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Study: U.S. employees put in most hours

By Porter Anderson

CNN Career

(CNN) -- You're not imagining it. The United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) has the proof:

"Workers in the United States are putting in more hours than anyone else in the industrialized world."

Lawrence Jeff Johnson -- the chief labor market economist who has led the ILO team in producing its new "Key Indicators of the Labor Market 2001-2002" study -- also says American workers are, per person, more productive than their counterparts in other countries.

"But we're not the most efficient, when you compare it per hour, looking at the Belgians and the French."

It seems almost cruel to mention this to our Stateside readers on Labor Day weekend, but Johnson says the Europeans' comparatively long vacations -- four to six weeks per worker -- may have something to do with this. "Maybe they're not so stressed" as American workers, who on the average may get two weeks' vacation.

One thing Johnson says doesn't merit emulation is a workweek shortened by law, as in the French workplace where a 35-hour week is the legislated standard. "Mandating it doesn't work," Johnson says. "In fact, they'll tell you that the '35-hour workweek' really means working the equivalent of 35 hours per week over the year."

"But if we're working ourselves to death in the United States," he asks, "why are we increasing the hours? Almost every year we increase the hours of work. American workers put in long hours to make up the gains" in efficiency seen in France and Belgium.

"There are lessons to be learned from workers in Europe."

To that end, the ILO is planning a special Global Employment Forum for November 1 to 3 in Geneva, this U.N. agency's headquarters, with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan among the attendees. "I'm not going to say that the Europeans do it better," Johnson says, "but we (Americans) need to open ourselves up to learning a little more from others. We don't always do it best."

In hard numbers, what Johnson is saying is that his ILO statistics show that last year the average American worked 1,978 hours -- up from 1,942 hours in 1990. That represents an increase of almost a week of work. And it registers Americans as working longer hours than Canadians, Germans, Japanese and other workers.

What's even more concerning, especially to Johnson and his fellow ILO analysts, is that "the increase in the number of hours worked within the United States runs counter to the trend in other industrialized nations," he says. There, "we're seeing a declining number of hours worked annually."

Using the most recently available data, the ILO has determined that the average Australian, Canadian, Japanese or Mexican worker was on the job roughly 100 hours less than the average American in a year -- that's almost two-and-a-half weeks less. Brazilians and British employees worked some 250 hours, or more than five weeks, less than Americans. Germans worked roughly 500 hours, or 12-and-a-half weeks, less than careerists in the States.

Of countries classified as "developing" or "in transition," only South Korea and the Czech Republic tracked workers putting in more hours than American laborers. The Koreans logged almost 500 hours more annually than Americans, the Czechs doing some 100 hours more work than U.S. workers on average.

World of work

The ILO predates the United Nations, having been founded in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles. A U.N. agency since 1946, it sets and promotes standards for workplace rights, job creation and occupational safety and health. The

organization has 175 member countries.

Johnson calculates that the worldwide labor force stands today at nearly 3 billion people -- roughly half the planetary population.

Of that large group, the agency estimates that 160 million workers are unemployed. About 41 percent of the unemployed pool, about 66 million, are thought to be younger people.

And there are some 500 million "working poor." They're unable to make more than US\$1 per day.

When it comes to the productivity issue, the ILO team is talking about "value added per person in 1990 U.S. dollars."

"Since the mid-1990s, U.S. labor productivity has grown considerably faster than most other developed (industrialized) economies," says Johnson. "Between 1995 and 2000, the average annual labor productivity growth rate in the United States was 2.6 percent, up from 0.8 percent between 1990 and 1995. Within the European Union, the labor productivity growth rate was 2.4 percent from 1990 to 1995. It decelerated to 1.2 percent from 1995 to 2000."

Ask Johnson what's going on and he immediately heads to an area of debate frequently touched on at CNN.com/Career -- the overtaking of personal time by work.

"I played golf on Sunday with a friend of mine, the vice president of a telecommunications firm. His phone rang three times, all work-related.

"We have this blurred line now between what is work and what is play. But we don't want to give up that edge. We American workers don't want to take time away from work.

"If we talk about a concept of 'decent work,' why are we increasing the hours we spend at it? In 2000, I would have thought we'd start seeing some retrenchment in those hours. We didn't.

"Now, the numbers I've been seeing between January and now show that the hours have fallen back a little bit. But that's easy to contribute to companies slowing down their manufacturing, less overtime on the job. The economy slows down somewhat, the hours get pulled back. But productivity continues to grow."

One of the most interesting national cases in the ILO's purview, of course, is the Republic of Ireland, a kind of poster country for European potential as workers there get ready to deal at last in euro coins and bank notes.

The well-documented new productivity of Ireland -- 7 percent growth in productivity in terms of value added per person employed -- is a story of almost non-existent unemployment. "A lot of companies from the United States," Johnson says, "went to Ireland to start penetrating the European market. Ireland has the common-language advantage for American companies.

"Ireland also has a very highly educated labor force, a trained labor force -- so much so that a lot of Irish engineers and technical people went abroad in the 1980s and have only returned in the 1990s. They also have a very business-friendly environment and a good proximity to other markets of Continental Europe.

"But the Irish also take long vacations," Johnson says with a sad laugh.

Working hard for the money

"The lower skills have been earning less, the higher skills more," says Johnson of the United States' earnings picture. Real earnings of laborers and welders, for example, trended downward somewhat during the last decade, while earnings increased for occupations demanding more formal education -- computer programming, accounting, nursing and teaching."

The ILO also reports that the wage gap between men and women persists. In 2000, female accountants in the U.S. banking sector, the agency says, earned 27 percent less than men in the same work. Female computer programmers in the insurance sector earned 10 percent less than male programmers.

There may, however, be a narrowing trend between men's and women's wages, Johnson says, even as the world faces an estimated growth of 500 million workers in the next decade.

As he and his agency work to prompt study and policy-making among countries' leaders through such events as the coming Geneva conference, Johnson says he never loses sight of the careerist irony in being an American abroad -- while displaying the work-driven patterns he studies in his native culture.

"I live in Switzerland with my wife and two young daughters, we've been there for five years," Johnson says. "We very much enjoy the lifestyle there.

Unfortunately, I work myself like an American.

"I have a young American associate in the office here working with us, went to Georgetown (University), London School of Economics. She has settled into the (Swiss) culture," its work pace and rhythms.

"She can take a long vacation. I can't."

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