

Workin' Hard and Hardly Livin'

Technology, the Buying of Time and the Selling of Leisure

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Last year, my best friend was telling me all about her lawyer sister's new computer purchase, which was paid for by her law firm. The sister had called to ask for advice, and my friend helped her put in an order for an astoundingly good system: Laptop with house-wide wireless networking, a docking station for the laptop at work – all the bells and whistles. I was told excitedly, “The wireless network extends through the house and out to the yard - so she can work on the deck if she wants!” At first, it sounded fairly brilliant to have that sort of set up at home, but on reflection I found the idea more than a little frightening. If her firm was willing to put all this money into her system, would they not expect her to be available to work at home all the time?

The more time I spent thinking about this, I found it coming up with quite a few of my friends: The MBA at a medical technology company expected to work on flights as business trips are considered company time; The market researcher who is putting in sixty hour weeks to look like a ‘go-getter’; The freelancer who is quitting contracts because they’ve begun to take up too much time at home; Another freelancer who was asked to be available remotely through Christmas vacation. As I don’t like to work more than absolutely necessary, all of these situations were rather difficult to comprehend and fairly horrifying. I began to wonder; how did society shift from the movement for shorter hours and increased wages to the age of longer work hours for less pay? Or more precisely, what has legitimated working these longer hours? It seemed to me that we had been offered technology as saviour from the drudgery of work, when in fact; it has not saved us at all.

Technological advances have made our work mobile, thus ‘freeing’ us from the confines of the office; however these advances have only helped to chain us to our workplaces electronically, increasing the number of hours we spend ‘at work’. Our time is therefore less sold to the employer than owned by the employer, and that time becomes

something that we must reacquire. This leads to a vicious cycle of work and spending, debt and further work, as leisure becomes a commodity that must be bought back in the form of vacations, movies, video games and equipment for sports – the list is endless. In the 'New Economy', shopping is no longer leisure – it is more work that must be done. Leisure itself has become commodified and through the dictates of consumer culture, we are expected to buy more leisure than anyone has the money to afford or time to enjoy.

I intend to examine the changes technology has wrought first historically, starting post-Industrial Revolution with the eight-hour movement and how work became commodified, thus inextricably linked to consumption. Then, I will look at how modern technologies have changed the view of time, the face of labour and the societal view of work; lastly linking this to the loss, and subsequent commodification of labour.

Before the technology of the Industrial Revolution made mass production possible, time belonged to the worker exclusively; skilled labour was centred in the home and produced according to a schedule set by the worker, or in the case of those living off the land, by seasonal changes. Pre-industrial workers did not see time as money and did not see the point of working more than necessary – leisure was often more valuable. (Ciulla, pg. 177) The Industrial Revolution brought about a massive shift – workers now sold their labour rather than their own products. Industrialization took work out of the home and drew a line between work and home life. Work-time became time that belonged to the employer, and working by the factory clock became the norm. However, it seems that working by the clock does not come naturally to people; it was difficult to initially get workers to follow regular hours. (Ciulla, pg. 177) After time, workers became accustomed to regular – and long – factory hours: up to twelve to fourteen hour days.

In the late 1800's a movement aiming to establish objective work conditions was born that would make mass consumption feasible by introducing higher wages and shorter hours. (Ewan, pg. 28) The eight-hour movement, as it was called, sought to take the (male) worker out of the factory and put him in the home, the church, and the store, where he would contribute to the nation's economy, civil society, and moral life. (Glickman, pg. 107) Not only would this allow for leisure time for workers to contribute to society, but also to help drive an economy that had become based on the mass production of goods. Eight-hour proponents associated free time with increased consumption and stressed the economic, as well as the political benefits of shorter hours – free time and money would enable workers to consume. (Glickman, pp. 100-1) In order to maintain levels of production, time out for mass consumption became as much of a necessity as time in for production. It was essential for the worker spend his wages and leisure time on the consumer market. (Ewan, pg. 29) While workers did get more free time and spent less time in the factories, excessiveness began replace thrift as a social value (Ewan, pg. 25), leading to a consumer society where workers sold labour to be able to buy products rather than producing on their own. As such, time itself became commodified – a product to be bought and sold.

How did these changes affect how time is viewed today? Time is now synonymous with money and action. The economic notion of time dominates the way people experience life at work and often at home - we live under the shadow of the idea that time is money. (Ciulla, pp. 172-3) We have developed an internal notion of time, common in industrialized nations. Our time is sold, not just our skills – and by selling our time, we sell freedom of what we do with that time. Time itself measures and structures tasks rather than the other way around. (Ciulla, pg. 179) Therefore, even if our work for the day or the week is completed, our time is still not our own. Time owned by the employer is work time, which

always trumps interactive (social) time and self time. (Ciulla, pg. 175) Thus, we are more willing to take on more work time, rather than protecting the little time that we have for ourselves, our families and friends.

Despite all this, it could be said that only the time we sell to employers is not our own – that there is little reason to devote interactive or self time to work outside of that arena. Increasingly, this is not the case. Work hours have increased over the last twenty years while leisure and vacation time decreased. (Ciulla, pg. 171) Even though most salaried workers work 9-5, many tend to work longer hours without being paid for overtime. (Ciulla, pg. 180) Speed and efficiency are seen as not only important, but also a possible escape to self time – if our work is completed, perhaps we will have time to spend at leisure. However doing things faster does not give us more free time – the faster we work, the faster our time simply fills with new work. There seems to be no end to the tasks to be completed; both at work and at home. (Ciulla, pg. 175) Even though this speed brings on an undeniable stress, seen in higher levels of anxiety and depression, our culture has bestowed elevated status to those who work all the time. (Ciulla, pg. 189) Being seen as industrious, a hard worker and committed to a career is indicative of a strong character, while an enjoyment of leisure over work is viewed pejoratively.

As time is money and speed is of the essence in modern society, we view technology as a way to save us time, increase our monetary gain, and make work easier. We have childish, magical expectations for technology – that it will solve all our problems and make us permanently happy. (Stivers, pg. 13) Stivers calls this 'technological utopianism': the myth of technological civilization as it resides in advertising and programs of mass media. (pg. 125) It is the myth of an eternal and perfect present we can construct, where all inefficiencies or problems of nature and society are solved. This promised land is likewise a

world of total consumption. In it, people have perfect health, are beautiful and eternally youthful, free to do whatever is pleasurable, and thus, completely happy. (Stivers, pg. 128)

We are sold this technological utopia so we will accept technology as a saviour – at work and at home, thereby allowing it into the private sphere. However, environmental, moral and political problems are increasing rather than decreasing. (Stivers, pg. 41)

One of these problems is the issue of longer hours and higher expectations on workers that we see today. The reasons people are working longer are rooted in changing business environment and in the effects of technological communication and the information revolution. (Wallace, pg. 57) Netcentric technologies like email, instant messaging and wireless networking have helped mould a business climate where working longer and harder can be desirable for some and mandatory for others. They enable people to work as long as they want to, around the clock. (Wallace, pg. 54) Professional work, in particular, has a task rather than time orientation – the professor's work does not end at the door of the classroom, nor does the executive's at the door of the office. Thanks to technology and telecommuting, the professional risks working constantly, no matter the time or place. (Ciulla, pg. 189) As it is possible to work from virtually anywhere, some managers expect people to check mail from home on a regular basis, while commutes are also being used for work now – on trains, subways and on planes. (Wallace, pp. 67-8)

As work and home life were separated by industrialization, technology supposedly bridges the between the two gap by 'freeing' us from the walls of the workplace. It gives us flexibility and mobility, the feeling of working for ourselves, on our own time and in our own territory. However, this feeling can be an illusion – it can extend or increase the amount of time people work. Flexibility regarding the location of work also gives flexibility to the time of work. The new technology gives us more freedom, but potentially makes us 24-

hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year employees. Employers thus electronically tether employees to work, neatly removing the boundary between work life and home life and that between work time and self time. (Ciulla, pp. 187-8) Whether it is time spent on the laptop creating a presentation or checking email, an hour on a conference call, or working remotely well into the evenings and weekends, technology has turned our homes from havens from work into extensions of offices.

Technology has not only changed the length of time we work at our jobs, but also the security we feel in our jobs. Bauman states “[Uncertainty] is now woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal.” (pg. 21) Corporate norms are changing: the expectations on staff are greater and an increased emphasis on teamwork has led to overwork based on guilt – you do not want to let the ‘team’ down, nor seem to be working less than your co-worker. (Wallace, pg. 62) To add to the anxiety, many companies are choosing layoffs over shorter hours for employees in order to reduce fixed costs and benefits. Job insecurity, corporate downsizing, and fear of losing their job all drive employees to work longer hours. (Wallace, pg. 61) No places of work can be anticipated to sustain the job currently performed or for that matter to offer any kind of job, until the retirement of its current holder. (Bauman, pg. 22) This instability can be attributed to changes in the market and customer loyalty, brought about by ‘improved’ technology: consumer loyalty is increasingly based on the best deals; online shopping means that it is no longer necessary to settle on local prices for goods. (Wallace, pg. 58) Therefore, these changes and societal pressures legitimate the escalating demands on workers.

Where, then, does leisure take place in our society? Leisure is usually considered an activity that requires learning, reflection or development of skill – something meaningful. Workers are often too tired or busy for leisure that might be based on self-improvement or

enrichment. (Ciulla, pg. 197) Not only do we spend more time working, but also spend more time at housework and recreational activities, like going to the gym. (Ciulla, pg. 176) Even these tasks can only be completed in a limited amount of time – the time that we have managed to guard from work. Once time pressure is added to tasks at home, we begin to experience home life in the same way we do work for pay, making lists and scheduling what little ‘free time’ we have. More and more people have begun to regard daily grinds, like cooking or remodelling, as hobbies or crafts. The more the time demands of work dominate our lives, the more all activities feel like work. People are either working, or working at relaxing. (Ciulla, pp. 185-7) Even spending money takes time – time to make it, time to shop and time to enjoy what you buy. (Ciulla, pp. 200) Families who could get by with working less are trapped in cycle of consumer desire and debt. (Ciulla, pg. 171) As consumption becomes a need rather than a desire, it too takes on aspects of work. There is no leisure in consumption, simply the grind of making and spending money.

As our time ever more belongs to our employers and all our activities feel like work rather than enjoyable pastimes, leisure has become something that must be bought back. Through watching television, we buy back leisure by surrendering our attention to commercials. We pay for our films, our games, our vacations – anything that provides pleasure and distraction from the day-to-day realities of our work. Many people take a professional approach to leisure, buying new, cool shoes; experimental sports equipment; the latest in computer equipment for gaming; for these people, sometimes buying the accoutrements for a hobby is more fun than actually using it. (Ciulla, pg. 199) This is definitely to the advantage of maintaining levels of consumption, as the market tempts people with more leisure options than they have time or money to enjoy. (Ciulla, pg. 200) The pressure to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ does not come from neighbours, but now from

television and advertisements. At least when we were attempting to keep up with our neighbours, our incomes were similar. Now, we try to keep up with people who are out of our economic range. This draws us into a seamless cycle of spending, debt and longer working hours – people in this cycle increasingly look to further consumption to give meaning to life. When work is disappointing, people make up for the loss of dreams with spending. We work to afford things we want to buy, and then we buy things and use free time to compensate in some way for hard work. (Ciulla, pp. 202-3) Therefore, we ‘deserve’ our evening out at a restaurant or club, the expensive cruise vacation, the newest video game or DVD set, because we have worked hard; we need an excuse to enjoy ourselves, and that excuse can only come at a cost. With the denigration of leisure, even sleep is not considered a fair use of time. We must always be doing something, whether that be working, or spending to relax.

Technology has not lived up to the promise it had in the early days of the eight-hour work day; rather than freeing us, we have become enslaved by it. We are able to work from anywhere, be reached at any time – it is unsurprising that technological advance would be used to meet the demands of capital. Though our time has come to be more or less owned by our employers and leisure has become commodified, there is some hope – springing out of some of the most technologically advanced areas. More young people in Japan are turning to part-time and casual work rather than be subject to the demands of corporations; Electronic Arts, one of the most successful computer gaming companies, is facing a class action suit filed by overworked and underpaid employees; Wal-Mart is being beset by union organizing efforts, and has been forced to allow a worker’s union in China. As the factory workers of the late 1800’s decided they would no longer put up with fourteen hour days, the technology workers of the 2000’s are burning out on seventy hour weeks and the necessity

to buy relaxation. If leisure and our time can be commodified, it can, over time, be taken back. After all, it rightfully belongs to us.

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