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You work smarter, longer and end up rushed, stressed

October 05, 2003

By Jack P. Manno

The U.S. Senate recently proclaimed October National Work and Family Month, pointing out how the pace of work and scheduling in the United States makes it increasingly difficult to find time for our families and our communities. On Oct. 24, the first national "Take Back Your Time Day" will be observed, in the words of the proclamation, as "a nationwide initiative to challenge the epidemic of overwork, over-scheduling and time famine that now threatens our health, our families and relationships, our communities and our environment." (For more information, visit www.timeday.org.)

The date falls nine weeks before the end of the year, making the point that U.S. workers now put in, on average, 360 more hours each year than Western Europeans do. How can some countries transform economic productivity gains into more paid vacations, family leave time and reductions in required work hours while the most productive country in the world does not?

Sociologist Juliet Schor points out that since World War II, the amount of goods and services produced per worker per hour has doubled. What does it do to families and communities and our health when everyone is feeling so rushed, so stressed? Why are so many employers increasing the demands while laying off so many people?

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Some of us at the College of Environmental Science and Forestry are asking how this rush to produce and consume affects our capacity to respect our natural environment. As Ghandi once pointed out, "Speed is irrelevant if you're traveling in the wrong direction."

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that between 1979 and 2000, annual out-of-household work time in middle-income households with two wage-earned increased 660 hours. No wonder there's an epidemic of neglected children and pets.

During this period, these countries decreased their annual work hours: Canada (-31), France (-244), Germany (-254), Italy (-88), Japan (-286), South Korea (-260), the Netherlands (-248), Norway (-138), and the United Kingdom (-107). The U.S. saw more work hours and fewer vacation days, while just the opposite occurred in these other countries.

The United States is the only OECD country without a vacation law. Most countries require at least four weeks annual vacation. Some legislate at least six. Most also require substantial paid leave for parents of newborns.

In the United States, all we have time for is watching television. Who has time for a real social life when they're exhausted? The amount spent on advertising increased from \$100 million to \$1.5 billion over those two decades. According to economist Lester Thurow, average American teens watch 21 hours of TV per week, while spending five minutes alone with their father and 20 with their mother. Time spent with children has declined by as much as 40 percent in a generation. Adults also sleep 20 percent less than they did in 1900.

It's easy to blame parents and workers, but most of us are in a bind. Real income has stagnated, so income gains between the 1970s and 1990s came largely from increased working hours. In addition, in the new globalized economy, the pace of business has accelerated. Technology always is in transition, and with instant communications and globe-hopping capital, market leadership is always vulnerable. The big money is gained by those ready with the product when the consumer is ready to buy. As a result, our ability to plan for the long term withers. We just don't have the time.

But we have to invest in the future - increase our savings rate and decrease our consumption; invest productivity gains in education and the civil and environmental infrastructure; and learn how to live well while using less material and energy.

We are going in exactly the opposite direction. In 1980, the combined private and public savings rate in the United States was 10 percent; by 1998 it was 2 percent; now we are in negative numbers. We are burdening future citizens with a huge national debt. According to simple-living advocate Cecile Andrews, comparing the United States to other industrial nations, we are:

No. 1 in billionaires - and children and elderly living in poverty.

No. 1 in real wealth - and unequal wealth distribution.

No. 1 in big homes - and homelessness.

No. 1 in private consumption - and last in savings.

No. 1 in executive salaries - and inequality of pay.

Several years ago, ESF Professor Charles Hall published a paper that became famous by showing that the resources used over a lifetime by the average baby born in the United States in 1990 would create 24.2 million pounds of solid and liquid waste; consume 1.5 million pounds of minerals, energy equivalent to 4,000 barrels of oil, 25,000 kilograms of plant foods and 55,000 pounds of animal products (4,000 animals.)

These numbers would be significantly greater today, and the environmental repercussions are astonishing. Americans are using up the world's resources to produce a lifestyle of urgency and anxiety.

When the environmental scholar Satish Kumar, president of Britain's Schumacher College, came to speak at SUNY-ESF, he surprised students with his prescription for our planetary woes. He spoke about the need to invent and spread new patterns of development where people's basic needs can be met without destroying the resource base. As usually happens after provocative lectures at ESF, the students sought direction for their lives. What can we do, they asked. After thinking a while he said, slowly and carefully, "Do less. Just do less."

If North Americans would slow down, take a breath, the rest of the world would have a little more room. As we look ahead to Take Back Your Time Day, millions of Americans can say, "From now on, I only have time for what matters." They can figure out how to slow down, invest time and resources in our families, our communities and our fellow creatures.

Jack P. Manno, Ph.D., is executive director of the Great Lakes Research Consortium based at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where he is an adjunct associate professor at the college. He is also the author of "Privileged Goods: Commoditization and its Impacts on Environment and Society," and a contributing author to "Confronting Consumption." Public forum Oct. 23 Issues discussed in this commentary are to be addressed in a series of events at SUNY-ESF on Oct. 23, the day before "Take Back Your Time Day." The public is invited to a public forum from 7-9:30 p.m. Oct. 23 in Alumni Lounge, Marshall Hall. "Some of us at the College of Environmental Science and Forestry are also asking how this rush to produce and consume affects our capacity to respect and protect our natural environment. As Ghandi once pointed out, 'Speed is irrelevant if you're traveling in the wrong direction.' " Jack Manno

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