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Better Work, Better Life

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National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies



Brigid Schulte

Profile

Brigid Schulte is a journalist and an author of the New York Times bestselling book, “Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play when No One has the Time”, and had been a staff writer of the Washington Post for almost twenty years, where she won a number of reporting and writing awards and was a member of the team that won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize. She now serves as the director of the Better Life Lab, the work-life, gender equality and social policy program at New America, a nonpartisan think tank. She’s focusing on the death from overwork phenomenon, its causes, consequences, and prospects for changes in Japan and America as a 2017 Abe Journalism Fellow.

In the United States we have a long-work hours culture, just like in Japan. We also we have death from overwork culture, although we don’t recognize it. A recent study found that work-life conflict, long work hours, lack of health insurance, toxic bosses and other issues associated with work, causes so much stress and illness that the workplace is now the 5th leading cause of death in America. Even so, work-life balance is still not seen as important. It’s seen as an individual’s responsibility. So there are relatively no national public policies to help people combine work and life responsibilities. Unlike like in other advanced economics, including Japan, there is no national paid family and medical leave in the United States. We have unpaid leave that covers only 60 percent of the workforce. Some companies may voluntarily choose to offer paid maternity leave, but not much paternity leave. In both the United States and Japan, it’s clear from the studies on stress, health, gender equality and karoshi, that policies, practices, and workplace cultures and social attitudes are not working in order for people to have a Good Life, and therefore must change.

What do we mean by The Good Life? The Harvard psychologist, Erik Erikson said that the richest and fullest lives make time for the three great arenas of life: Work, Love, and Play.

Why do we need the time for play? In the United States, we have a culture that sees leisure is an unproductive waste of time. But when we are idle or spend time away from concentrated work, our brains are actually most active. In neuroscience, the Default Mode Network lights up when our brains are idle, connecting different parts of the brain that don't typically communicate, or work together when we are operating in a brain focused mode. We are discovering that the "Aha" moment of insight, creativity and fresh ideas comes in a moment of rest, in what neuroscientists call a diffuse thinking, or daydreamy mode. It's becoming clear that the most effective way to work is to oscillate between our two modes of thinking: concentrated work and diffuse time off and away from work. We definitely need the time for leisure.

How can we find the time for leisure, while we have time pressure in modern life trying to juggle concentrated work, life and family caregiving responsibilities? The first thing to realize is that leisure is in the eye of the beholder. It all depends on how the time and the way you spend it make you feel. The Greek philosophers said that leisure was the space where we refreshed our soul and became most fully human. That requires time – whether for reflection, to connect with others or to do a favorite activity. When I kept a time diary, a time management expert found what he called leisure in my schedule, and I called bits and scraps of garbage time confetti – five minutes here, 10 minutes there of mostly time stolen in between other responsibilities- which is certainly did not feel very leisurely. What leisure research has found is that for leisure time to be truly refreshing, one needs to freely choose the activity and have control over the time.

In America, our stress levels from the long-work hours culture and time pressure have become so high that the World Health Organization predicts that one-third of us will be so anxious as to be diagnosed with anxiety-related mental condition in our lifetimes. We are very rich and very anxious countries, and one of the reasons why is because we are so focused on money. Money does not make us happy. Research confirms what we've known through common sense all along: connection and time with other people is the source of human happiness. A little stress is actually good for us, and can keep us on our toes. But too much constant stress makes us sick. When we are chronically stressed out, stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol constantly flood the body, which lead to high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and even cancer. New neuroscience research shows that going through stressful events, coupled with the perception of being stressed out can actually shrink our brains. One study at the Yale Stress Center found that the prefrontal cortex, the most recently evolved portion of our brain, where we think, learn, remember and make decisions, was full 20 percent smaller in volume in people who had been through stressful events and also felt really stressed out compared to those who were not so stressed. We should recognize that too many people are feeling too much stress from overwhelming work, outdated gender expectations and a lack of leisure. And that's not good for our health, our families, our communities, our businesses nor our societies.

Unfortunately, too many people think long work hours equal good work. And that's not true. A survey asking CEOs around the globe shows that more than three quarters of the CEOs think someone with no caregiving responsibility is an ideal worker – a point of view that has barred women and caregivers from leadership positions, regardless of their performance and talent. The

overtime work hours have been actually increasing since the 1980s. Working all the time leads to burn out, which is costly for businesses, not more productivity. In fact, international surveys of hourly productivity show the United States has one of the longest work weeks among many advanced countries. But Norway, where they work 37.5 hours a week by law, is the most productive country. France and Denmark, having six weeks of paid vacation every year and having very common childcare leave and paid family leave, have nearly the same productivity per hour as the United States. Japan and South Korea, where work hours are among the longest of all advanced economies, have among the lowest productivity rates.

Since the late 1980s, many working mothers in the United States have been criticized in the media and have been dealing with so much guilt because of fears that they're not spending enough time with their children. In fact, time diary studies show that working mothers in America today are spending more time with their children than stay-at-home mothers spent in the 1960s and 70. They've prioritized time with their children by giving up time for sleep, personal care, adult friendships, time with spouses, and spending virtually all their leisure time with their children. But that's not good for anyone. Women and mothers need time for rest and recovery, and children need time on their own to develop their own sense of identity and independence. It's time to let the guilt, intensive mothering and criticism go. It's also time to recognize that women aren't the only ones who can give care. For instance, new research shows that having a child, men also undergo biological changes: their bodies produce prolactin, the same hormone that produces breast milk, their testosterone levels drop, and their brains exhibit the same pathways of nurture and communication that women's do. Men and women are natural caregivers, and it's time that our workplaces, policies and attitudes reflected that to open up opportunity for women in the workplace and men to become more active caregivers at home, particularly now that both the United States and Japan have increasingly aging populations who will need more care.

Regarding the pay gap, if men and women hold the same jobs with the same profession, the same education, the same levels of experience, childless men and childless women are pretty much at parity. However, comparing mothers and fathers, there is the pay gap. When we become parents, only fathers get a bonus. This is because of the unconscious bias that fathers are going to be more dedicated and work harder as "breadwinners" to provide for their families, and the expectation that mothers will be torn between home and work and will be distracted and frazzled. Research shows that's not at all true. That working mothers are often among the most efficient workers, because they have to be.

Now, even though more women have been graduating from college and getting advanced degrees than men since the mid-1980s in the United States, women who are educated and participate in the labor market still spend twice as much time, on average, doing the housekeeping and parenting, and men spend more time working for pay. (Caregiving is hard work, too, it's just unpaid, and not recognized as as valuable as paid work.) That contributes not only the pay gap, but also the lack of women in leadership positions. It's not that women haven't had the talent. They haven't had either the time nor have workplace policies, attitudes and practices given them the chance. We must find a way to create time for meaningful work, love, and play for everyone, and not police men and

women into narrowly defined gender roles. Work-life balance, rather than being a side issue or unimportant, is actually central. Making it a priority will result in more effective, innovative work, better businesses, healthier happier, more engaged and productive workers, more opportunities for both men and women to share care responsibilities at home and grow at work, closer-knit, stable families and communities, and ultimately, a more human, fairer, sustainable future for all: The Good Life.