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Jackie Rosenfeldt, a partner at Grant Thornton LLP and a mother of three, says she "works all hours" during the first fall crush of job and school.

ANDREAS LARSSON

It's back-to-reality day

A holiday, sort of; for most, Labor Day heralds return to full calendars, formal dress codes

BY LISA BERTAGNOLI

Ah, Labor Day: the final day of hooky before the overscheduled swirl of September, when the bill comes due for weeks or months of summer languor.

After a season of casual dress, flexible hours, frequent Starbucks runs and leisurely lunches, Labor Day means a return to dressing in suits, eating lunch on the fly and juggling schedules packed with client and fam-

ily commitments. School, civic and charitable duties kick back up, too, after summer off for the likes of the Economic and Executives' clubs and light schedules for many arts and non-profit boards.

"In summer, people are a tenth as busy," says Leslie Hindman, president and CEO of Leslie Hindman Auctioneers in Chicago, which begins its fall series of auctions on Sunday. "All the

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It's down to business as fall begins

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boards start up in the fall.”

In late August, Ms. Hindman, 52, who sits on 10 boards, went shopping in New York for a new fall wardrobe for work and social engagements. “It’s like getting your kids ready for school,” she says of the season-opening crush.

Although technology has blurred the lines between work and play—most executives have full summers, keeping in touch even while on vacation—there’s still “an adjustment, a move back to a regular schedule” as the weather cools and days shorten, says Jennifer Berman, managing director at CBIZ Human Capital Services, a Chicago-based consulting firm.

Ms. Berman says she sees a bit of a letdown among clients as the more laid-back days of summer turn into a jam-packed fall. She’s suggested that clients save some merriment, such as a picnic, for after Labor Day to soften the sentiment. “Anything with food makes people happy,” she says.

Some see the traffic and tourist patterns begin to change and feel a surge of back-to-school energy, looking forward to a well-staffed office, a full social schedule and a more formal dress code. Others watch the interns leave and pre-season football begin and mourn a summer that may have come and gone without a break.

CANCELED VACATION

Lerone Sidberry, senior vice-president for employee benefits in the Chicago office of Lockton Cos. LLC, a Kansas City, Mo.-based insurance firm, had an unusually hectic summer: He was in a suit and tie every day and had to cancel his vacation to meet with clients. Mr. Sidberry, 37, had planned a weeklong trip to Florida to celebrate his 12th wedding anniversary; he canceled at the last minute when several clients could not reschedule a strategy meeting.

“My wife was not happy, to say the least,” he says.

He’ll make up for it by taking her to Savannah, Ga., for a long weekend later this month. That “isn’t exactly a good solution, but it’s what I can do this year,” Mr. Sidberry says.

For many mothers—and overwhelmingly, it was women rather than men expressing this sentiment—the season is a double whammy of increased work along with the demands of a new school year.

With the approach of Labor Day, “it’s like a horse race here,” says Jackie Rosenfeldt, partner at Grant Thornton LLP in Oak Brook and the mother of three children, two of whom are school-age. Come fall, “it’s the crashing of two worlds: school and work.”

For Ms. Rosenfeldt, fall means returning to a full workload and getting her fourth-grader son and second-grader daughter back on their school schedules. In the summer, she works the equivalent



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The mood was laid back at marketing firm Marcel Media while CEO Kelly Cutler was out on maternity leave this summer.

of a three-day week in Grant Thornton’s employee benefits practice. But with benefit-plan audits due Oct. 15, she’s already back up to a five-day equivalent.

The crush means a rigid homework and dinner schedule at Ms. Rosenfeldt’s home in St. Charles. Once the kids are asleep, she stays up working well past 10 p.m. In the morning, she’s up at 5 to get in a few more hours of work before they rise. Her schedule eventually settles into a fall routine, “but the first couple of weeks, you work all hours,” she says.

August storms ended summer abruptly for Ruth Ann M. Gillis, president of Exelon Business Services Company and a senior vice president at Chicago-based Exelon Corp. As ComEd crews worked to restore power, Ms. Gillis was tethered round the clock to her BlackBerry and cellphone. And weatherwise, at least, “summer’s not over yet,” jokes Ms. Gillis, 53.

THE BOSS IS BACK

At some offices, the entire culture undergoes a shift.

Kelly Cutler, founder and CEO of Marcel Media LLC, an interactive marketing company based in Chicago, will make two transitions this month: from summer to fall, and from maternity leave back to boss. Ms. Cutler, 33, timed her second pregnancy so she could give birth during the

summer, a somewhat slower time for her business.

“The pressure’s off a little bit,” she says.

Meanwhile, Ms. Cutler’s 11 employees enjoyed the boss’s absence during the languid days of summer. They dressed down, went for walks and had a festive staff breakfast each Friday.

The casual atmosphere presented a few management challenges for Ben Swartz, Marcel Media’s president and co-founder, who was in charge of the office while Ms. Cutler was away. The biggest? Maintaining discipline, especially when employees busy on client projects were distracted by less-busy colleagues proposing a coffee run or afternoon stroll.

The scanty summer dress code didn’t help, either. “Young men and women make up the office,” says Mr. Swartz, 33. “And they’re incredibly talented . . . but they have that ability to become distracted.”

Come fall, he says, they’ll be back to more formal work attire, “and we’ll make more coffee in the office.”

Executives who spent the summer drumming up business are grateful to be facing an overworked autumn.

“I had no summer vacations, no summer doldrums, no summer anything,” says Don DeLoach, 46, president and CEO of Aleri Inc., a Chicago-based manufac-

turer of data-processing technology for the financial industry. The summer’s market volatility kept Mr. DeLoach hopping on planes to Europe, where he visited Aleri’s international clients.

The markets that made most people anxious increased Mr. DeLoach’s business. “It’s a good problem to have,” he says.

Financial adviser Henry Swan is also seeing the results of a summer of calls, e-mails and letters. During the slow summer months, “we do seminars to keep the activity rolling,” says Mr. Swan, 60, executive vice-president in the Western division for AXA Advisors LLC, a New York-based financial advising firm.

A late August event was unexpectedly busy: We “will be very busy, just from that one seminar,” he says.

HARVEST SEASON

The 10-person staff of Chicago-Healers.com, a Lake Zurich-based referral service for practitioners of alternative medicine, also spent the summer trying to rustle up business.

“Everything we planted is coming to fruition—now,” says JoAnn Hefferle, 45, president of the seven-year-old company. Clients who were difficult to reach earlier in the summer are suddenly impatient to get programs rolling. “They’re like, ‘Okay, yesterday,’” Ms. Hefferle says.