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Whatever happened to 9 to 5?

The myth behind the 8-hour workday, and some revised lyrics for Dolly Parton

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Is "9 to 5" a myth? (Comstock/Getty Images / August 14, 2011)

Ask Rex Huppke: I Just Work Here
August 14, 2011

"Workin' nine to five

What a way to make a livin'

Barely gettin' by

It's all takin' and no givin'

They just use your mind

And they never give you credit

It's enough to drive you

Crazy if you let it."

That's about as close as we got to a protest song in the 1980s. Pinned by anti-establishment folk warrior **Dolly Parton**, the theme song to the movie "9 to 5" cemented that time frame as a national slang term for workaday drudgery. (The movie also taught us that all mean bosses are required to bear some resemblance to **Dabney Coleman**.)

I bring up these important historical facts as a prelude to a fascinating question.

Q: 9 to 5 has become such a heavily used expression to talk about the daily grind of work, but I don't know anyone who actually works those hours. Everyone I know is scheduled to be in the office from 8:30 to 5 or 9 to 5:30 or some other 8 1/2-hour combination — not 8 hours with lunch. Did we cede 30 minutes to the "man" since Jane Fonda, Dolly Parton and Lily Tomlin tied Dabney Coleman to a chair in 1980?

— Anonymous in **Minnesota**, via email

Ask Rex Huppke: I Just Work Here



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A: For starters, it seems the very idea of people working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. may be a bit mythical.

"It's something of a stereotype," said Robert J.S. Ross, a professor of sociology at Clark University in **Massachusetts**. "I don't know that there were ever a majority of offices that were 9 to 5. In many, many offices, at least the clerical staff was supposed to be there by 8:30."

To whatever degree a 9-to-5 shift ever existed, it's clearly an inaccurate way to describe the workers of today. Many are in the office by 8 a.m. and stay until 6 p.m. or later, not to mention time spent sending late-night emails from home or typing away on laptops on the train to work.

But long before people started bemoaning a 9-to-5 shift, American workers were toiling from dawn to dusk and would bend over backward to get a simple eight-hour shift.

We can do anything we want to do if we stick to it long enough.

— **Helen Keller**
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"The whole eight-hour movement took off right after the Civil War," said Robert Whaples, chairman of the economics department at Wake Forest University. "People at that time said the length of the workweek is long and the pace is very fast and they needed something that gave them time to live."

This push for eight-hour workdays led to labor demonstrations across the country in May 1886. A popular slogan at the time was: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will!" (Personally, I wish they'd gone with more of a 4-10-10 split.)

Slowly, different industries began adopting the eight-hour workday. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act established a national minimum wage and required that workers in certain industries be paid overtime if they worked more than 40 hours in a week.

So we had the fighting and the yelling and the clever slogan writing to get to an eight-hour day standard, and then by the 1980s we get Ms. Parton and her cohorts griping about how such a shift will "drive you crazy if you let it."

Since then, however, the country has seen vast changes in its economy. Ross pointed out that a decline in manufacturing led to an erosion of unions. Some workers began getting "quasi-managerial" titles that exempted them from the Fair Labors Standards Act.

"As unions got beaten back, they lost control of the classification system," Ross said. "People were switched to managerial titles or contract workers, so there was no longer an hours issue."

There are still, of course, many hourly workers. And statistically, the number of hours worked each year has been trending downward, but those statistics fail to account for the hours people put in working through coffee breaks or on weekends.

"One of the things that has really eroded over the last couple of decades is lunching," Ross said. "That is an aspect of the time pressure and the work pressure. It's expected, and people do it to themselves as well as their employers doing it to them — people eat at their desks. It's been 20 years since we've had a faculty lunchroom here at Clark University."

So we used to work too much, then we got down to a reasonable workday, and now many of us seem to be working too much again.

"I would say there's more overload," Ross said. "The professors are putting in more hours, the public health professionals, the lawyers — everybody's doing more."

At the very least, it seems the term "9 to 5" has become a dated part of the lexicon, kind of like using a button to "roll down" a car window or "dialing a number" on an **iPhone** (barring Apple's release of a rotary iPhone).

To take care of this problem, I suggest we petition Ms. Parton to record an updated version of her Grammy-winning song, one that takes into account the desire of today's workers to keep their jobs in a tight economy. Might I suggest:

"Workin' eight to eight

Eatin' lunch while I am typin'

Let me demonstrate

That you'll never hear me gripin'

Might take my iPad

Along with me in the shower



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I'll skip my son's birthday

Working extra hours."

Or something along those lines. Call me, Dolly.

Talk to Rex

Ask workplace questions and share stories with Rex Huppke at **IJustWorkHere@tribune.com**, follow him on Twitter at **@RexWorksHere** and find more at **chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere**.

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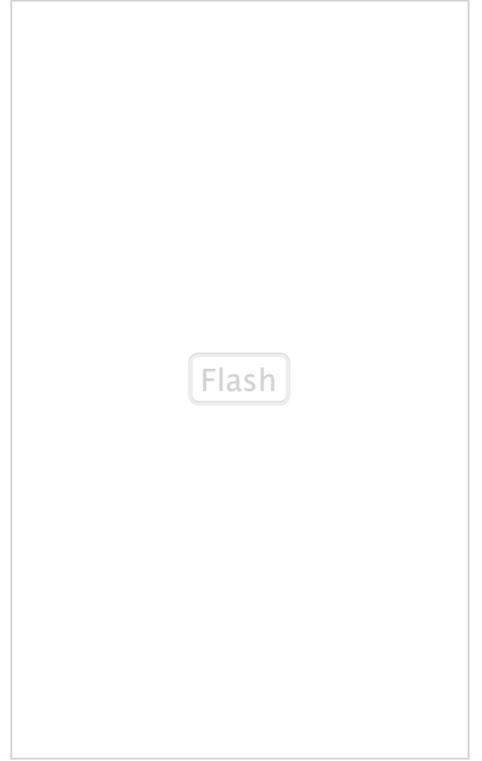
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Jim Wong at 8:55 AM August 17, 2011

The mantra over the last couple years for our clients is "do more with less". Companies are investing in technologies and changing processes to create efficiencies. As a result, their perception is the employees can now do more. As a theory, it sounds great but does not always work out exactly as planned. Thus, employees are now stretched to capacity or near capacity. We don't see this trend changing anytime soon.

CarolEiffler-Orton at 12:23 PM August 16, 2011

In the early 70s, I was an administrative professional for an international conglomerate's midwest legal group in a very lavish office, 9-5 with an hour for lunch. It was the shortest workday I ever had. Less than a decade later, I began my own venture where 40 hour weeks were not often the norm but that was my choice. The fact is when your work is your passion the time is not a burden but a joy. As far as teachers working hours are concerned, I have a few things to offer. I taught a college class years ago and loved the work despite its being very time intensive; the politics, poor students' attitudes and low pay made me abandon it. In contrast, I live a block away from a k-5 school and can attest to most teachers arriving shortly before classes start and leaving within 15 minutes of ending; often, their cars beat out the parents there to do pickups. I also know enough neighborhood children to be appalled at not only the lack of comprehensive instruction going on during the day coupled with little homework during the week and none being assigned on weekends and during breaks. Lest you think that this is a one-sided view, I also can state that while serving as a regional community college committee volunteer, I was routinely appalled at the majority of teachers' refusal for specialized training offered on their own time. Immediate \$ was their only goal. Disgusting.

joeschmo1 at 9:12 PM August 15, 2011

Whiners! America was built on hard work. At the turn of the 19th Century, most Americans were farmers working 12 hour days (if not more)! Now, we have to work over 8 hours and we moan and groan. Any wonder why our great country isn't so "great" anymore? We all want something for nothing and China is winning the battle.



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