

Why Some of Us Work So Hard

We've all heard the admonitions about "workaholism": how some people sacrifice not just fun, but also family life and even their own lives, by working insane hours when they don't really have to.

And all of us also know people who work very long hours not because they're workaholics, but because they don't get paid nearly enough to work less while paying their bills.

But what about all the people whose work suffuses their whole lives—who never seem able to forget the demands of the job for a while—but who like their work and don't altogether sacrifice other things?

A window into such lives is given us in [this long and fascinating article](#) by Ryan Avent, *The Economist*'s senior economics editor and Free Exchange columnist.

At the beginning he notes:

"As a child, I wonderingly observed the hours my father worked. The stoical way he went off to the job, chin held high, seemed a beautiful, heroic embrace of personal suffering. The poor man! How few hours he left himself to rest on the couch, read or watch American football..."

He has taken his time retiring, and I now realise how much he liked his work. I can remember the glowing terms in which his clients would tell me about the help he'd given them, as if he'd performed life-saving surgery on them. I also remember the way his voice changed when he received a call from a client when at home. Suddenly he spoke with a command and facility that I never heard at any other time, like a captive penguin released into open water, swimming in his element with natural ease."

Now 37, Avent has in a way become his father:

"I get up at 5.30am and spend an hour or two at my desk at home. Once the children are up I join them for breakfast, then go to work as they head off to school. I can usually leave the office in time to join the family for dinner and put the children to bed. Then I can get a bit more done at home: writing, if there is a deadline looming, or reading, which is also part of the job. I work hard, doggedly, almost relentlessly. The joke, which I only now get, is that work is fun."

Almost everybody Avent knows socially is like that. It's what the upper-middle, professional classes have become, and must remain if they want to remain members of that class.

This seems to be part of why income inequality is increasing in America and Britain. If you make it into that class, you're sitting pretty. If you don't, you're often just screwed. The "working" class is falling behind for a variety of reasons.

But there's also a downside for the beneficiaries. Avent explains that your work becomes your identity as your participation in civic life suffers and friends become "friends of convenience." If you fail badly for whatever reason, it's as if your life is over, not just your job.

I know many people like that—some who are still successful, others who have been derailed. Is that the kind of person you want to be?