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Dear Reader,

Do you feel overworked, unable to finish your to-do lists, anxious about keeping your job? Or perhaps you wish you had a job even at the cost of being overworked? What if the economic recession would be an opportunity to rethink how we organize our priorities, our life, what has become normal? This month we offer a review of Dr. Juliet Schor's latest book ***True Wealth***, where she addresses some unforeseen benefits resulting from the global financial crisis.

Enjoy the reading,

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

**Quote of the Month**

*"Never ask me to stop, because I may not start again."*

Uncle Wilbur



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## About work and life

**A book review by Isabel Rimanoczy**

What is stressing out so many millions of Americans? They have lost control of their daily lives, says Juliet Schor<sup>11</sup>. "They work too much, eat too quickly, socialize too little, drive and sit in traffic for too many hours, don't get enough sleep, and feel harried too much of the time." This, explains the author, undermines the basic sources of wealth and well-being: having strong ties with family and community, cultivating a sense of purpose, and being healthy in mind and body.

Of course it sounds Utopian to imagine us all having jobs that take up less of our time — particularly at a time when many people wish they would *have a job* — when the costs of medical insurance, education, and mortgages are hard to cover. Companies have been laying off employees and those that remain feel they have to put in as many hours as they can, in order to keep their job.

But it is Utopian only when we look at it from a perspective of scarcity, observes Schor. If people would work fewer hours we could take the first step toward solving the unemployment crisis — while giving Americans a better quality of life. In other words, we would distribute the work that needs to be done among more people. What about paying our bills?, you may be wondering. "Living on less pay usually means consuming less, making more of the things one needs at home," replies Schor.

"Actually many people have begun to do this," she observes. "Whether driven by necessity or by choice to live simply, many Americans are shifting toward fewer work hours," and she continues, "it's a trend that, if done correctly, could get us out of our current economic crisis and away from unsustainable economic growth."

### **More than growing the economy**

Schor observes that over the past four decades Americans have been working longer, with the average working person putting in 180 more hours of work in 2006 than in 1979. More men are working over 50 hours a week. So we shouldn't be surprised, the author says, that such a large number of U.S. employees report being overworked." A 2004 study found that 44 percent of respondents were often or very often overworked, overwhelmed at their jobs, or unable to step back and process what's going on. A third reported being chronically overworked. These overworked employees had much higher stress levels, worse physical health, higher rates of depression, and a reduced ability to take care of themselves than their less-pressured colleagues," according to Schor.

Yet there seems to be some light at the end of this tunnel. A trend towards shorter weeks has begun, and a comparative study the author conducted between data from 1996 and 2004 indicated that the percentage of adults making voluntary changes in their lifestyle, entailing earning less money, went from 19% to 48%. Schor cites the New Dream survey, where "23% said they were not only happier, but they didn't miss the money. Sixty percent reported being happier, but missed the money to varying degrees. Only 10% regretted the change."

As we reported in a previous [LIM News](#) article, many employers have creatively addressed a stagnant economy not by negatively impacting their workforce through layoffs, but by reducing hours, shortening the working week, instituting flex-time or offering unpaid vacations. In the New

Dream survey, several people who lost their jobs or experienced involuntary reduction in pay or hours, discovered the benefits of having a more balanced life.

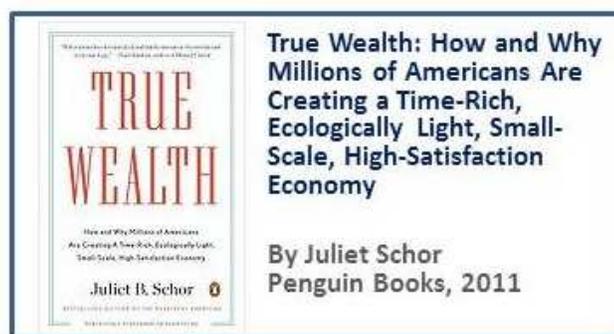
### **Learning a new way of living**

Schor goes on to cite other benefits to both individuals and to the planet of changed behaviors and attitudes towards the current high level of work hours. Her proposed formula to "earn less, spend less, emit and degrade less" results, she suggests, in allowing people more free time and a better quality of life. She cites a study of the Center for Economic and Policy Research that estimates that if the United States "were to shift to the working patterns of Western European countries, where workers spend on average 255 fewer hours per year at their jobs, energy consumption would decline about 20 percent." She herself studied the environmental footprint made by the industrialized countries over the last 50 years, and noted that nations with shorter working hours make a considerably smaller ecological and carbon impact on our planet.

The author also finds a correlation between working hours, income and the environmental footprint in the home. A French study found that families with larger working schedules tend to buy larger homes and more appliances, to travel more by private cars than public transportation, to use more hotels and to eat out more. And a recent Swedish study showed that a 1% reduction in working hours reduces the family carbon footprint by 0.8%. The connection is simple; when we work longer hours, we need to hire more services, we seek gratification by buying more objects, and we eat out more. When we have more time at home, we garden and cook, consume less and engage in less resource-intensive activities, Schor observes, and she suggests we can meet more of our basic needs by making, fixing, and doing things ourselves.

Of course necessity is the mother of invention, and an economic recession often demands that people go back to doing things for themselves. She states, "In April 2009, according to a national survey, one in five Americans said they were making plans to plant a garden that year. After the recession hit, service-oriented businesses such as salons, pet groomers, and nannies experienced a decline in business as people began doing these things for themselves. An annual expo called Maker Fair that started in California has been attracting growing numbers of do-it-yourselfers and inventors. It's spreading to new locations around the country, and attendance has reportedly quadrupled since 2006."

And people are finding new areas of interest, the author indicates. "People are returning to lost arts practiced by earlier generations — woodworking, quilting, brewing beer, and canning and preserving. They are also hunting, fishing, and sewing." This is a reminder of how people managed to afford clothing, food and maintained their homes several decades ago.



Schor sees a good sign in the growth of a "do-it-yourself" movement. "Most people find some productive activities they prefer, are more skilled at, or can do more easily. They trade or sell what they're best at producing. With this specialization, self-provisioning becomes a pathway to incubating a set of small businesses that will flourish as the sustainable economy takes off." It makes me think of the community bonds that are forged when we have something to exchange with our neighbors.

"Self-providers value their newfound skills, love the chance to be creative, and are getting satisfaction and security from constructing a more self-reliant lifestyle," Schor observes. "They are nourished by connection with the earth." A crisis that is forcing change on us may lead us to healthier, more balanced lives; and it can reduce our ecological footprint, which can only serve both us and our planet.



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<sup>11</sup>Dr. Juliet Schor is Professor of Sociology at Boston College and the author of *The Overspent American* and *True Wealth* (Penguin Group, 2011).



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