



White Paper #8: The Problem of Free Time: It's Not What You Think

Ask an American about what they do during their free time and they are likely to tell you they don't have any. A recent survey found that 47 percent of Americans thought their free time had decreased during the last five years, while only 22 percent reported more free time. Such beliefs, however, don't necessarily reflect what is actually happening in terms of how long we work during a week or the percentage of our lives given to work. In terms of hours worked per week, for example, the findings of the largest national time use studies show that Americans gained almost one hour per day of free time during the period from 1965 to 1985. American males average about 40 hours of free time per week while females average 39 -- hardly the workaholic country we envision. Further, the percentage of total hours of life spent at work, which had dropped from 22% to 15% between 1900 and 1950, has doubtlessly decreased since then. The average American is retiring earlier and earlier and entering the labor force later and later.

Almost all the gains we have made in free time, time use studies show, have been given over to more television viewing, a behavior which some research has associated with deterioration in mood, decreased mental capabilities (due to the lack of complexity of much of its content), declines in physical fitness, and increases in obesity.

The problems of time use in our society and the work-leisure equation are not ones of working longer hours. Instead, they are: (1) our attitudes toward time; (2) uneven distribution of leisure across the life cycle; and (3) the deterioration of education for the worthy use of leisure.

In terms of attitudes toward time our ethic of open-ended consumption of goods has simply carried over to the consumption of experiences, making time the ultimate scarce commodity. Additionally, the rise of "efficiency" to the premier value in our culture has meant that much of our leisure activity is undertaken with the same attitudes toward time saving as is work, robbing it of much of its pleasure. Scientific management is as much in evidence at Disney World as on the shop floor. Finally, many Americans have become virtual walking resumes, defining themselves almost solely by what they do. The ancient Athenian ideal of leisure, the absence of the necessity of being occupied, is not only rarely realized but most Americans regard contemplation as simply a waste of time -- being busy has become a primary indicator of importance. The car phone, for example, is taken as a sign of success rather than failure.

The distribution of free time across our life cycle is also problematic. We have allowed the large gains in free time which have occurred in our society during the last few decades to accumulate during the last ten to twenty years of life. We are also entering the labor force later in life. College is providing for prolonged adolescence. Average Americans now retire in their early sixties and can expect a decade and a half or more of free time. Most are in relatively good health. Economically, they are less likely to be poor than average. Some of these gains need to be plowed back into earlier stages of life, giving those with comparatively little free time, such as parents of children under the age of five and single mothers, more leisure. This may be done through maternity and paternity leave, flexible hours, worksite day care and other ways. Children and time use must also be re-thought. Our kids are in school, on average, less than one-half of the days of the year, spend twice as much time as their parents watching VCR recorded entertainment, and less time doing homework than youth in most other industrial nations.

Perhaps the biggest problem concerning our work-leisure equation is that preparation to use leisure has deteriorated, for many, even more dramatically than our preparation for work. Leisure has been "dumbed down" not only because the de-skilling of many jobs carries over into free time use, but also because of cuts in libraries, museums, parks, physical education in schools and inner-city youth programs. Such cuts have meant that skills for use during leisure are increasingly learned from MTV, at the shopping mall or in the gang. Under the Reagan Administration, most funding for community-

based recreation and park systems, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, was gutted. Americans' use of free time is of no concern of government. Federal policy now often assumes: better left to the market sector and to families. Universities, also, have made deep cuts in curricula which seek to prepare those will manage public and private, non-profit recreation, park and leisure services. Meanwhile, they emphasize the technology-related disciplines which ultimately produce more free time.

In the 1920s, increases in free time caused many social critics to wonder out loud whether leisure constituted a threat to those who were ill-prepared to use it in satisfying ways. Our high rates of drug abuse and crime suggest our preparation for the use of free-time is still a problem. The psychological evidence we have is that one of the most satisfying uses of leisure involves activities in which skills and abilities have been developed and in which challenges match such skills and abilities. In such activities, as diverse as playing the trumpet, rock climbing or chess, challenges may be increased as skills and abilities increase. Such behaviors involve extensive educational preparation and such preparation requires not only the learning of skills but also of appreciations.

The ability to use leisure wisely, Bertrand Russell believed, was the final test of a civilization. While we cannot say with precision what constitutes "wise use," it appears that America would have flunked such a test. Further public dialogue is urgently needed on this issue if we are to improve our use of leisure. Increased free time is where science and technology must ultimately take us.

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