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Work-Life Balance

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The essential issue of work-life balance is the inability of many workers to achieve parity with regard to their responsibilities to a job and/or a profession, and their obligations and commitments to their private, family, nonwork lives. Work-life balance is not a new problem. It has long been a part of everyone's worklife experience. But in the latter part of the 20th century, the accelerated pace, stress, and complexity of our jobs and our careers has placed this phenomenon at the center of every conversation about our collective work lives. Work-life balance is not a gender or family rights issue. It is a problem that touches every member of the workforce and is closely related to two fundamental questions: (1) Do we live to work or work to live? (2) Do workers' rights include the right to not always have to be working?

At the end of the 19th century, the major goal of the American labor movement was simple and distinct: 8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, and 8 hours for what we will. For brief periods in the 20th century, for some workers in specific industries, this goal was achieved. But the 40-hour standard week is either a memory or a still-sought-after dream for most Americans. Depending on whose statistics you want to accept, as a nation we are working more now than ever.

In 1989, *Newsweek* reported that 85% of the American workforce put in more than 45 hours a week on the job. Economist Juliet Schor estimates that annual hours on the job, across all industries and occupations, have been increasing over the past 20 years, so the average employee is now on the job an additional 163 hours, or the equivalent of an extra month per year. In her 1991 best seller *The Overworked American*, she claimed that one fourth of all full-time workers spent 49 or more hours on the job each week. Of these, almost half were at work 60 hours or more. In 1997, in her important analysis on work and the family, *The Time Bind*, Arlie Russell Hochschild reported that both men and women workers average slightly more than 47 hours per week. Finally, in a 1999 study, a Cornell University research project found that on average, Americans work 350 hours more per year than Europeans—and 70 hours more a year than even the Japanese, whose language contains the word *karoshi* that means “death from overwork.” If some of these figures and projections are accurate, by the year 2010, the average workweek could exceed 58 hours.

What has to be kept in mind is that these figures only reflect hours on the job and do not represent the other aspects of our workday such as getting to and from the job as well as household and family responsibilities. A 1999 survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute of New York concluded that both spouses, in a double-income household with kids, put in a minimum of 15 hours per day on work, commuting, chores, and children. These figures, based on a Monday through Friday schedule, mean that both spouses have already “logged-in” 75 hours before the weekend. Moreover, although Sundays in many households are still reserved for family outings and social events, Saturday is usually just another workday. “Honey-do-lists” are drawn-up, chores are assigned, projects attended to, and kids are schlepped to music lessons and the mall. According to a 2001 *Harvard Health Letter*, nonworking, no-chores, leisure time has eroded to 16.5 hours per week per person.

Whatever the exact amount of time each of us is putting into the job, it is both palpably and statistically clear to most of us that we are working harder and longer than ever before. And more than just the extra time we are putting in on the job, the tempo, intensity, and stresses associated with our work seems to be accelerating. We cram more and more into each day, and yet we feel that we never have enough time to do all that must be done.

Besides all this, two other factors in the work-life balance equation need to be taken into

account: vacations and fatigue. A recent report from the United Nations points out that U.S. workers average 49.5 weeks of work each year. Joe Robinson, former editor of *Escape* magazine, claims that we're the most vacation-starved country in the industrial world! In this society, says Robinson, we perversely allow downtime for machinery for maintenance and repair, but we don't allow it for the employees. There is only one other country with fewer vacations days than America (10 to 13) and that is Mexico (6). And what is worse, says Robinson, is that in America these vacation days are not required by law, but rather are the result of negotiated contracts or custom and tradition. In comparison to the mandated vacation schedules of other industrialized nations, American workers are suffering from a serious leisure lag: Italy, 42 days; Germany, 35 days; Sweden, 32 days; Denmark, 30 days; Ireland, 28 days; and even the work-addicted Japanese get 25 mandated vacations days a year.

In a 1995 cover story, *Newsweek* reported that 25% of us say we're fried by our work, frazzled by the lack of time, and just plain exhausted. Symptoms of exhaustion and fatigue are now among the top five reasons why people consult their doctors. According to a survey conducted in 2001 by the National Sleep Foundation, our workaholic lifestyle is turning America into a "nodding off nation," with 40% of those surveyed reporting difficulties staying awake during the day and on the job. The poll reported that although people need between 7 and 10 hours of sleep each night, 62% of those surveyed sleep less than 8 hours per night. Sleep researchers are now in general agreement that chronic lack of sleep may be as bad for a person's health as smoking, a poor diet, and a lack of exercise. We need sleep to rest and build out brains, to heal, to clear our cobwebs, to slow aging and dementia, and to help avoid obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. We need sleep to be fully present in our own lives.

Like it or not, too many of us, out of desire or necessity, choice or chance, put too much time in on the job. We have made a fetish out of work. It's now part of our character and culture. We have become addicted to the *promise* of work. Work *promises* we will get ahead. Work *promises* power, money, and influence. Work *promises* we will be accepted, respected, and successful. And so, we work. We work because we need to, because we need money. We work out of habit and desire. We work to occupy time. We work to establish our place in the pecking order, to guarantee status and prestige. And, too often, we work because we simply don't know what else to do with ourselves, because we think we must and should. It has simply become standard to respond to the conventional salutation of "Hello, how are you?" with some version of the refrain "*I am so busy?*"

According to the Families and Work Institute 1999 study, 63% of Americans say they want to work less, up from 17% in 1994. In another 1999 study conducted by NYU and the University of Pennsylvania, it was found that 45% to 50% of workers (80% of those working more than 50 hours per week) said they would prefer to work fewer hours, and more than 25% said they would take a pay cut to make it happen. Another survey in 2000 found that even college students and recent grads place "flexible hours" at the top of the list of the job benefits they most desire—above health insurance, vacations, and stock options.

And yet the problem remains unchanged. Too many of us work more and more in the manic pursuit to maintain our lives and our lifestyles. As a society, we are suffering from the frenzy, frustration, and fatigue. To turn around the words of Thorstein Veblen, "We have become a harried working class rather than a leisure class."

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Further Readings

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