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Let's Be Less Productive

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HAS the pursuit of labor productivity reached its limit?

Productivity — the amount of output delivered per hour of work in the economy — is often viewed as the engine of progress in modern capitalist economies. Output is everything. Time is money. The quest for increased productivity occupies reams of academic literature and haunts the waking hours of C.E.O.'s and finance ministers. Perhaps forgivably so: our ability to generate more output with fewer people has lifted our lives out of drudgery and delivered us a cornucopia of material wealth.

But the relentless drive for productivity may also have some natural limits. Ever-increasing productivity means that if our economies don't continue to expand, we risk putting people out of work. If more is possible each passing year with each working hour, then either output has to increase or else there is less work to go around. Like it or not, we find ourselves hooked on growth.

What, then, should happen when, for one reason or another, growth just isn't to be had anymore? Maybe it's a financial crisis. Or rising prices for resources like oil. Or the need to rein in growth for the damage it's inflicting on the planet: climate change, deforestation, the loss of biodiversity. Maybe it's any of the reasons growth can no longer be safely and easily assumed in any of today's economies. The result is the same. Increasing productivity threatens full employment.

One solution would be to accept the productivity increases, shorten the workweek and share the available work. Such proposals — familiar since the 1930s — are now enjoying something of a revival in the face of continuing recession. The [New Economics Foundation](#), a British think tank, proposes a 21-hour workweek. It may not be the workaholic's choice. But it's certainly a strategy worth thinking about.

But there's another strategy for keeping people in work when demand stagnates. Perhaps in the long run it's an easier and a more compelling solution: to loosen our grip on the relentless pursuit of productivity. By easing up on the gas pedal of efficiency and creating jobs in what are traditionally seen as "low productivity" sectors, we have within our grasp the means to maintain or increase employment, even when the economy stagnates.

At first, this may sound crazy; we've become so conditioned by the language of efficiency. But there are sectors of the economy where chasing productivity growth doesn't make sense at all. Certain kinds of tasks rely inherently on the allocation of people's time and attention. The caring professions are a good example: medicine, social work, education. Expanding our economies in these directions has all sorts of advantages.

In the first place, the time spent by these professions directly improves the quality of our lives. Making them more and more efficient is not, after a certain point, actually desirable. What sense does it make to ask our teachers to teach ever bigger classes? Our doctors to treat more and more patients per hour? The Royal College of Nursing in Britain warned recently that front-line staff members in the National Health Service are now being "stretched to breaking point," in the wake of staffing cuts, while a study earlier this year in the *Journal of Professional Nursing* revealed a worrying decline in empathy among student nurses coping with time targets and efficiency pressures. Instead of imposing meaningless productivity targets, we should be aiming to enhance and protect not only the value of the care but also the experience of the caregiver.

The care and concern of one human being for another is a peculiar "commodity." It can't be stockpiled. It becomes degraded through trade. It isn't delivered by machines. Its quality rests entirely on the attention paid by one person to another. Even to speak of reducing the time involved is to misunderstand its value.

Care is not the only profession deserving renewed attention as a source of economic employment. Craft is another. It is the accuracy and detail inherent in crafted goods that endows them with lasting value. It is the time and attention paid by the carpenter, the seamstress and the tailor that makes this detail possible. The same is true of the cultural sector: it is the time spent practicing, rehearsing and performing that gives music, for instance, its enduring appeal. What — aside from meaningless noise — would be gained by asking the New York Philharmonic to play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony faster and faster each year?

The endemic modern tendency to streamline or phase out such professions highlights the

lunacy at the heart of the growth-obsessed, resource-intensive consumer economy. Low productivity is seen as a disease. A whole set of activities that could provide meaningful work and contribute valuable services to the community are denigrated because they involve employing people to work with devotion, patience and attention.

But people often achieve a greater sense of well-being and fulfillment, both as producers and consumers of such activities, than they ever do in the time-poor, materialistic supermarket economy in which most of our lives are spent. And here perhaps is the most remarkable thing of all: since these activities are built around the value of human services rather than the relentless outpouring of material stuff, they offer a half-decent chance of making the economy more environmentally sustainable.

Of course, a transition to a low-productivity economy won't happen by wishful thinking. It demands careful attention to incentive structures — lower taxes on labor and higher taxes on resource consumption and pollution, for example. It calls for more than just lip service to concepts of patient-centered care and student-centered learning. It requires the dismantling of perverse productivity targets and a serious investment in skills and training. In short, avoiding the scourge of unemployment may have less to do with chasing after growth and more to do with building an economy of care, craft and culture. And in doing so, restoring the value of decent work to its rightful place at the heart of society.

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