

Inquiring Minds - 4 March 2022

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Do We Live to Work or Work to Live?

Traditional American View of Work

U.S. workers are known for their industriousness and diligence, which some writers have attributed to our Puritan heritage. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in German in 1905 and translated into English in 1930, Max Weber described the capitalistic spirit as the desire to constantly work and build greater and greater wealth, even when wealth is not needed. He viewed work as an ennobling activity that should be embraced as an end in itself. The Puritans viewed hard work and diligence in one's work as pleasing to God.

It appears that the Protestant work ethic is alive and well today if it is defined as number of hours worked. The average American works harder than our Japanese counterparts or the average European worker. "Statistics show that Americans work longer hours than the majority of other countries — **137 hours per year more than Japanese, 260** per year more than in the UK," and **25% more hours** than Europeans."

(<https://nypost.com/2017/09/03/americans-work-harder-than-any-other-countrys-citizens-study/#:~:text=It%20turns%20out%20the%20average,%2C%E2%80%9D%20according%20to%20the%20study.>) Because of all these extra work hours, Americans miss out on the long vacations that their Japanese and European counterparts enjoy as time to get away from work and recharge.

Research also shows that workers in these countries are happier than American workers (<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/08/workers-in-these-countries-are-the-happiest-heres-how-americans-compare.html>). So why do we work so hard if we don't enjoy doing so?

Why Americans Work So Hard Reflects What We Value

Our highly competitive economic system encourages materialism more than more cooperative styles of capitalism practiced in Europe. (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/01/consumerism>). Our conspicuous acquisition reflects a view that success is measured more in terms of "what you own" as opposed to "what you are." Remember the phrase, "keeping up with the Jones"? How much does that influence how we spend our money today?

More and bigger are better. Compared to the rest of the developed world, we live in larger houses, drive bigger cars, and tend to measure our success by how much money we make and what we can acquire with it. In the 1940s and 1950s, our generation grew up in houses averaging about 1,000 square feet. By the 1970s, the average was 50% higher, and today's houses in the U.S. average nearly 2,500 square feet. <https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/new-us->

[homes-today-are-1000-square-feet-larger-than-in-1973-and-living-space-per-person-has-nearly-doubled/](#). Bigger may mean better, but it also means more expensive.

In addition to housing, major expenses of American families today such as health care, transportation, and university education, are becoming more expensive every year. For example, in the 1960s, my tuition at an in-state university was \$270 per year; today the same school charges over \$15,000 in annual tuition. And, of course, all these major expenses cost much less in the social democracies of Europe.

So, it now appears that Americans work so much more than other developed countries not necessarily because of our work ethic, but because we **have** to in order to support our life-style. In our youth, one bread winner was enough to lead a relative comfortable middle-class life; now almost invariably, two full-time salaries are necessary.

How many of us buy stuff we don't need with money we don't have? How do we cover all those expenses – in particular, for non-essential possessions? We go into debt – why pay for today what you can put off till next month? The USA is the developed world leader in consumer debt, according to global credit card debt statistics, with **average 2020 debt of \$5,331**. Next come Canada (\$4,154), the UK (\$3,245), and Japan (\$2,900). Other countries included in the comparison are Germany (\$2,052), France (\$1,616), and China (\$1,728) [https://balancingeverything.com/credit-card-debt-statistics/#:~:text=The%20USA%20is%20in%20the,%2C%20and%20China%20\(%241%2C728](https://balancingeverything.com/credit-card-debt-statistics/#:~:text=The%20USA%20is%20in%20the,%2C%20and%20China%20(%241%2C728)

Covid 19 Has Changed Everything

Big picture economic issues. According to the Pew Research Center, between February 2020 and February 2021, employment fell by 8.5 million with unemployment climbing more sharply among women than men. A “perfect storm” of contributing factors includes interruptions in the global supply chain, huge bottlenecks in major seaports, and a shortage of truckers. The resulting drop in raw materials necessary for the manufacturing sector produced layoffs. And as the average American’s disposable income dropped, consumer demand slumped, which further suppressed the need for employees.

The workplace. The work environment of American workers has dramatically changed during the pandemic. Suddenly, lower-income Americans in “dirty jobs” were “essential” and in some work settings like slaughterhouses, they were **forced** to continue working in close quarters in spite of their high risk of contracting Covid. And many died. Businesses in the retail, service & hospitality industries – restaurants, hotels, cruise lines, hair salons & fitness centers – struggled to stay in business by laying off staff members, and many simply went bankrupt. And despite financial assistance from local and federal programs, many Americans lost not only their jobs, but also their apartments and homes.

In stark contrast, many middle- and upper-income Americans in white-collar jobs enjoyed the luxury of working at home and minimizing their exposure to the deadly pandemic. Zoom meetings replaced the standard face-to-face gatherings, and vacancies in office buildings grew rapidly, resulting in major losses of revenue. Although commercial real estate has been

hit hard by the pandemic, there are plans to convert some of the now-empty spaces into apartment buildings. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/realestate/empty-office-buildings-hotels.html>).

Working at home, at least a day or two a week, may be here to stay. A monthly survey of U.S. workers began in May 2020, tracking more than 30,000 workers aged 20–64 who earned at least \$20,000 per year in 2019 (<https://review.chicagobooth.edu/economics/2021/article/are-we-really-more-productive-working-home>). In an analysis of the data collected through March 2021, the researchers found that nearly six out of 10 workers reported being more productive working from home than they expected to be, compared with 14 percent who said they got less done. On average, respondents' productivity at home was 7 percent higher than they expected. The researchers argue that if the work-from-home trend continues, these working arrangements will increase overall worker productivity in the U.S. by 5 percent as compared with the pre-pandemic economy.

Take this job and shove it! A curious paradox has arisen as Americans reconsider their work and life priorities as the number of weekly Covid 19 deaths in the U.S. continues to be nearly equivalent to two 9/11 terrorist attacks *per week*. In spite of significant uncertainty about the economy plus the pandemic, the number of people quitting their jobs has surged to record highs – 4 million in July, 4.3 million in August, 4.4 million in September, and 4.2 million in October, 2021 (<https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/a-record-number-of-workers-are-quitting-their-jobs-empowered-by-new-leverage/ar-AAPqmmR?li=BBnb7Kz>). By September, nearly one quarter of workers aged 20 to 34 were neither working nor looking for work. This high level of turnover has contributed to labor shortages, especially in leisure and hospitality. In addition, pressure to unionize or go on strike has grown, and employees are demanding higher wages. Faced with labor shortages, employers are trying to attract workers with pay increases. Over the past six months wages of leisure and hospitality workers have risen at an annual rate of 18 percent, and they are now well above their pre-pandemic trend_ (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/14/opinion/workers-quitting-wages.html>).

What's it all about, Alfie? With increasing numbers of Americans questioning the emphasis they have placed on their careers, career coaches are popping up to help them rethink their priorities (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/20/business/career-spiritual-coaching-pandemic.html>).

Jonathan Malesic, author of the forthcoming book “[The End of Burnout](#),” argues that the future of work should mean working less. “Americans are not just burned out and underpaid – our entire relationship to work is broken.”

“We need that truth now, when millions are returning to in-person work after nearly two years of mass unemployment and working from home. The conventional approach to work — from the sanctity of the 40-hour week to the ideal of upward mobility — led us to widespread dissatisfaction and [seemingly ubiquitous burnout](#) even before the pandemic. Now, the moral structure of work is up for grabs. We now have space to reimagine how work fits into a good life.” Malesic's New York Times opinion piece includes many quotes from employees who

agree (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/09/23/opinion/covid-return-to-work-rto.html?searchResultPosition=1>):

I am never going back to angry commute podcast listening and mid-drive meditation to deal with the frustration of traffic. I just can't stomach the meaningless drive anymore. Work happens wherever. 28 YEAR OLD PRODUCT DESIGNER, RICHMOND, VA.

I am never going back to being the last parent to pick up my child from school. 42 YEAR OLD MARKETING STRATEGIST, PHOENIX

I am never going back to frantically trying to get it all done on artificial timelines by working more rather than being honest about my own mental health needs. 38 YEAR OLD SMALL BUSINESS OWNER, BOZEMAN, MONT.

I resolve to do less and enjoy it more. EILEEN FIGEL, 58 YEAR OLD URBAN PLANNER, CHICAGO

I resolve to remember my boundaries. 'No' is a complete sentence. AMANDA GRIMM, 41 YEAR OLD BUSINESS ANALYST, ST. PAUL, MINN.

I resolve to try and unionize my fellow employees. RICHARD GEISMAR, 70 YEAR OLD PHYSICAL THERAPIST, NEW YORK, N.Y.

I resolve to put work second. My family and I come first from now on. JACKIE KOLGRAF, 30 YEAR OLD FREELANCE DIGITAL CONTENT PRODUCER NORTH EASTON, MASS.

I resolve to be firm in my decision to go home when I feel sick and stay home or wear a mask until I am better. MICHAEL BORGER, 26 YEAR OLD AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE MANAGER, TUCSON, ARIZ.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you ever feel like the employees above during your working years? If so, what did you do about it.
2. Have you heard your children or grandchildren make such comments during Covid? If so, what changes did they make in their work lives?
3. Why do we place so much emphasis on materialism? How can we change such a well ingrained point of view?
4. When the baby boomers are gone and millennials and generation Z are in public office steering the country, will they resolve these issues? Having lived through economic disruption, youth unemployment, Covid 19, and increasing wealth and income inequality, will they take significant steps to shift American values away from materialism?