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## **Work-Life Balance and the Rest of Our Lives**

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, Warwick University

Work. Yet more work. And still more of the stuff.

Many feel that this is what consumes us. As the most vibrant years of our life tick away, we sit at a hot desk in front of a still hotter keyboard. People in the industrial nations are rich -- breathtakingly affluent by any historical standard -- but it is easy in 2003 to believe that it is essential to rush down the office corridor, have business meetings with Cornflakes, compete endlessly for promotion, take no real lunch break, and the rest.

A visitor from Jupiter would rub her green head and wonder why such a wealthy society tolerates its obsession with work.

I am not immune. On the day the Sunday Times called, there was no room in my diary. This article's finishing touches were thus written after midnight. It was sent, as drowsiness set in, down the line from a home computer.

Last week saw legislation to try to encourage so-called work-life balance. Governments are beginning to act. But the first thing to ask is: do cool-headed facts actually support the stereotype?

Mostly they do. In a recent international survey, random samples of employees were asked about the amount of time they felt they were able to spend with their families. Remarkably, 46% of Americans wanted to have much more time at home with the family. For Britain, the figure was 36%. Other countries with a severe work-life imbalance included France, Portugal, Sweden and Russia.

Yet some parts of the world did much better. In Spain, only 8% of workers wished for much more time with their families. In the Netherlands, 18% said so.

Looking at the survey data, we find that work-life balance problems are most intense among those in middle age. The sense of wanting more time peaks in a person's early 40s. It is highly qualified people who suffer disproportionately. Finally, the wish for more family time is most acute among men. This may be because it is much easier, and more acceptable in society, for women to find part-time jobs.

To an economist, the American example is paradoxical. The USA is the wealthiest part of the globe, so in a straightforward sense this is the country that could most easily afford to head for the beach at 3pm (now there is a thought: even saying it makes one feel that jumping in a sandy car on a sunny afternoon would be the most natural thing in the world).

And there is other evidence. Research by Francis Green and colleagues has shown that the 'intensification of work', as measured by reported levels of tiredness, grew through the 1990s, although it may recently have levelled off. Moreover, Warwick University studies have shown that stress as measured by medical mental health scores worsened sharply among British workers over the last decade. Job satisfaction scores have dropped a little in the United States in each of the previous three decades. In the 1970s, 56% of Americans were extremely satisfied at work. In the 1980s, it was 52%. In the 1990s, 47% were.

Where America goes today, the Brits follow tomorrow. Getting to the intellectual bottom of the work-life balance problem is thus in everyone's interest.

First, and contrary to what most economics textbooks suggest, there is no evidence that the accumulation of wealth diminishes the desire for more wealth. The notion of diminishing returns plainly does not apply here. Once you have a Lexus, you want two. In the United States, high school students now drive themselves to classes in BMWs. Making money does not make one slow down.

But why is that? The probable explanation is that people's innate need for rank means that they are compelled to run ever-faster, because they look over their shoulders all the time.

Think of a children's roundabout. When the biggest boy in the playground starts to push faster, we all have to pick up speed, even though it hurts, if we actually want to stay in the game. And so we spin, and then fly, faster and faster. Of course we can drop off the roundabout, but the bump will make us bleed, and the later social opprobrium will be even harder to bear.

Modern society is like the roundabout. Each person is rational; yet the group is not. I drive myself on, so you must too. It is this competitive mechanism, I believe, that is the key to thinking about our work-life imbalance in western society.

Hence we must somehow coordinate leisure, without infringing freedom.

Second, it is useful to probe the stress and job satisfaction statistics to discover which bits of life are the ones going wrong. For Britain, we have excellent information every year on things like satisfaction with your promotion prospects, satisfaction with pay, satisfaction with the boss, and so on. Where are the bad downward trends found? The strongest is in satisfaction with the nature of the work itself. The next-worst secular trend is in satisfaction with the boss. The third-worst is in satisfaction with 'my ability to work on my own initiative'. All three point to a deterioration in something subtle but important: feelings of autonomy and intrinsic worth.

Third, the data reveal that some common newspaper and TV ideas are actually false. Dissatisfaction with one's hours of work has not, in Britain, grown over the last decade. Indeed the oft-quoted statistic that our nation in Europe has the longest hours at work is not currently true. Greece and Ireland work more than we do.

Nor has there been a decline in satisfaction with Britons' job security (not even in the public sector, where it is sometimes thought that morale over job cuts has made workers fearful). Nor indeed has there been a general fall in satisfaction with pay (though in the public sector in this case there has).

Could we put all this together and solve the problem of systematic over-work? Perhaps abolishing Wednesdays might be the place to start.