

We're becoming slaves to the working day?

by Mark Pavilons

Like the dwarves in Snow White, I owe, so it's off to work I go. Day in and day out, month after month, year after year.

After so many years of climbing the ladder, who isn't tempted to simply walk away??

Just ask The Box, who proclaimed in their 1984 tune Walk Away:

I caught myself dreaming of an open field

In October when the wind turns the sky to grey

I could stand still there in the middle of the hay

Could do nothing but to wish time would fade slowly here

It's a working day, a rainy day ...

Walk, walk, walk away ...

It's a mid-week day, a working day...

Walk, walk, walk away ...?

The brain, according to Robert Frost, is a wonderful organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office.?

It's funny that we've come to the point where we have to remind ourselves to switch off, unhook, unplug at the end of a work day. How many still answer calls, texts and emails into the evening?

As Michelle Obama put it, we need to do a better job of putting ourselves higher on our own to do' list.?

And yet Joseph Campbell observed one of the western world's realities:??I think the person who takes a job in order to live that is to say, for the money ??as turned himself into a slave.?

Here, in top-shelf North America, our work day involves getting up to an alarm, commuting upwards of an hour to work, chugging along for eight hours or so, and then heading home. Sometimes, we head out to lunch, a less than nutritional, quick meal somewhere near our office. Often, we eat at our desk, in front of our computer.

I'm sure we've all had bosses who didn't care one iota about their employees. I've also had to follow directives, no matter how ludicrous, from the higher ups over the years.

We're scrambling in search of a balance, something we've ignored for decades. Now we're paying the price.

I'm not sure why we haven't taken some pointers from our brothers and sisters around the globe, who practise a very strict life-work relationship.

I'm a foodie and love travel shows on TV. So, I thought I'd point to the Italian approach to work.

The Italian work day is designed for living, not just laboring. The rhythm of work follows a different beat than in many other countries. It's one that accommodates family, leisure, and that essential midday meal.

And this approach to working hours is firmly grounded in legislation designed to protect worker rights and wellbeing. The standard work week is legally set at 40 hours, typically distributed across five days.

The maximum working week cannot exceed 48 hours averaged over a four-month period. This ceiling is enforced to prevent worker exploitation and maintain healthy work-life boundaries.

Also, overtime work is strictly regulated.

The typical Italian day might run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., followed by a lengthy lunch break of two to three hours. Work then resumes from 3 or 4 p.m. until 6 or 7 p.m. This schedule acknowledges both the biological reality of the post-lunch dip and the cultural importance of enjoying a proper meal, often with family.

The extended mid-day break allows people to return home for freshly prepared meals, visit local markets, or simply enjoy a slower pace.

Many Italian businesses maintain the tradition of closing early on Fridays, allowing workers to get a head start on the weekend.

Italy offers a generous allocation of both public holidays and vacation time. The country has 11 nationwide public holidays.

Civil servants also enjoy this type of flexible schedule. Government offices, including local municipalities, judicial bodies, and educational institutions, typically operate from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday to Friday.

This condensed schedule allows public sector employees to dedicate afternoons to personal interests, family, and social activities. Many public sector entities close for a lunch break, usually for an hour between 12 and 1 p.m.

Being a fan of Italian travel shows, and the spate of Stanley Tucci episodes, it's the love of food that grabs my attention.

Italians (like many others) are passionate about fresh, home-made dishes, with ingredients grown only footsteps away.

I've never made pasta from scratch or sipped a wine bottled just down the street. But it's on my bucket list.

Italy is not unique.

Spain, too, is known for its mid-day siestas and socializing with colleagues after work is also ingrained in their culture.

It's common for employers in France to offer four-day work weeks, and the French actually frown upon ?workaholism.?

In Switzerland, a whopping 35% still work from home and most enjoy a minimum of four weeks holidays.

Conversely, in many Asian cultures, working longer hours shows dedication and loyalty. But this has some profound consequences, not the least of which is a ding to family life.

What I find odd is that many countries actually limit the hours in a work week by law.

It shows the government puts personal health and wellbeing above bottom-line productivity.

So, while we Canadians (and The Box) dream of an open field where the wind kisses our tired mugs, our counterparts have got it down pat. What are we doing wrong and why are missing out on so much in life?

I say let's make extended mid-day breaks mandatory for all. Let's organize massive, community pot-lucks on a regular basis. Let's raise a glass!

Who's with me?