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A Slowdown That May Slow Us Down

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#)

Atlanta — Recessions have a way of upending the established order of things. For decades, Americans have worked longer hours, with fewer vacations, than people in most other industrialized countries. Now, suddenly, those who have managed to avoid unemployment are being asked to work less.

Among employers trying to stave off layoffs, “furlough” is the buzzword. State and local governments, universities, architectural firms and concrete factories are begging workers, or in many cases forcing them, to take unpaid time off. [President Obama](#) has praised “the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job.” In California, 235,000 state workers are taking off two days a month. In Atlanta, City Hall is now closed on Fridays. In January, 6.9 million Americans were working part time “because of slack work or business conditions,” more than double the number two years before, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

Yet if these times were less freighted with economic anxiety, might not many workers starved for personal time jump at the deal Atlanta’s nearly 5,000 employees have been given? They work one hour longer Monday through Thursday, and then they get a three-day weekend, reducing their work time, and pay, by 10 percent. Time is, after all, a form of wealth — but this country of workaholics accustomed to unbridled consumption has generally chosen money over time. Furloughs might work as a kind of recalibration — a market correction, if you will — of that age-old imbalance. Those who can afford them might actually come to like them.

Of course, for those already struggling to get by, furloughs can be a rude shock, pushing workers to look for a second job when jobs are scarce.

In New York’s Suffolk County, only 115 of 10,500 employees availed themselves of a voluntary furlough program in the first half of 2008 — enough to pay for five jobs, said [Steve Levy](#), the county executive.

Any acquired taste for such “free” time may not last when the economy picks up again, but there’s always a chance. Duriya Farooqui, the director of performance management for the City of Atlanta, said the arrangement was one that she herself had sought in her job hunt. “I suspect that there’s a whole cohort of working parents that would opt for this scenario even in a completely balanced and functioning economy,” said Ms. Farooqui, part of a two-income family with two small children.

John de Graaf, the executive director of [Take Back Your Time](#), an organization based in Seattle that advocates reducing overwork and “time famine,” says he hopes shortened hours will stick. “It may not ultimately be a sacrifice,” he said. “It may be exactly what they need to do to be

happier and healthier.” He said he would prefer an increase in paid vacation and parental leave, of course, but to his thinking, involuntary pay cuts are a good solution to shrinking budgets if they save jobs.

Setting aside, for a moment, acute financial worries, furloughs might also help answer larger questions underlying the economic crisis: What will America look like when it is over? Will we resume being a nation of spenders instead of savers? Will we be content with smaller houses and fewer things? Weren’t we working too much, anyway?

“Hopefully something about this recession might help us to begin to think about what the important things in life are,” Mr. de Graaf said.

Already some workers have reacted to the furloughs with more stoicism than bitterness.

While a single mother in Sacramento complained that the state furloughs would force her to give up smoking, her only luxury, furloughed employees around the country have said that they see small sacrifices as necessary to prevent larger ones. Another California employee was using the time off to watch her daughter ride horseback.

There is a counterargument, though. Critics who support the idea of shorter workweeks in theory say a recession is not the time to force them on workers. Stagnant wages, said Thea Lee, policy director for the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), have already made time off unaffordable. “Normally you would expect that as society gets wealthier, their wages rise; and as their wages rise, people work less,” Ms. Lee said. “Since we’ve ruptured that connection between wages and productivity growth, people have no choice but to work more to maintain their standard of living, and even that hasn’t been enough.”

In an ideal world, said Juliet Schor, an economist at [Boston College](#) and the author of books on labor, leisure and consumerism, shorter working hours would be voluntary, and workers would be compensated for any increased productivity. But even forced furloughs could provide more time for family, community, learning and volunteering, unless people must scramble to fill the time with a second job. Smaller paychecks, she said, would “dampen down the competitive consumption that’s associated with the high-hours economy,” leading to a sustainable way of life.

Employers, too, may find collateral benefits to furloughs. Studies show that reducing work hours can increase productivity per hour. Atlanta has recorded fewer sick days, and work crews have saved time because they set up and break down four times a week instead of five, said David Edwards, a policy adviser to Mayor [Shirley Franklin](#).

Such results have precedents. During [the Great Depression](#), Kellogg’s instituted a 30-hour workweek that was so popular vestiges of it lasted until the mid-1980s. Within two years, productivity had reached 40-hour levels, said Benjamin Hunnicutt, a professor of leisure studies at the [University of Iowa](#) and the author of “Kellogg’s Six-Hour Day.” Morale improved, and 85 percent of workers liked the change despite the lower pay, he said.

Other studies have shown that vacation, leisure time and shorter hours reduce stress and physical ailments like heart disease — though those ills can pile up again if you can't pay the mortgage or the car mechanic.

Given the potential benefits in productivity and morale, why don't American companies embrace shorter hours? One major reason is health care, a per-worker expense, said William A. Niskanen, an economist at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#). "So much of the compensation these days is health care, and that's independent of how long you work, so the cost per hour goes up."

Another reason may be cultural. "In the 19th century, leisure was seen to be the place where we would realize our humanity, where we would come into our own," Professor Hunnicutt said. "Now, leisure is suspect. It becomes suspect after the Great Depression, after the Second World War," as companies positioned work, not family, as the center of life. Shorter workweeks, he added, were viewed as feminine, and extra leisure time was viewed as a woman's domain. "I found a strong gender bias in Battle Creek," he said of the town in Michigan where Kellogg's is headquartered. "Men began to identify strongly with 'full-time' work — this is what real men do, and if you don't center your life on the job, you can't lay claim to your masculinity. Women held on to an older concept of organized labor, that work was a means to an end."

Unions and liberal economists have often focused their efforts on paid, not unpaid time off, to bring the United States in line with other Western countries. To that end, Dean Baker, the co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, has proposed a stimulus measure that would give companies two years of tax credits for offering more vacation, sick leave, maternity leave or personal time, of up to 10 percent of their normal work year, or \$2,500.

Without such incentives, however, workers are still torn between wanting their pay and liking their time, said Gayla Dodson, another Atlanta employee, who manages solid-waste crews. "It's sad and it's hard," she said, "but in another sense it's bringing people together. My family, we spend more time together, my friends, we spend more time together." Without money for nightclubs or dinners out, she said, "you can't be as busy because you don't have as much luxury."

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