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Longer Hours, More Stress, No Extra Pay: It's Not Just Amazon, It's the Modern Workplace

It may look like more and more workers are workaholics. In fact, they are just powerless.

By Bryce CovertTwitter

August 26, 2015

By now many of us have read *The New York Times's* insider account of the brutal workplace culture at Amazon's corporate offices. We already knew about what it's like to work in Amazon's warehouse centers: boiling heat, impossible production demands, and frequent firings of the temporary workforce. For the white-collar workers, demands are also high, if of a different nature: staff regularly cry at their desks, are shamed for taking time off for cancer treatments, and so often work during weekends and vacations that they develop ulcers. Failure to respond to a late-night e-mail comes with a reprimand. One employee recounts that her fiancée had to come to headquarters every night at 10 PM and call her repeatedly to get her to leave.

The *Times* article also includes stories from employees who profess to simply love working at that grueling pace. They are motivated by "thinking big and knowing we haven't scratched the surface on what's out there to invent," as one retail executive put it. "This is a company that strives to do really big, innovative, groundbreaking things, and those things aren't easy," the company's top recruiter said.

Our culture of work has so infiltrated our collective psyche that we like to think that we're putting in long hours and responding to e-mails on the weekends because we're devoted and

ambitious. This is what journalist Miya Tokumitsu has skewered repeatedly in her writing: the “do what you love” ethos—the idea that we should all seek work that we’re emotionally devoted to, not sticking with just for a paycheck—that demands unending passion and therefore unending work, even if those long hours don’t actually mean we’re getting more done.

But while some employees call it a choice to put in long hours, it’s hard to see how that can really be true—for anyone. It would be one thing if Amazon were simply selecting for a small slice of the American workforce that truly wants to put in 60-hour or more weeks and neglect personal lives (and health). Yet a follow up Times piece pointed out that extreme work cultures aren’t limited to Amazon’s headquarters, but also show up at places like Netflix and Goldman Sachs. That’s because, the author writes, the financial reward for landing a job at those companies is so huge that each one attracts many more people to each slot than could possibly get it, “leading to the brutal competition that plays out at companies where only the best are destined for partnerships or senior management positions.”

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But Amazon, Netflix, and Goldman Sachs are just the extreme end of the way all of our workplaces are heading: toward longer hours, higher demands, data to track it all in real time, and no extra pay to reward for all the stress. And we got here in large part because ours is an era marked by a low point in workers’ power.

The stakes for the rest of us might be slightly lower, but what’s happening to tech workers and bankers is what we have all experienced for the decade or so. All jobs are hot commodities. While the ratio has recently improved, for about six years after the crash of 2008, there were far more job seekers than open positions available throughout the entire economy. Nearly seven people were vying for each opening at its peak in July 2009. There were at least two unemployed people for each open job until last fall. We are all pretty much expendable in a world where there is always a crush of workers trying to break down the door to a posted job.

At the same time, unions, an important lever of power for workers vis a viz their bosses, have all but disappeared, particularly for the most recent generation of workers. People in unions command higher wages and, in other countries at least, more control over their hours. But the unionization rate hit a 70-year low in 2011, when it plummeted to 11.9 percent, and it’s been falling since. Just about 11 percent of the workforce, or 14.6 million people, belonged to a union last year, compared to 35 percent in the mid-1950s. Younger people are less likely than older generations to be card-carrying members: just about 10 percent of workers ages 25-34 were in unions in 2014, compared to nearly 14 percent of people 35-44 and 15 percent of those 45-54.

What this means is that American employers enjoy an inordinate amount of power over their employees, at all pay grades and skill levels. The vast majority of professionals say they work more than 50 hours a week. Retailers keep their workers on edge about whether or not they’ll work a given day or demand they work two shifts in one day. Few of us have the ability to push back a boss tells us they want us working late or starting early.

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And what incentive do employers have to cede any of that control if the scales are so tilted in their favor? Retailers don't have to pay for a workforce any bigger than absolutely necessary. White-collar employers can expect more product and more round-the-clock responses from their employees without having to pay them any overtime.

It's likely that the youngest generation of workers may appear even more workaholic under these circumstances than past ones. But we can't take that as a sign that they don't value their personal lives or control over their time off. It speaks to an inability to say no. And in the face of that disempowerment, we may be telling ourselves extreme demands are in fact voluntary choices. After all, it feels better to think of time spent in front of a computer well into the night as something done in the service of passion than in the service of someone else's bottom line.