

Is Something Wrong with Work-Life Balance? A Look at International Data

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Many people argue that western society has a problem with what has come to be called 'work-life balance'. In other words, we all work too hard.

The idea is that our countries are rich but that we have no time to enjoy the riches. Families especially, some think, are the ones who suffer. The rise in divorce rates is claimed to be part of the picture: this, goes the argument, makes men and women invest still more heavily in work-related activities, with a consequent worsening in the underlying problem. Work-rates spiral out of control. Family time disintegrates. We all live to work – not the other way around.

Over the next few years, our research will explore these interesting but complicated issues.

An economist has a number of immediate problems with the argument.

First, when human beings choose to do something -- like work 60-hour weeks -- the economist's instinctive reaction is to say that that person is doing what or she wants, so it at best pointless to worry about it or believe that governments should interfere. Second, working hours have been trending down steadily for the last century; hence a look at the historical data makes one doubt the thesis that western society is going to hell in a hand-basket of over-work. Third, as shown in some of our earlier research, people say they enjoy their jobs enormously. Reported degrees of satisfaction at work in the industrialized countries are actually impressively high.

Yet common observation makes one wonder. Even if we look at ourselves (on most Sundays at 7.30am, in two different continents, we are usually at work in front of our computer screens), it seems commonsense to believe that things are not this simple.

The West does work much harder than we need to by the standards of our grandparents. We could have much more than their standard of living even if we chose to work a 3-day week. But, as a society, we do not.

We do not abolish Wednesdays, but instead spend more and more of the weekends in the office.

There is an argument that says we are in a so-called Nash equilibrium or prisoners' dilemma -- where everyone is behaving rationally individually but as a collective group we are working inefficiently hard. On this view, the group is collectively trapped in a spiral. Keeping up with the Joneses is what rules. In other words, if you work hard, I feel I have to in order to be able to keep up – in chances of promotion at work, in buying the latest cars and sweaters, in simply being seen to be industrious by my neighbours. If we could all agree to slow down together, we could all be happier. Coordinating it is then the tricky bit.

We are not sure what to make of this claim, and are currently keeping an open mind about the arguments. But we have been processing newly-available data.

If, in the late 1990s, you ask the same questions of workers in 27 countries, it is true that a remarkably high proportion say they wish they had more time for their families. And the US does particularly badly, which is strange, because it is approximately the richest in the whole sample.

In principle, it would be easy for Americans to work less hard and still have a life-style that is the envy of the world.

The International Social Survey Programme now provides relevant information. Here are the percentages from data on nearly twenty thousand randomly sampled workers across the world:

The International Work-Life Balance League Table.

“I would like to be able to spend much more time with my family”

US 46%, France 41, Philippines 40, Portugal 39, Israel (Jews) 37, Great Britain 36, Slovenia 34, East Germany 34, Czech Republic 33, Sweden 32, Russia 31, Poland 30, Norway 27, Denmark 26, Hungary 26, West Germany 26, Canada 26, Cyprus 26, New Zealand 26, Israel (Arabs) 25, Switzerland 23, Italy 21, Netherlands 18, Bulgaria 14, Japan 9, Spain 8, Bangladesh 5.

The United States comes top of this un-distinguished ranking. In fact, the table at the end of this paper shows that 85% of American workers say they want more time with their family.

If one looks a little more deeply at the data, a number of interesting things emerge.

First, ‘over work’ by this criterion (ie. wanting more time with your family) peaks in a person’s early 40s. Middle-age apparently brings the problem to a head. Second, highly qualified people suffer it most. Those with advanced qualifications are the ones who want to see their families more. Third, the feeling is most acute among men rather than women.

Although it seems strange to an economist, there is evidence here that the USA has a problem. Despite all those BMWs and speedboats, 85% of Americans want more time with their family, and 46% say they want much more.

And yet they could have it if they tried. They are rich.

This is a puzzle.

Full table overleaf

Work-Life Balance by Country (%)

“If you could change the way you spend your time, which of the following ... would you like to spend more time on ...time with your family?”

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Percentage of Workers who Want More Time with their Families

	Much more	A bit more	Same	A bit less	Much less	N
Bangladesh	5 %	37	50	6	2	941
Bulgaria	14	40	42	3	0	441
Canada	26	43	29	2	1	558
Cyprus	26	37	30	5	2	591
Czech Republic	33	39	25	2	1	519
Denmark	26	43	29	1	0	648
East Germany	34	49	16	2	0	251
France	41	40	18	1	0	503
Great Britain	36	38	25	1	0	572
Hungary	26	51	23	1	0	705
Israel (Arabs)	25	36	25	12	2	241
Israel (Jews)	37	32	28	2	1	678
Italy	21	43	33	1	1	454
Japan	9	35	54	1	0	647
Netherlands	18	47	37	1	0	1002
New Zealand	26	29	26	1	0	729
Norway	27	47	25	0	0	1371
Philippines	40	32	20	7	1	641
Poland	30	44	23	2	2	630

Portugal	39	37	23	1	0	891
Russia	31	40	27	1	0	809
Slovenia	34	40	25	0	0	508
Spain	8	50	41	1	0	403
Sweden	32	42	24	1	0	839
Switzerland	23	48	28	1	0	1692
United States	46	39	14	0	1	826
West Germany	26	47	26	1	0	631
Total	27	42	29	2	0	18723

Authors' calculations. N is the number interviewed in each nation. Source of original data: International Social Survey Programme: 1997