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In search of lost time

Why is everyone so busy?

Time poverty is a problem partly of perception and partly of distribution

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THE predictions sounded like promises: in the future, working hours would be short and vacations long. “Our grandchildren”, reckoned John Maynard Keynes in 1930, would work around “three hours a day”—and probably only by choice. Economic progress and technological advances had already shrunk working hours considerably by his day, and there was no reason

to believe this trend would not continue. Whizzy cars and ever more time-saving tools and appliances guaranteed more speed and less drudgery in all parts of life. Social psychologists began to fret: whatever would people do with all their free time?

This has not turned out to be one of the world’s more pressing problems. Everybody, everywhere seems to be busy. In the corporate world, a “perennial time-scarcity problem” afflicts executives all over the globe, and the matter has only grown more acute in recent years, say analysts at McKinsey, a consultancy firm. These feelings are especially profound among working parents. As for all those time-saving gizmos, many people grumble that these bits of wizardry chew up far too much of their days, whether they are mouldering in traffic, navigating robotic voice-messaging systems or scything away at e-mail—sometimes all at once.

Tick, tock

Why do people feel so rushed? Part of this is a perception problem. On average, people in rich countries have more leisure time than they used to. This is particularly true in Europe, but even in America leisure time has been inching up since 1965, when formal national time-use surveys began. American men toil for pay nearly 12 hours less per week, on average, than they did 40 years ago—a fall that includes all work-related activities, such as commuting and water-cooler breaks. Women’s paid work has risen a lot over this period, but their time in unpaid work, like



cooking and cleaning, has fallen even more dramatically, thanks in part to dishwashers, washing machines, microwaves and other modern conveniences, and also to the fact that men shift themselves a little more around the house than they used to.

The problem, then, is less how much time people have than how they see it. Ever since a clock was first used to synchronise labour in the 18th century, time has been understood in relation to money. Once hours are financially quantified, people worry more about wasting, saving or using them profitably. When economies grow and incomes rise, everyone's time becomes more valuable. And the more valuable something becomes, the scarcer it seems.

Individualistic cultures, which emphasise achievement over affiliation, help cultivate this time-is-money mindset. This creates an urgency to make every moment count, notes Harry Triandis, a social psychologist at the University of Illinois. Larger, wealthy cities, with their higher wage rates and soaring costs of living, raise the value of people's time further still. New Yorkers are thriftier with their minutes—and more harried—than residents of Nairobi. London's pedestrians are swifter than those in Lima. The tempo of life in rich countries is faster than that of poor countries. A fast pace leaves most people feeling rushed. "Our sense of time", observed William James in his 1890 masterwork, "The Principles of Psychology", "seems subject to the law of contrast."

When people see their time in terms of money, they often grow stingy with the former to maximise the latter. Workers who are paid by the hour volunteer less of their time and tend to feel more antsy when they are not working. In an experiment carried out by Sanford DeVoe and Julian House at the University of Toronto, two different groups of people were asked to listen to the same passage of music—the first 86 seconds of "The Flower Duet" from the opera "Lakmé". Before the song, one group was asked to gauge their hourly wage. The participants who made this calculation ended up feeling less happy and more impatient while the music was playing. "They wanted to get to the end of the experiment to do something that was more profitable," Mr DeVoe explains.

The relationship between time, money and anxiety is something Gary S. Becker noticed in America's post-war boom years. Though economic progress and higher wages had raised everyone's standard of living, the hours of "free" time Americans had been promised had come to nought. "If anything, time is used more carefully today than a century ago," he noted in 1965. He found that when people are paid more to work, they tend to work longer hours, because working becomes a more profitable use of time. So the rising value of work time puts pressure on all time. Leisure time starts to seem more stressful, as people feel compelled to use it wisely or not at all.

The harried leisure class

That economic prosperity would create feelings of time poverty looked a little odd in the 1960s, given all those new time-saving blenders and lawnmowers. But there is a distinct correlation between privilege and pressure. In part, this is a conundrum of wealth: though people may be earning more money to spend, they are not simultaneously earning more time to spend it in. This makes time—that frustratingly finite, unrenewable resource—feel more precious.

Being busy can make you rich, but being rich makes you feel busier still

Daniel Hamermesh of the University of Texas at Austin calls this a “yuppie kvetch”. In an analysis of international time-stress data, with Jungmin Lee, now of Sogang University in Seoul, he found that complaints about insufficient time come disproportionately from well-off families. Even after holding constant the hours spent working at jobs or at home, those with bigger paychecks still felt more anxiety about their time. “The more cash-rich working Americans are, the more time-poor they feel,” reported Gallup, a polling company, in 2011. Few spared a moment to feel much sympathy.



So being busy can make you rich, but being rich makes you feel busier still. Staffan Linder, a Swedish economist, diagnosed this problem in 1970. Like Becker, he saw that heady increases in the productivity of work-time compelled people to maximise the utility of their leisure time. The most direct way to do this would be for people to consume more goods within a given unit of time. To indulge in such “simultaneous consumption”, he wrote, a chap “may find himself drinking Brazilian coffee, smoking a Dutch cigar, sipping a French cognac, reading the *New York Times*, listening to a Brandenburg Concerto and entertaining his Swedish wife—all at the same time, with varying degrees of success.” Leisure time would inevitably feel less leisurely, he surmised, particularly for those who seemed best placed to enjoy it all. The unexpected product of economic progress, according to Linder, was a “harried leisure class”.

The explosion of available goods has only made time feel more crunched, as the struggle to choose what to buy or watch or eat or do raises the opportunity cost of leisure (ie, choosing one thing comes at the expense of choosing another) and contributes to feelings of stress. The endless possibilities afforded by a simple internet connection boggle the mind. When there are so many ways to fill one’s time, it is only natural to crave more of it. And pleasures always feel fleeting. Such things are relative, as Albert Einstein noted: “An hour sitting with a pretty girl on a park bench passes like a minute, but a minute sitting on a hot stove seems like an hour.”

The ability to satisfy desires instantly also breeds impatience, fuelled by a nagging sense that one could be doing so much else. People visit websites less often if they are more than 250 milliseconds slower than a close competitor, according to research from Google. More than a fifth of internet users will abandon an online video if it takes longer than five seconds to load. When experiences can be calculated according to the utility of a millisecond, all seconds are more anxiously judged for their utility.

New technologies such as e-mail and smartphones exacerbate this impatience and anxiety. E-mail etiquette often necessitates a response within 24 hours, with the general understanding that sooner is better. Managing this constant and mounting demand often involves switching tasks or multi-tasking, and the job never quite feels done. “Multi-tasking is what makes us feel pressed for time,” says Elizabeth Dunn, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. “No matter what people are doing, people feel better when they are focused on that activity,” she adds.

Yet the shortage of time is a problem not just of perception, but also of distribution. Shifts in the way people work and live have changed the way leisure time is experienced, and who gets to experience it. For the past 20 years, and bucking previous trends, the workers who are now working the longest hours and juggling the most responsibilities at home also happen to be among the best educated and best paid. The so-called leisure class has never been more harried.

Racing to the top

Writing in 1962, Sebastian de Grazia, a political scientist, cast a withering eye across the great American landscape, dismayed by all the relentless industry and consumption. “If executives are so powerful a force in America, as they indubitably are, why don’t they get more of that free time which everybody else, it seems, holds to be so precious?” Perhaps it is fortunate de Grazia did not live to see the day when executives would no longer break for lunch.

Thirty years ago low-paid, blue-collar workers were more likely to punch in a long day than their professional counterparts. One of the many perks of being a salaried employee was a fairly manageable and predictable work-week, some long lunches and the occasional round of golf. Evenings might be spent curled up with a Sharper Image catalogue by a toasty fire.

But nowadays professionals everywhere are twice as likely to work long hours as their less-educated peers. Few would think of sparing time for nine holes of golf, much less 18. (Golf courses around the world are struggling to revamp the game to make it seem speedy and cool—see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21636688-thought-thriving-parts-asia-golf-struggling-america-and-much-europe) (<http://www.economist.com/news/christmas-specials/21636688-thought-thriving-parts-asia-golf-struggling-america-and-much-europe>) .) And lunches now tend to be efficient affairs, devoured at one’s desk, with an eye on the e-mail inbox. At some point these workers may

finally leave the office, but the regular blinking or chirping of their smartphones kindly serves to remind them that their work is never done.

A Harvard Business School survey of 1,000 professionals found that 94% worked at least 50 hours a week, and almost half worked more than 65 hours. Other research shows that the share of college-educated American men regularly working more than 50 hours a week rose from 24% in 1979 to 28% in 2006. According to a recent survey, 60% of those who use smartphones are connected to work for 13.5 hours or more a day. European labour laws rein in overwork, but in Britain four in ten managers, victims of what was once known as “the American disease”, say they put in more than 60 hours a week. It is no longer shameful to be seen swotting.

All this work has left less time for play. Though leisure time has increased overall, a closer look shows that most of the gains took place between the 1960s and the 1980s. Since then economists have noticed a growing “leisure gap”, with the lion’s share of spare time going to people with less education.

In America, for example, men who did not finish high-school gained nearly eight hours a week of leisure time between 1985 and 2005. Men with a college degree, however, saw their leisure time drop by six hours during the same period, which means they have even less leisure than they did in 1965, say Mark Aguiar of Princeton University and Erik Hurst of the University of Chicago. The same goes for well-educated American women, who not only have less leisure time than they did in 1965, but also nearly 11 hours less per week than women who did not graduate from high school.

What accounts for this yawning gap between the time-poor haves and the time-rich have-nots? Part of it has to do with structural changes to the labour market. Work opportunities have declined for anyone without a college degree. The availability of manufacturing and other low-skilled jobs has shrunk in the rich world. The jobs that are left tend to be in the service sector. They are often both unsatisfying and poorly paid. So the value of working hours among the under-educated is fairly low by most measures, and the rise in “leisure” time may not be anything to envy.

Yet the leisure-time gap between employees with more and less education is not merely a product of labour-market changes. Less well-educated men also spend less time searching for work, doing odd jobs for money and getting extra training than unemployed educated men, and they do less work around the house and spend less time with their children.

But this does not explain why so many well-educated and better-paid people have less leisure time than they did in the 1960s. Various factors may account for this phenomenon. One is that college-educated workers are more likely to enjoy what they do for a living, and identify closely

with their careers, so work long hours willingly. Particularly at the top, a demanding job can be a source of prestige, so the rewards of longer hours go beyond the financial.

Another reason is that all workers today report greater feelings of job insecurity. Slow economic growth and serious disruptions in any number of industries, from media to architecture to advertising, along with increasing income inequality, have created ever more competition for interesting, well-paid jobs. Meanwhile in much of the rich world, the cost of housing and private education has soared. They can also expect to live longer, and so need to ensure that their pension pots are stocked with ample cash for retirement. Faced with sharper competition, higher costs and a greater need for savings, even elite professionals are more nervous about their prospects than they used to be. This can keep people working in their offices at all hours, especially in America, where there are few legal limits on the working hours of salaried employees.

This extra time in the office pays off. Because knowledge workers have few metrics for output, the time people spend at their desks is often seen as a sign of productivity and loyalty. So the stooge who is in his office first thing in the morning and last at night is now consistently rewarded with raises and promotions, or saved from budget cuts. Since the late 1990s, this “long-hours premium” has earned overworkers about 6% more per hour than their full-time counterparts, says Kim Weeden at Cornell University. (It also helps reinforce the gender-wage gap, as working mothers are rarely able to put in that kind of time in an office.)

Ultimately, more people at the top are trading leisure for work because the gains of working—and the costs of shirking—are higher than ever before. Revealingly, inequalities in leisure have coincided with other measures of inequality, in wages and consumption, which have been increasing steadily since the 1980s. While the wages of most workers, and particularly uneducated workers, have either remained stagnant or grown slowly, the incomes at the top—and those at the very top most of all—have been rising at a swift rate. This makes leisure time terribly expensive.

So if leisureliness was once a badge of honour among the well-off of the 19th century, in the words of Thorsten Veblen, an American economist at the time, then busyness—and even stressful feelings of time scarcity—has become that badge now. To be pressed for time has become a sign of prosperity, an indicator of social status, and one that most people are inclined to claim. This switch, notes Jonathan Gershuny, the director of Oxford University’s Centre for Time Use Research, is only natural in economies where the most impressive people seem to have the most to do.

The American is always in a hurry

Though professionals everywhere complain about lacking time, the gripes are loudest in America. This makes some sense: American workers toil some of the longest hours in the industrial world. Employers are not required to offer their employees proper holidays, but even when they do, their workers rarely use the lot. The average employee takes only half of what is allotted, and 15% don't take any holiday at all, according to a survey from Glassdoor, a consultancy. Nowhere is the value of work higher and the value of leisure lower. This is the country that invented take-away coffee, after all.

Some blame America's puritanical culture. Americans are "always in a hurry," observed Alexis de Tocqueville more than 150 years ago. But the reality is more complicated. Until the 1970s, American workers put in the same number of hours as the average European, and a bit less than the French. But things changed during the big economic shocks of the 1970s. In Europe labour unions successfully fought for stable wages, a reduced work week and more job protection. Labour-friendly governments capped working hours and mandated holidays. European workers in essence traded money for more time—lower wages for more holiday. This raised the utility of leisure, because holidays are more fun and less costly when everyone else is taking time off too. Though European professionals are working longer hours than ever before, it is still fairly hard to find one in an office in August.

In America, where labour unions have always been far less powerful, the same shocks led to job losses and increased competition. In the 1980s Ronald Reagan cut taxes and social-welfare programmes, which increased economic inequality and halted the overall decline in working hours. The rising costs of certain basics—pensions, health care and higher education, much of which is funded or subsidised in Europe—make it rational to trade more time for money. And because American holidays are more limited, doled out grudgingly by employers (if at all), it is harder to co-ordinate time off with others, which lowers its value, says John de Graaf, executive director of Take Back Your Time, an advocacy organisation in America.

The returns on work are also potentially much higher in America, at least for those with a college degree. This is because taxes and transfer payments do far less to bridge the gap between rich and poor than in other wealthy nations, such as Britain, France and Ireland. The struggle to earn a place on that narrow pedestal encourages people to slave away for incomparably long hours. "In America the consequences of not being at the top are so dramatic that the rat race is exacerbated," says Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel prize-winning economist. "In a winner-takes-all society you would expect this time crunch."

So rising wages, rising costs, diminishing job security and more demanding, rewarding work are all squeezing leisure time—at least for the fortunate few for whom work-time is actually worth something. But without a doubt the noisiest grumbles come from working parents, not least the

well-educated ones. Time-use data reveals why these people never have enough time: not only are they working the longest hours, on average, but they are also spending the most time with their children.

American mothers with a college degree, for example, spend roughly 4.5 hours more per week on child care than mothers with no education beyond high school. This gap persists even when the better-educated mother works outside the home, as she is now likely to do, according to research from Jonathan Guryan and Erik Hurst of the University of Chicago, and Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland. As for fathers, those with a job and a college degree spend far more time with their children than fathers ever used to, and 105% more time than their less-educated male peers. These patterns can be found around the world, particularly in relatively rich countries.

If their leisure time is so scarce, why are these people spending so much of it doting on their sprogs, shepherding them from tutors to recitals to football games? Why aren't successful professionals outsourcing more of the child-rearing? There are several reasons for this. The first is that people say they find it far more meaningful than time spent doing most other things, including paid work; and if today's professionals value their time at work more than yesterday's did, presumably they feel the time they spend parenting is more valuable still. Another reason is that parents—and above all educated parents—are having children later in life, which puts them in a better position emotionally and financially to make a more serious investment. When children are deliberately sought, sometimes expensively so, parenting feels more rewarding, even if this is just a confirmation bias.

A mother's work

The rise in female employment also seems to have coincided with (or perhaps precipitated) a similarly steep rise in standards for what it means to be a good parent, and especially a good mother. Niggling feelings of guilt and ambivalence over working outside the home, together with some social pressures, compel many women to try to fulfil idealised notions of motherhood as well, says Judy Wajcman, a sociology professor at the London School of Economics and author of a new book, "Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism".

Though women do less work around the house than they used to, the jobs they do tend to be the never-ending ones

The struggle to "have it all" may be a fairly privileged modern challenge. But it bears noting that even in professional dual-income households, mothers still handle the lion's share of parenting—particularly the daily, routine jobs that never feel finished. Attentive fathers handle more of the enjoyable tasks, such as taking children to games and playing sports, while mothers are stuck with most of the feeding, cleaning and nagging. Though women do less work around the house than they used to, the jobs they do tend to be the never-ending ones, like tidying, cooking and

laundry. Well-educated men chip in far more than their fathers ever did, and more than their less-educated peers, but still put in only half as much time as women do. And men tend to do the discrete tasks that are more easily crossed off lists, such as mowing lawns or fixing things round the house. All of this helps explain why time for mothers, and especially working mothers, always feels scarce. “Working mothers with young children are the most time-scarce segment of society,” says Geoffrey Godbey, a time-use expert at Penn State University.



Parents also now have far more insight into how children learn and develop, so they have more tools (and fears) as they groom their children for adulthood. This reinforces another reason why well-off people are investing so much time in parenthood: preparing children to succeed is the best way to transfer privilege from one generation to the next. Now that people are living longer, parents are less likely to pass on a big financial bundle when they die. So the best way to ensure the prosperity of one's children is to provide the education and skills needed to get ahead, particularly as this human capital grows ever more important for success. This helps explain why privileged parents spend so much time worrying over schools and chauffeuring their children to résumé-enhancing activities. “Parents are now afraid of doing less than their neighbours,” observes Philip Cohen, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland who studies contemporary families. “It can feel like an arms race.”

No time to lose

Leisure time is now the stuff of myth. Some are cursed with too much. Others find it too costly to enjoy. Many spend their spare moments staring at a screen of some kind, even though doing other things (visiting friends, volunteering at a church) tends to make people happier. Not a few presume they will cash in on all their stored leisure time when they finally retire, whenever that may be. In the meantime, being busy has its rewards. Otherwise why would people go to such trouble?

Alas time, ultimately, is a strange and slippery resource, easily traded, visible only when it passes and often most highly valued when it is gone. No one has ever complained of having too much of it. Instead, most people worry over how it flies, and wonder where it goes. Cruelly, it runs away faster as people get older, as each accumulating year grows less significant, proportionally, but also less vivid. Experiences become less novel and more habitual. The years soon bleed together

and end up rushing past, with the most vibrant memories tucked somewhere near the beginning. And of course the more one tries to hold on to something, the swifter it seems to go.

Writing in the first century, Seneca was startled by how little people seemed to value their lives as they were living them—how busy, terribly busy, everyone seemed to be, mortal in their fears, immortal in their desires and wasteful of their time. He noticed how even wealthy people hustled their lives along, ruining their fortune, anticipating a time in the future when they would rest. “People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy,” he observed in “On the Shortness of Life”, perhaps the very first time-management self-help book. Time on Earth may be uncertain and fleeting, but nearly everyone has enough of it to take some deep breaths, think deep thoughts and smell some roses, deeply. “Life is long if you know how to use it,” he counselled.



Nearly 2,000 years later, de Grazia offered similar advice. Modern life, that leisure-squandering, money-hoarding, grindstone-nosing, frippery-buying business, left him exasperated. He saw that everyone everywhere was running, running, running, but to where? For what? People were trading their time for all sorts of things, but was the exchange worth it? He closed his 1962 tome, “Of Time, Work and Leisure”, with a prescription:

Lean back under a tree, put your arms behind your head, wonder at the pass we’ve come to, smile and remember that the beginnings and ends of man’s every great enterprise are untidy.

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