Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America

John de Graaf (ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003. 248 pp.

reviewed by Jeff Brice, Jr.

Time poverty is the result of a recent evolution in the regular work agenda of most Americans. The propensity to work harder and longer than others has been lauded as a respectable avenue to workplace admiration and career ascension. While most employers tend to reward the hardest workers with enviable career-related perks, titles, and compensation, the problem is, as John de Graaf says in this book, that we as a country are now working way too much in our, relatively, short lifespans. In fact, most of the contributors to this compilation of essays on the time crisis in America report that the average worker is being robbed of personal time that will never be replaced. Fortunately, the editor and other authors provide the reader with a myriad of strategies to reclaim our right to the time we once devoted to our families, broader community goals, and the pursuit of fun. The book is an interesting, powerful read and an effective tool for recruiting working-class people to support the National Take Back Your Time Day (October 24th) campaign, which de Graaf is leading (www.timeday.org).

The book is comprehensive, consisting of ten parts and thirty chapters. Part One, "Overwork in America," introduces the reader to the escalating problems associated with diminishing leisure time for American workers and frames the discussion that guides the rest of the book. Part Two, "Time is a Family Value," focuses on one unpleasant consequence of a time-crowded existence—the degeneration of parental time spent with children and other family members. Even worse, it details how parents condition children to replicate their harried lifestyles. Part Three, "The Cost to Civil Society," discusses how time used at work might better be spent addressing social problems. Part Four, "Health Hazards," describes some of the negative mental and physical effects of overwork and correlates American's declining health with increased time urgency. Part Five, "Environmental Consequences," details how the waste byproducts of our harried lifestyles serve to further degenerate the earth's beleaguered ecosphere. Part Six, "Historical and Cultural Perspectives," outlines the specifics of prior practical and scholarly research that supports the arguments of the shorter work-time movement in America. Part Seven, "Taking Back Your Time," provides evidence about how so-called convenience goods actually increase the amount of time spent at work. This part concludes with helpful suggestions to assist individuals with the process of simplifying and enjoying their lives. Part Eight, "Workplace Solutions," is the highlight of the book, providing examples of viable strategies for decreasing time at work without sacrificing productivity. Part Nine, "Rethinking Patterns of Culture," addresses other aspects of American culture that contribute to the overall quality of livelihood—healthy foods and livable neighborhoods. While not directly related to time poverty issues, the authors make the case that more time might equal better diets and less obesity as well as more attention to the development of an urban infrastructure to further decrease time stress. The final part, "Changing Public Policy," lays out, in three chapters, the overall agenda for the Take Back Your Time movement. Using Europe as a template, the reader is informed about specific work-time alternatives that should be paralleled. A litany of legislative and workplace modifications are introduced, and the likely result of the resultant expansion of "personal time" on the American economy is investigated. Throughout these ten parts, the contributing essayists examine the time poverty issue through the triangulated lens of history, workplace practices, and intriguing recommendations. It is clear that de Graaf is passionate about the subject and has compiled a work that is as educational as it is powerful.

One irony (out of many) for those who read this book is the recognition that the more technologically advanced we become, the more we (as workers) become slaves to our employers. In a sense, it does not benefit us to applaud the convenience of wireless communication, portable facsimiles, picture phones, etc. that make it virtually impossible to escape the prying eyes of those for whom we work. In a nutshell, the relentless pursuit of convenience has plainly added to the current crisis of diminishing leisure time. Is it really practical to be able to receive a facsimile while on a beach vacation? Do we really want the boss to be able to see us while we work at home? While not presently practiced, it is the possibility of an employer's 24-hour virtual intrusion through the availability of

continuous contact that is most unsettling. The true value of this book is that it points out problem areas that have served to diminish employee free time, yet offers the hope of relief in the form of a well-articulated movement to help ensure that things don't go too far.

De Graaf has done a laudable job identifying prominent contributors from such diverse fields as sociology, economics, psychology, public health, urban development and others to bolster his claims of time stress and overwork. Not only should this book be read as an educational tool, but also it should be consulted annually to remind us that work and life are two separate topics. Following are a few useful themes:

Americans and Overwork. Extending findings Juliet Schor reported in *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, more than a decade ago, annual average work hours for Americans have risen from 1,679 in 1973 to 1,878 in 2000. This represents an increase of 199 hours—or approximately five additional weeks of work per year. This total work effort represents an average of nine weeks more than European workers. A large portion of this gain comes as the result of shorter vacations, mandatory overtime, and working at home when normal work hours are not enough. Not only does the average American spend more time at work than today's Europeans, medieval peasants worked less than we do (and they were considered slaves!).

Societal Consequences. The endless workweek, which has been characterized by work at the jobsite and at home, has caused Americans to become less involved with politics, community causes, and family issues. Essentially, we have less time to devote to our obligations as citizens of the United States. According to de Graaf's contributors, the consequences of expanded work hours are far-reaching, affecting election outcomes, wars, and crime rates. By taking back some working time, workers can focus on educating themselves about domestic and global issues, become activists for issues that are meaningful to them, and provide more supervision for their children to reduce the likelihood of youth crime.

Worker and Workplace Solutions. Job sharing is a method of organizing work that allows two or more people to be responsible for at least one job via rotating fulltime schedules (e.g., three employees who share two jobs by each person alternating four-months on and two months off in rotation). While hardly a new idea, the notion of job sharing forwarded in this book is much different from the more typical arrangement in which two employees split a workday or workweek. In any fashion, less time at work is the primary benefit for employees; however, the payment of lower wages and fewer health and related benefits is a boon to employers.

Work sabbaticals are suggested as a vehicle to allow workers to engage in some meaningful activity that advances individual interests and those of the employer. Although de Graaf reports that an increasing number of Americans find their jobs to be the most interesting part of their lives, it is likely that many have never learned how to find meaning outside of the confines of organized employment. After some individual reorienting to define what is truly important, sabbaticals offer an opportunity to nurture the spirit, become involved with family and community, improve fitness by reducing stress, and ultimately to return to work revitalized, re-energized, and recommitted.

Choose new role models to emulate at work. A recent cross-industry study performed by Work Family Directions demonstrated that managers who work more than 60 hours a week are no more committed to the organization than those who choose to labor a mere 45 hours. The conclusion is that the "workaholic" employee is no more devoted to the organization than the average worker. However, these two categories of employee do differ in one respect—workaholics report a 230% increase in job burnout over that of average workers. This negative side effect represents an overload on the worker compensation health claims industry. Healthy employees have fewer health care claims and may represent a significant decrease in employee benefit costs. Possible positive side effects from this form of overwork are the feelings of accomplishment and affiliation that many workaholics experience. However, the personal benefit to employees is secondary to the burden of increased claims for physical ailments. So, while it is often assumed that the workaholic is more dedicated and productive, it is actually the better-adjusted employee who represents the more valuable asset for a well-informed employer.

Overall, John de Graaf's book is a significant milestone in the worker retooling and work redesigning movements supported by labor advocates. One weakness, however, is its absence of commentary by entrepreneurs or entrepreneur groups. This is important because entrepreneurs routinely labor 70-90 hours per week during the early stages of business initiation. Many entrepreneurs never change this habit, which threatens their heath with stress-related illnesses and strains their marriages, other family relationships, and social networks. While the average entrepreneur has no boss to whom to report, important stakeholder groups to the business can be just as imposing--if not worse. The entrepreneur finds him- or herself in the position of trying to appease the needs and desires of customers, investors, employees, suppliers, regulatory officials, community groups, unions, etc. until there is no time left to enjoy the benefits of "so-called" independence from traditional employment. If any group needs to learn how to take back their time it is this

growing segment of the working population. That oversight notwithstanding, this book is a useful tool for informing the public about the insidious nature of overwork and time poverty. For a reasonable fee and the amount of time required to read roughly 250 pages (it seems much shorter), one can discover solutions to the problem. The "Take Back Your Time" movement de Graaf advocates may even become "the next big thing" in American labor relations.

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