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# Work Style Differences

By Lothar Katz

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While summer vacation is slowing business in many countries across the northern hemisphere, maybe you have some time left to ask yourself a quick question: how much do you work?

The answer might say as much about the culture you belong to as it does about you as a person. In the United States, the likely response is “a lot”. That is partly because in this achievement-focused culture, it can be embarrassing to admit that one is not busy. The claim is usually also true: Americans are busier than ever. A 2004 OECD report found a 20% increase between 1970 and 2002 in the average number of hours Americans spent working. Canadians’ work hours went up 17% over the same period. However, Europeans and many Asians went the other way: work hours dropped 7% in the United Kingdom, 10% in Italy, 17% in Japan and Germany, and an impressive 24% in France. Propelled by technology gains and workplace efficiency improvements, all of these countries enjoyed increases in overall productivity during the same timeframe. As far as total annual work hours go, available statistics are not reliable enough for an accurate comparison, but several data points indicate that the U.S. is now in the top group in the world, surpassed only by a few work-dominated countries such as South Korea. Not surprisingly, work-life balance regularly comes up as a major issue in U.S. employee surveys.

Europeans may be quick to point out that their workloads are on the rise again and that lately they have started working longer than they used to. Indeed, even countries such as Germany and France are changing their once-rigid work regulations and practices that sometimes had people on mandatory 35-hour workweeks. Employees may also have less vacation days than they used to. The pressures of globalization on the job market are clearly taking tolls on a worldwide scale.

However, many Europeans still pride themselves with not being as “imbalanced” as Americans, who, as they see it, work all the time and don’t know how to enjoy life. Germans, Northern Europeans, and others claim that they work “much more efficiently”, declaring that since they get more done per hour worked, they need to work less hours. Naturally, such claims are difficult to verify. Another group, which includes Northern Italians, Spaniards, and some Eastern Europeans, may stress the many hours they spend working, although this could include considerable time spent at social and relationship building events. Others, for instance Southern Italians, may ridicule anyone boasting their long work hours and question their values. Asians may be less vocal about all this, but a similar spectrum of styles exists in that part of the world.

Obviously, work hours, vacation days, and work styles are only a few of the many factors that determine productivity and competitiveness of a country’s economy. Rather than claiming superiority, it is smart to recognize and acknowledge the diversity of opinions and preferences in this area. Here are a few suggestions:

**Accept work style differences.** Often, they reflect underlying cultural diversity. In “monochronic” cultures such as the U.S. or Germany, most people prefer a well-organized and systematic work style, doing one thing at a time. In polychronic cultures such as France, Southern Italy, or most of Latin America, many prefer a more spontaneous and flexible approach that often has them doing several things “in parallel”. There is no clear case for one being superior to the other.

**Don't brag about your long work hours.** Everything in life has two sides, and this is no exception. Others' interpretation of your work attitude may not quite be what you may expect. For instance, what may convey "achievement-oriented, committed, and hard-working" to you may come across as "inefficient, unfocused, and lacking a sense of priority" to others. Find better ways to demonstrate your commitment to the work you do.

**Take vacation and holiday periods into account.** If you plan to go to Europe on a business trip during the month of August, well, you may be better off staying at home. July and August being the prime vacation period, Europeans will be reluctant to set up business meetings. If you insist to meet anyway, you may not be able to meet the decision makers you had hoped to deal with. Although their vacations tend to be the longest, this phenomenon is not limited to Europeans. China's Lunar New Year (typically one week in early February) or Japan's Golden Week (up to two weeks around the beginning of May) significantly impact business activities as well, people in the southern hemisphere may take extensive vacations between January and March, and so on. It is smart to consider such factors when planning business travel.

Oh, before I forget: should you be taking time off work soon to go on a vacation, enjoy!

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.