

Activity: Frown on Vacations

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Does American Culture Frown on Vacations?

For at least 10 years now, many global studies have found that Americans worked longer hours than workers in any other developed country. A lobbying organization that believes Americans should have a mandatory amount of vacation time, Take Back Your Time, notes that last year 25% of American workers got no paid vacation at all, while 43% didn't even take a solid week off.

A recent survey of 2000 professionals by Hudson, a staffing firm, found that half of all workers failed to take all the time that they were allotted, and 30% took less than half.

Why? Respondents to the Hudson survey who didn't take all their allotted time off cited excessive work loads, fears of downsizing, and hopes of promotion as three major reasons.

Anxiety aside, even those American workers who do manage to get away, the link with the office is not broken. A 2006 survey by Steelcase, the office furniture manufacturer, found that 43% of working Americans say they spend some time doing work while on vacation. This number has doubled (from 23%) since 1995, back when the Web was just getting started, and blackberries were something you put in a crumple.

Why are the citizens of the richest country in the world working so hard – or at least, so long?

"I think it's part of the American business culture, really," says [Earl Hill](#), a senior lecturer in organization and management at Emory University's [Goizueta Business School](#).

For example, skipping vacation is almost unheard of in a number of European countries, where workers get six weeks of vacation time from Day One on the job. In the U.S., vacation time is something that builds up gradually, and often only grows to three or four weeks after five years on the job. The experience of those early years, plus the fact that people move around from job to job, accustom American employees to managing with less time off, according to Hill.

Interestingly, Hill teaches in Europe during part of his vacation time. "I enjoy being in a very different culture and learning about how people who are very different from me live."

Heightened expectations and job security, as highlighted in the Hudson survey, are also factors.

According to Hill, there are many industries where a lot of 'face time' is expected. "That doesn't necessarily mean that you're producing more or getting more results," he says. "It's 'face time,' you're kind of expected to be [seen around the office] 12 to 14 hours."

Yet there is a lot of evidence to suggest that to really get ahead, workers need less face time and more hammock time. "Focusing narrowly in a limited range of

activities limits the brain's potential, and therefore, of course, your own," says [Rick Gilkey](#), an associate professor in the practice of organization and management at Goizueta and an associate professor of psychiatry at Emory's School of Medicine.

"At the very least, you're setting yourself up for a more traditional trajectory of aging, which is one of rather continuous and predictable decline," he adds. This decline can be avoided, Gilkey says, "because we now know that the brain has the ability to revitalize itself...and create new neurons and new pathways and can grow and expand through the entire lifecycle. Instead of expanding your experience, you're narrowing it."

Another contributor to foregoing vacations, says Gilkey, is that people become addicted to their own stress hormones – and that's a bad thing. "They're getting kind of the equivalent of a runner's high, except they're not doing it from exercise, they're doing it from overwork and stress," he explains. "There is evidence that people do get addicted to it and those stress hormones are detrimental particularly to a part of the brain called the hippocampus, which is responsible for short-term memory."

There may be other detrimental effects on our personal lives as well. For example, people in a number of other developed countries that work less than Americans also live longer, weigh less, and suffer lower divorce rates.

In addition, time spent away from the office can be of great benefit, some professors say. According to Gilkey, a study to determine the commonalities of Nobel laureates "found very few, of course, but one of the things they did find was that virtually all of them recalled that the genesis of their intellectual lives occurred around the family dinner table and that family dinners were a very common feature," notes Gilkey. "The social-emotional world of the family and the connections around the dinner table and the conversations people have" are clearly beneficial.

Nor does sacrifice necessarily benefit employers. One recent study in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* noted that most of the worst industrial accidents in the past few decades, including Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Exxon Valdez, all occurred in the early hours of the morning due to human error or fatigue. The study found that long hours sharply increased the risk of error – a 60-hour week of 10-hour day shifts is estimated to add 16% risk of an accident, and five 12-hour day shifts is estimated to add a risk of 28%.

Even less extreme work situations can create unproductive results. "Stress ultimately takes the form of four kinds of symptoms – absenteeism, unwanted turnover, poor quality and poor productivity," Gilkey says.

A few companies understand this, adds Gilkey. "Some companies, Hewlett-Packard among them, have realized that it's short-sighted and they not only lose key personnel, but there's burnout and illness rates increase. Ultimately, they realize, [extended work hours] is a very short-term strategy."

But companies with that type of insight are the minority, stresses Hill. "I know a lot of them talk the talk, but I dare say there aren't a whole lot of them who walk the walk—in terms of trying to create a working environment that supports a work-life balance."

One sign that HP is a company truly concerned about the issue: not only do they chase employees out of the office, but Gilkey says the company even encourages workers to log off entirely while they're on vacation. "Off means off," he says. "It

doesn't mean continuing [to work] in a different location."

That's a crucial rule, in Gilkey's view, because technology is making the boundary between work and life so porous. "It gets trickier and trickier to tell, even for the individual himself, when you're working and when you're not," Gilkey says. "I think that creates the worst possible situation because then you're sort of half doing it, you're not really working. You're doing your email but you're kind of taking a little break because your brain needs it, for one thing, and then you're working at such a low efficiency." The result, says Gilkey, is that you're working all the time. "I think that's a real trap."

All this work has led to a profound shift in the culture, Gilkey believes. A hundred years ago, the mark of the well-off was that they worked less. A hundred years ago, many of the wealthiest in the U.S. spent their winter holidays at the exclusive Jekyll Island Club in Georgia. "Now it's almost the opposite, where it's a badge of honor – 'I'm much too important to take time off.' It's the inverted attitude."

Some economists have argued that what is happening in American culture is not that people are working longer but they are working more at work and less at home. What's happening, these studies suggest, is a process called "marketization" – the substitution of things people prepare for themselves at home for something they buy at a store. For example, women who might have spent hours preparing meals for their family a generation ago, now work in an office and order takeout.

Ultimately, however, the reason people in so many countries spend so much less time in the office than Americans do and take longer vacations may be an inheritance of the Puritan strand of the American character. "The Protestant work ethic is still very alive in the United States, despite the 1960s and maybe because of the 1960s," says [Bradd Shore](#), a professor of anthropology at Emory and director of Emory's MARIAL (Myth and Ritual In American Life) Center.

American feelings about leisure are so ambivalent that Shore says workers may even try to make time off look like work. Consider how Americans dress at home: Shore sees the rise of blue jeans as leisure wear as "a covert recognition of the value of work," since jeans were once worn principally as work clothes.

Further, Shore notes that many Americans find it important to look busy, almost as a mark of status. Shore's theory is that most Americans today "mind their busy-ness" – they are competitive about their level of activity, not only at work but in spheres outside of work, such as with how many activities their children participate in. "I think that people are tired, but I think it's also a form of bragging."
