

simply be chalked up to the crushing effects of a heartless and unchecked capitalist system.” Many extreme professionals find their work enormously alluring. Their intensity and investment may serve companies well in the short run but will pose risks over time. Employees can burn out, undermine their health, and weaken family ties.

The extreme work model threatens to cull real talent, particularly female talent, that otherwise could have reached the top. Women don’t shirk the responsibility of extreme work, but the majority—especially women who are mothers—are simply not matching the hours logged by their male colleagues, the authors write. Companies seeking more gender diversity—and perhaps greater lifestyle balance—in their upper ranks should look carefully at the work behavior they are rewarding. Their pool of top talent will shrink dramatically if jobs go from being exhilarating to merely exhausting.

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

No Rest for the Wicked

THE SOURCE: “A Century of Work and Leisure” by Valerie A. Ramey and Neville Francis, as summarized in *The NBER Digest*, Feb. 2007.

THE BRITISH ECONOMIST JOHN Maynard Keynes predicted in 1930 that the central problem of humanity in the future would be how to spend its copious leisure time in a meaningful way. He saw productivity increasing so dramatically that companies would have

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to dole out work sparingly to have enough to go around. Although Keynes was correct about productivity and, to some extent, the shrinkage of the workweek, he was out to lunch on leisure.

Studies show that Americans work hundreds of hours less per year than they did a century ago, potentially opening up vast new opportunities for leisure activities. But measurements of work and leisure depend on who and what is counted. Unlike earlier researchers, Valerie A. Ramey and Neville Francis, of the University of California, San Diego, and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, respectively, include everybody, young and old, in their study of leisure time, because the definition of “working age” has changed so much over the past 100 years. And they define leisure differently as well, toting up only activities that people enjoy performing, not taking the car to be inspected or sending off payments to the utility company.

True leisure time available to Americans, they write, remains almost the same per capita as it was in 1900. The number of paid on-the-job hours has declined, to be sure. What has expanded most is the amount of time spent in education. High school is now required, and more than half of high school graduates enroll in college. The authors conclude that about 70 per-

cent of the decline in hours worked has been offset by an increase in hours spent in school (which are counted as work).

Moreover, despite the proliferation of labor-saving appliances, to say nothing of the relatively recent arrival of takeout food, “home production” work—tasks such as cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, commuting, and yard work—grew over the century. It increased partly because standards rose. In 1913, a home economist observed that “if one is poor it follows as a matter of course that one is dirty.” As America got wealthier, expectations of cleanliness went up, and laundry, dishwashing, and housecleaning took more time. As breadwinners got better jobs, families bought more food and acquired fancier tastes, which required more and higher-quality cooking. As families had fewer children, more time and effort had to be put into the nurture of each one.

The researchers extracted their definition of leisure from a survey rating enjoyment of various activities. The activities with the highest scores were counted as leisure, and among them were sex, sports, playing with the kids, movies, and sleep. The losers on the enjoyment scale were counted as home production work—commuting, babysitting, home repair, gardening, and laundry.

The authors acknowledge a “degree of imprecision” in their estimates, but they believe that, overall, they have accurately captured the direction of change in true leisure time between 1900 and 2000: It went nowhere.