

"Have they had time to enjoy their success? Do they have a family and social life? If they do, do they still have it?"

Ms Fleming hears of many high-level single people in their 40s, women in particular, who are not planning on having children because they are committed to their career. Depending on their priorities, these people may find themselves in a state of perpetual imbalance, she says.

Mr. Harling agrees it takes a certain type of person to live the startup life and is the first to say it's not for everyone.

"You have to have a special personality. You have to be the stubbornest bastard on the planet. You have to be so incredibly hard-headed in order to succeed. You'll want to quit. Hundreds of times, you'll want to leave. But you just stick with it."