

Why White-Collar Workers Spend All Day at the Office

Why Americans work more than anyone else.

[Derek Thompson](#) December 4, 2019



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Americans work too much.

This is not a matter of opinion so much as a factual point of international comparison. The average American worker [labors more hours](#) than her counterparts in just about every similarly rich country, including Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom. If the average American worked as much as the typical German, she'd have about 30 extra days off per year. That's a free six-week vacation in exchange for embracing the famously leisurely work habits of ... Germany.

The reasons behind America's overwork are the subject of exhaustive study and theorizing—including on this site. Some observers focus above all on public policy: The U.S. has been steadily eroding labor rights since the Cold War, and there is no federal guarantee for vacation or parental leave, pushing Americans toward longer workweeks than those of their more unionized brethren in similar countries. Others look to the character of ["greedy" American industries](#), such as consulting and banking, which demand long hours and undivided loyalty from their employees so they can thrive in a competitive global economy. Still others, including me, point out that in the past few decades, the dogged pursuit of meaning at work has become a kind of secular religion—[workism](#).

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But these explanations may be overlooking an obvious modern force: the digital revolution.

In a new [working paper](#), the economists Edward E. Leamer, of UCLA, and J. Rodrigo Fuentes, of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, studied data about working hours from the American Community Survey. They found that hours worked since 1980 increased nearly 10 percent for Americans with bachelor's and advanced degrees. Leamer told me that he believes this is because computing has shifted much of the economy from manufacturing to *neurofacturing*, Leamer's term for intellectually intensive white-collar labor that is often connected to the internet, such as software programming, marketing, advertising, consulting, and publishing.

Neurofacturing jobs lend themselves to long hours for several reasons, Leamer said. They're less physically arduous, as it's easier to sit and type than to assemble engine parts. What's more, the internet makes every hour of the day a potential working hour.

If the operating equipment of the 21st century is a portable device, this means the modern factory is not a place at all. It is the day itself. The computer age has liberated the tools of productivity from the office. Most knowledge workers, whose laptops and smartphones are portable all-purpose media-making machines, can theoretically be as productive at 2 p.m. in the main office as at 2 a.m. in a Tokyo WeWork or at midnight on the couch.

As Leamer and Fuentes write in the paper, "The innovations in personal computing and internet-based communications have allowed individual workers the freedom to choose weekly work hours well in excess of the usual 40."

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The internet has also supercharged global competition and forced international firms to outwork rivals many thousands of miles away. This has created a winner-take-all dynamic that's trickled down to the workforce. In their 2006 study, ["Why High Earners Work Longer Hours,"](#) the economists Peter Kuhn and Fernando Lozano found that the premium paid for longer workweeks has increased since 1980 for educated workers, but not for less educated workers. Their theory is that at the most competitive firms, ambitious workers putting in super-long hours are sending a clear message to the boss: *Promote me!* And the boss isn't just getting the message; he's actively soliciting it. At many firms, insanely long hours are the skeleton key to the C-suite and the partner track. Thus, overwork becomes a kind of arms race among similarly talented workers, exacerbated by the ability to never stop working, even at home. It's mutually assured exhaustion.

It sounds dystopian to imagine a future of work where there is no end to labor and time itself is the office. But it's not all bad, Leamer told me. Neurofacturing is safer, more comfortable, and often more fun than the most common jobs of the 20th century and earlier. There should be no nostalgia for industrial factory labor, or for [harvesting sperm](#) oil from the brains of

rotting whale carcasses. If automation can replace yet more boring, dangerous, and unpleasant work, it may open the labor market to jobs that people are obsessed with, not only because they're zealous workists but also because the work itself is gratifying, and sometimes even a blast.

As internet-charged careerism winds its way through the modern economy, what national virtues might it be replacing? When a recent [Pew survey](#) asked Americans about the keys to living a fulfilling life, less than a third named money, or marriage, or children, or even romance. The most popular response: "Having a job or career they enjoy." The web may be our garden of boundless leisure, but it is also a global workplace without limits. And in the open office of the internet, more Americans are not only engaged in overwork but also convinced that it is necessary to love their labor, above all else.

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