



THE TRUTH ABOUT HOW MUCH WORKAHOLICS ACTUALLY WORK

MOST PEOPLE GRANDLY EXAGGERATE THE NUMBER OF HOURS THEY WORK--AND IN DOING SO, UNDERMINE THEIR OWN PRODUCTIVITY. HERE'S HOW TO TRACK YOUR REAL WORK TIME AND MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY HOUR.

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I first came to the topic of time not because I was interested in time management but because I was fascinated by the academic study of time use.

Hunting through data from the American Time Use Survey, conducted annually by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and other time-diary projects, I came to the inescapable conclusion that how we think we spend our time has little to do with reality. We wildly overestimate time devoted to housework. We underestimate time devoted to sleep. We write

whole treatises glorifying a golden age that never was; American women, for instance, spend more time with their children now than their grandmothers did in the 1950s and '60s.

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These curious blind spots continue into the realm of work. People who get paid by the hour know how many hours they work. People who inhabit the world of exempt jobs have a much more tenuous grasp on this concept but, as a general rule, the higher the number of work hours reported, the more likely the person is to be overestimating.

A study published in the June 2011 Monthly Labor Review that compared estimated workweeks with time diaries reported that people who claimed their “usual” workweeks were longer than 75 hours were off, on average, by about 25 hours. You can guess in which direction. Those who claimed that a “usual” workweek was 65–74 hours were off by close to 20 hours. Those claiming a 55–64-hour workweek were still about 10 hours north of the truth. Subtracting these errors, you can see that most people top out at fewer than 60 work hours per week. Many professionals in so-called extreme jobs work about 45–55 hours a week. Those are numbers I can attest to from time logs I've seen over the years. I've given speeches at companies known for their sweatshop hours and had up-and-comers keep time logs for me. Their recorded weeks tend to hover around 60 hours--and that's for focused, busy weeks with no half days, vacation days, or dentist appointments, and, most important, for weeks that people are willing to share with colleagues. We live in a competitive world, and boasting about the number of hours we work has become a way to demonstrate how devoted we are to our jobs.

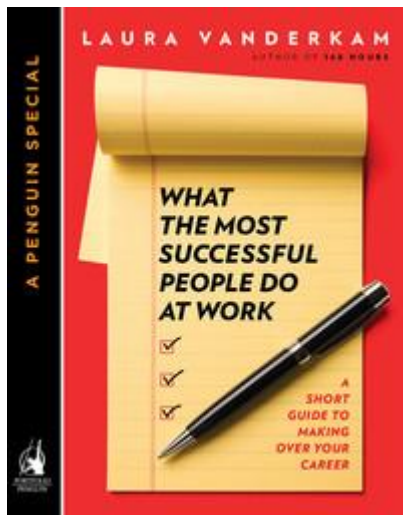
That would be funny, except that numbers have consequences. If you think you're working 80 hours per week, you'll make different choices in your attempts to optimize them than if you know you usually work 55.

People who want to use their hours better should figure out how they're spending their hours now. If you've ever tried to lose weight, you know that nutritionists will tell you to keep a food journal, because evidence shows it works. One study of a year-long weight loss program, published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* in 2012, found that women who kept a food journal lost about 6 pounds more than those who did not. Writing down what you eat keeps you accountable for what you put in your mouth. Likewise, writing down how you spend your time keeps you accountable for the hours that pass, whether or not you're conscious of them.

There are lots of apps that can help you keep a time log, or you can [download a decidedly low-tech spreadsheet](#) from my website. I use the even lower-tech solution of writing down my hours in a spiral notebook. If you've never kept track of your time before, I encourage you to try logging a whole week and think of yourself as a lawyer billing time to different projects. How much time do you spend checking e-mail? Thinking? Planning? Traveling? In meetings? Doing the substance of whatever work you were hired to do?

Tally up the totals and study them. Do those totals seem reasonable? What do you over- or underinvest in? Perhaps the most important insight to come out of this experiment is an understanding of exactly how long activities take. If I've got a blog post written, it takes me half an hour to format it with links and photos--a good thing to know before attempting to post between the 11:45 a.m. end of a phone call and lunch with my kids at noon. People who do a lot of something often develop a good sense for this and consequently have a more accurate understanding of how much they can produce in the 2,000–3,000 annual work hours that a 40–60 hour workweek entails. An October 2012 *Wall Street Journal* profile of Connie Brown, an artist who specializes in personalized maps, reported that a map took her more than 200 hours to complete, and so she did about 12 a year. Even adding administrative time, that puts her in the 2,000–3,000-hour bucket. A less experienced artist might attempt to tackle 50 such projects per year, but since that's 10,000 hours, and a year has just 8,760 hours (8,784 during leap years), that clearly wouldn't work.

You don't have to log your minutes forever, but even doing it for a few days gives you a mindfulness about time--a mindfulness I imagine monastic sorts were pursuing as they meditated through their books of hours. That mindfulness can lead to more productive choices by itself. One busy doctor who kept a time log for me subsequently took her log to her clinic director to make the case for more administrative support so she could see more patients. Having logged many weeks over the years, I no longer propose phone calls before 11 a.m. if I get a say in the matter. That's because I know that morning hours are when I am best able to turn an idea into words.



You may be frustrated to discover that how you're spending your time isn't how you wish to be spending your time, but the stark truth is that time is a nonrenewable resource—when it's gone, it's gone. There is no point lamenting how many of your hours have been lost in the past.

There is much to be gained, though, by committing to doing things differently in the 2,000–3,000 work hours you are granted as a blank slate each year.

--Excerpted from [WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO AT WORK](#). Published by Portfolio/Penguin. Copyright Laura Vanderkam, 2013.