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Work and Leisure are a Spectrum

By Tim Lee - 10/11/2012

John Quiggin writes about John Maynard Keynes's famous essay predicting that we'd all have 15-hour workweeks by now. Quiggin writes that Keynes's vision "seems further from reality than ever," but I think we're actually moving in the direction he predicted, just not in quite the way he thought we would.

It's conventional to think of work and leisure as mutually exclusive categories. You're either on the clock or you're not. But this seemingly clear conceptual distinction isn't always clear in practice. For example, I'm a freelance writer. My "job" consists of reading stuff and writing about it. But if I won the lottery, I don't think my daily routine would change very much. I'd do a bit more traveling, and the mix of topics I wrote about would change somewhat. But I'd still spend a big chunk of my time reading blogs, arguing with people on Twitter, and writing about stuff that interests me.

I'm admittedly an outlier, but I think the point applies in general: dividing the day between "work" and "leisure" and then measuring how many hours is spent at each activity doesn't provide us a reliable guide to what we really care about, which is how much of our time we get to spend doing things we find rewarding and fulfilling. It turns out that many people have only a limited appetite for "leisure" in the sense of spending their days at the beach or on the golf course. Rather, they're interested in pursuing creative or philanthropic activities that, when pursued in earnest wind up looking a lot like having a job.

For example, as people get wealthier, they're more likely pursue careers as artists, musicians, chefs, political activists, bakers, winery operators, boat captains, college professors, and so forth. They opt for white-collar jobs over blue-collar jobs, or (depending on their personality) jobs that let them work with other people rather than sitting at a desk, or outside rather than inside. White-collar workers prefer jobs where their bosses don't yell at them for surfing the web on company time. Blue-collar workers prefer jobs that let them take long breaks and have flexible hours. People like to work for small independent businesses rather than large corporations.

To be sure, only a small and fortunate minority has a job they like so much that they'd continue doing it even if they didn't need the money. But the fact that so many successful people who *do* have options choose less lucrative but more rewarding work tells us something about human nature. Many of us, at the margin, would rather have more "leisure like" jobs than more formal time off. And that's exactly what many of us have been getting in recent decades.