
Work Hours

By Lothar Katz

The subject of how hard people work, or rather *don't* work, is a big cheap-shot magnet.

*"Those factory people are lazy." "Nobody in accounting works more than 9-to-5."
"It's Friday afternoon? I bet the sales guys all already left."*

We've all heard them before. Between the lines, these remarks say: "*I* (or *We*) work harder than *they* do!", reflecting a perception of superiority that seemingly makes most of us feel good about ourselves.

This pattern repeats itself when it comes to other countries, though the comments tend to become more snide. Quips about "these French and Germans taking off all summer" are legion. And who hasn't heard, or talked, about those "Mexicans/Argentines/Greeks/Portuguese/Nigerians/Arabs/Indians/Pakistanis/..." (feel free to add your personal favorite here) who "enjoy life in the sun rather than putting in good, hard work"?

Plenty such national stereotypes exist. Some might include a small nucleus of truth, some are just that: stereotypes.

But wait, now: Mexicans? That's funny. The OECD just published an extensive update on a multi-year report on hours worked around the world. The organization identified the country where people work the hardest, that is, where the average overall number of hours worked per day is the highest, to be (are you sitting down?) ...

... Mexico !

As we know from that old line about lying with statistics, we should check the data first. Alright, let's take a closer look. Here's what I found:

The OECD's report, called *Society at a Glance*, attempts to capture numerous social indicators across 40 countries whose economies are either fully or nearly fully developed. The data on time use includes unpaid work, activities distinguished from leisure by the "third-person" criterion: if a third person could be paid to do the activity, it is considered to be work. The accepted, as well as the only available, method of assessing time use leverages individual surveys that record how people make use of their time. These surveys were conducted over periods of time thought to be most representative for the average work year. Both aspects obviously leave room for error. A further source of error lies in the fact that the data for most countries includes some vacation time, not factored in for others, such as Mexico. Given that many Mexicans typically enjoy no or relatively short vacations, the impact of the latter appears to be rather small in that country's case, though. Age groups surveyed were 15-64 in most but not all countries, where inputs from younger people generally tend to be less precise than those of older respondents. The inputs for most countries were collected in the 2005-2009 timeframe, but some go back as far as 1999. Lastly, the survey questions in Ireland and Mexico were simplified and are thus intrinsically less precise. All of these factors introduce potential errors; none of these errors are likely to be huge, though.

Who Works the Hardest

According to the study, an average Mexican spends a bit more than 10 hours per day on paid and unpaid work combined. This compares to almost 8.5 hours in China and India, 8 hours and 10 minutes in the US, just under 7.5 hours in Germany, and 7 hours and 12 minutes in Belgium, the country showing the lowest total in the study. When comparing only paid work, Japan emerges the 'winner', with almost 6.5 hours worked. (Keep in mind that these averages represent the seven days of the week, as well as vacation time/holidays). In the #2 spot follow three countries: China, South Korea, and (again!) Mexico. Lowest on the list: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, each reporting averages of less than 4 hours of paid work per day(!).

What are we to make of all this? The choice is yours. Those inclined to do so could further challenge the accuracy of the data collection, question the honesty of those surveyed, or argue that people in their home country work less but compensate for it by working much more efficiently (if I only got a dollar for every time I heard this one!).

Alternatively, maybe they could question their own stereotypes?

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