

From the 2h workday of the hunter gatherer to dropping dead ...

Wed, 9/7 2:11PM 30:02

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, started, work, stressed, company, buy, increased, pavlov, private equity, workers, money, pandemic, 1000s, home, slow, requests, euros, life, sell, realise

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One of the extraordinary things to emerge from the Coronavirus pandemic, the war and inflation afterwards is that many of us realise that they can't keep working like this for too long anymore. It is suppressing who we really want to be. For many workers workloads, stress and working hours have never been this high. In this podcast, I'd like to present the socio economic history that led us where most of us are today. This is rebel leader with a heart. So why do so many people end up working this hard and being busy all the time? Well, if we go back to our hunter gatherer past, you'll find that we work two to three hours per day, and it wasn't even work. We did things that kept us alive. And those things were part of our cultural life. We probably even liked them and enjoyed hunting and gathering. The rest of the time was probably spent talking, playing, sleeping and making love. For hundreds and 1000s of years, there wasn't property rights, and humans could find what they needed to live in nature. They had to hunt, gather, or later work the land to get it. But work was pretty limited. And at some point in history, King Henry even created the charter of the forest for free men. It stated that everyone had the right to subsistence, and everyone had the right to access raw materials to enable them to work. Human beings used to make stuff and trade or sell it. And when basic trading became too complicated, money was invented, it made the exchange of goods much easier. And it had a positive effect on people overall. And that's when we got the middle class. But as people got wealthier, the aristocracy became poor. And so they made free trade illegal, you were only allowed to do business in a certain sector, if you were chartered by the king. And people were also often dispossessed from land they owned, and that land was privatised by landlords or kings. And so for the first time in history, people didn't have the means to survive anymore by themselves. People had no choice than selling their bodies for wages for these landlords. And without free trades and no lands, you had to go work as an employee of His Majesty. Or for a corporation chartered by the king, or one of these landlords, you had to travel and go work in the city. And bakers, for instance, couldn't bake and sell their own bread anymore. They had to go work for the Royal bakery. And so instead of selling the value, you create it, you would sell your time for a wage. And that's when employment was born. But also, when time became more important, the clock tower went up in mediaeval towns. And in fact, jobs and employment are very new things from a historic point of view. And now, a couple of

centuries later, we still have disbelief, and find it completely normal. That working for a company is how you make income. The main shift that happens when you move from an economy where you create value to one where you sell your time, is that human beings begin to be understood in terms of their utility value. But also that's when time is money becomes a whole new concept. The faster you go, the more money you can make. It was first adopted in companies to increase production and become more efficient. But for many of us, it has tainted our private lives as well. We have to hurry. Our children have to hurry. We try to squeeze more and more into less and less time. Every moment becomes a race against the clock, at work, at school at home in our beds when we eat. Our lives have become a never ending race against the clock. And the church played an important role. as well in getting people to work hard. Calvinists believed that to enter heaven and become a saint, one must have faith and to show your faith you have to work hard. Laziness was seen as evidence of declining faith. Are you working relentlessly in a disciplined way to realise God's Will on Earth. And that meant that you had to select a specialised occupation, dedicate a lot of time to it. And above all, never waste a moment Stein. If you're caught in a moment of idleness, and suddenly we're in an accident, at that moment effect that you're not working hard, is a sign that your faith has slipped, you might be headed towards eternal damnation. So church even accentuated this trend. And after privatising and limiting free trade, another trend accelerated our business lives. At some point in history, the Kings created centralised money, and decreed that only their money was allowed to be used. There were even wars over this and people got killed. Now, if people wanted to trade they had to borrow central currency at interest, it's meant that you had to pay back more money than you borrowed. And where does that more money come from, from the economy growing. And for years, Western economies grew thanks to colonialism. colonials would go discover new territories enslaved people and take their belongings. And that's how the Western world kept growing until the end of World War Two, when the colonists started to rebel and push back, good for them, of course. But once they pushed back, we needed another way to grow. And three big innovations influence the next trend. industrialism allowed us to mass produce goods, the radio was invented, and a few decades later television. And a combination of those innovations lead to a new trends, consumerism, radio, and then television increased desires for things into people, people would buy more stuff. And this led to more factories that could employ more people. The standards of living increased for many people, leading to buying more and more things. And advertising was critical in consumerism. Without it, people wouldn't buy stuff that they don't actually need. And I love this quote from the movie Fight Club. We buy things we don't need with money, we don't have to impress people we don't like. But then at some point growth started to slow down. As more and more of the middle class people had more of the stuff they want it. And so we found new ways to produce at lower costs by producing goods 1000s of kilometres away, and then transport those goods over 1000s of kilometres to be used for a short while before throwing it away at this side of the world. And I love the YouTube video from Greenpeace and I will put the link below the video. This is the text from that little video. Oil that took 1000s of years to form is bumped by complicated machines, then transport it into a refinery to be transformed. From there it travels again to a factory to be transformed into plastic pellets. Then it is transported again towards another factory and moulded into a plastic spoon. The spoon is wrapped into a plastic and put in a box. The box is put on a pallet the pallet is put on a container the container put on a track that travels to the port where it is put on a ship. That ship travelled 1000s of kilometres and arrives at a port where it is put on another truck from that truck to a warehouse from the warehouse to a store. That's where you buy it to eat ice cream for a couple of minutes. Then you throw it away and it stays on the pile of garbage for 1000s of yours. And all that because you're so busy working that you don't have the energy to just take a couple of minutes to wash a metal spoon and so for comes humour ism to work, we need advertising. And that advertising that constantly focuses on lack, you're not good enough, unless you buy this. And then suddenly you want that

thing because indeed, you don't feel good enough, especially since you're exhausted from the hard work. And once you get that thing, you feel better for a couple of minutes, hours or days, until you get the feeling that you need something else. When I was working hard and stressed, I would go shopping very often, because buying stuff gave me some kind of release. But know that I'm not as busy anymore and happier, I noticed that I don't need or want as many things anymore. So for years, happiness meant that you could buy stuff. And for years, we accumulated stuff and stuff. More and more people realise that it's not making us happier. And consumerism is destroying our planet along the way. Then digitalization of work happens, it not only made work less limited than before, but it also allowed us to get requests from much more sources. When we worked with our hands work was pretty delimited, you could see when it started, and when it's ended, a car was finished, when all the parts were mounted, a lens was ready when all the seeds were planted. But then we started working with our heads and work became less delimited. When you work on a project, you can always work more by doing some more research by aligning more with your colleagues by rewriting stuff. But still work was mainly done from the office within the working hours. And if you wanted to work more, you had to stay longer at the office or take some files with you at home. And most of the requests came through letters, meetings or talks with colleagues or your boss. But with digitalization, we started to work with email. It was a great invention at the beginning. And I remember the time when we were happy because we received an email Wow, somebody has sent me an email. Here again, some of us had fixed computers. And if we had a computer at home, it was for private usage. But emailing started to get crazy and numbers and we started receiving emails from more sources than before, inside and outside of the company. Then we receive laptops and home internet connections. It allowed us to be more flexible. But for so many, it's meant bringing work back into our homes, new ways of communicating emerge, like chats, WhatsApp, social media, and no suddenly we started receiving requests through so much more sources, requests that we need to honour. But why is it that we find it so hard to say no to all these requests? Have you heard of Pavlov? Pavlov is a scientist that studied conditioned behaviours. His most famous experiment is with dogs he trained. Before giving his dog's food he would ring a bell. After ringing that bell, the dog would receive food. He did this for a while, when the bell rang, the dogs immediately became alert and started to salivate. Then they received foods, but at some point, Pavlov stopped giving the dog's foods when he rang the bell. And still, when the dogs heard the bell, they got up, were more agitated and were salivating. The conditioning had transformed their brains and habits was formed. During the Industrial Revolution, public school was created. And before that education was either private or reserved to rich people, or organised in a village. In industrial times, school was created to create skilled labour that would work in the factories and become good workers. And so just like Pavlov train these dogs, the educational system, trained our children or us to listen to the teacher and follow instructions. You were a good student, if you did everything that way. As expected from you, that's when you received good grades and got rewarded. And you were a bad student, if you didn't do everything that was requested from you. That's when you got bad grades and often got punished at home as well. If you don't do everything that is expected from you, you are a useless person that will have a hard time finding a job and surviving. And that educational system hasn't changed much since the industrial revolution. It is still conditioning our children in becoming good obedient workers. So the conditioning of doing what others expect, is deeply ingrained in each of us, especially in those of us that used to be good students. That's why we find it's so hard to say no to requests to the point of burning out sometimes. Now, let's come back to our world of work. As work became less delimited. And we quest started to come from everywhere, it simply became impossible to deliver everything that is requested anymore, and those who still try get extremely stressed, risk burning out or worse risk getting sick. Then, the next trend was that the power started to shift from industrialists to the financial world. In industrialism, the shareholders or founders wanted to make products or deliver services. And

for that they needed good workers. They also needed a long term vision if they wanted to continue making money on the long term. But when the power started shifting from industrialists to financial people, it didn't matter anymore, what you produced or what service you delivered, the only thing that mattered was the money you were making. At some point in my career, I became the managing director of a company owned by private equity. And it gave me the chance to understand the ins of that system. Private Equity buys a company at a certain price, make them grow in profits and value and then sell the company usually after three to five years at a higher price. And I'm going to simplify how private equity companies work. The whole system is based on two important criteria, the profit the company makes and the multiple at which you can sell it. So let's say that a company makes 100,000 euros in profits, and was bought at a multiple of seven, seven times 100,000 euros is 700 000s. Now, three years later, the private equity has increased profits to 500,000 euros with a well implemented strategy. So it's time to start selling the company again, to increase profitability even more. It reduces costs by laying people have a very efficient short term strategy to increase profits. And it became a common practice thanks to neoliberal economic policies that began with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. So let's say in this case, 10 people are dismissed immediately increasing profits with 500,000 euros. So profits grows to in total 1 million euro. And with a very good sales story, the sales multiple is now eight. So private equity manages to sell the company at eight times 1 million euro 8 million euros. Of course, they made some investments in the company, let's say 300,000. So they bought the company at 700,000 sold it at 8 million and invested 300,000. So the private equity became 7 million euros wealthier. And they offer a bonus of one year salary to the CEO with that money, because the CEO needs to receive an incentive to grow profits, but also to do the dirty job of dismissing people. And so what's the result of this operation? The private equity and their investors got 7 million wealthier 10 times their initial investment. The CEO received a huge bonus and got wealthier as well. 10 people got dismissed and became poor unless they manage To find another job, and the other 50 employees of the salt company have to work more to compensate. They are even more busy than before and afraid of losing their job if they don't continue to deliver what is expected from them. So which people become richer, workers that aren't productive enough become poor, and the others have to work more for the same wage. Now, public companies have another system, but it is still based on making more money as the main driver more than producing goods or services. And so with a power shifting to the financial world, workload started to increase even more for people. As of then, people could be massively laid off so that companies could make more profits. And we started to do more and more work with less and less people. And that, of course, created stress, but stress now is portrayed as a given in our modern capitalistic economy. So therefore, it is our responsibility as individuals to adapt to it. It's almost our fault if we are still stressed in this world. And did you know that the modern term I'm stressed out, only really appeared around the 80s stress was considered a disease before that and cold neurasthenia with all kinds of bizarre treatments. Today, it's considered completely normal to be stressed. It's almost not good. If you're not busy or stressed. You can only be successful if you're stressed, busy and working hard. And if you're busy, it means you're important as well. Even today, we're still bombarded with messages telling us hard work means you were worth the person. How often does the hero detective in our favourite TV show take a holiday? A typical scenario is a captain. We moved the detective from a case because there is a conflict of interest. But the detective will use the few holidays he has to still solve the crime in all secrecy. You'll see him work during nights and weekends and outside of work, he doesn't have many friends. He is so committed that he's willing to sacrifice his holiday, or even his life for work. It might not be the Calvinists today that glorify hard work. It's the movie business. And the next trend that added an extra layer of workload on workers is the pandemic. At first, it forced us to slow down a bit. We suddenly found ourselves at home having dinner with our family. We we discovered our neighbourhoods as the only thing

we could do was go for a walk. Some people couldn't work at all and started cleaning their houses and gardens. That's when the garbage facilities were overwhelmed with people throwing stuff out stuff they bought, but don't really need it, of course, and a whole world slowed down for a while until companies organise themselves for homeworking. Most companies only replaced meetings with virtual meetings. And suddenly, for older people working from an office, it became possible to do their job from home. And that's when all hell broke loose. You found yourself sitting at the same table with all your roles mother, father, sister, employee, teacher, even when the schools were closed husband wife, you didn't know any more when one roll stopped. And when another started when it was week, day or week, night, week, day of weekends, you set at the same table for dinner, working, playing with your kids or paying your bills. And statistics shows that a number of meetings increased and the meetings became longer. More emails were exchanged, and we started getting our information for more apps and systems. For most of the company's hybrids or remote work became very transactional. You opened your camera and started talking about tasks. You didn't even have the time anymore to work from one meeting to the next and chat a bit at a coffee machine or water cooler with colleagues. Some people today have back to back meetings and can only work on their projects at nights or during weekends. A lot of us like our work Because of our colleagues, we are social beings after all, but now suddenly, we are 24/7 connected. And at the same time, we have never been this disconnected from our companies, from our colleagues and even from ourselves. And now we can go back to the office, but the majority of people don't want to go back full time. We want to keep the flexibility of working from wherever we want in order to be more present for our children, or to avoid two hours of unproductive traffic jam. And what we see is that often commute time has been replaced with more work and statistics shows that we worked on average two hours more every day since the pandemic started. But too many workers fall into the trap of working even more. And in some countries, working hours increased by 40% Since the pandemic and because we work harder and harder and isolate ourselves more and more from others. Our mental health is rapidly degrading, even young people in their 20s Get burnouts nowadays. In fact, the Gen Z experienced more burnouts than any other generation. So that is why you work so hard today from dispossessing lens and eliminating free trades to exchanging time for wages, consumerism, digitalization, to liberal economies and massive layoffs to being conditioned by religion school or even the movie world to portraying stress as a given. And finally, D materialising work during the pandemic. And I don't blame anyone, because we humans created this system. We are the system. But it also means that we can change the system from the inside or escape it. And I don't have all the answers to get out of this failing economic model that is not only destroying our health and happiness, but also our precious planet. We need a collective answer coming from different angles and perspectives. But I consider myself lucky, because I managed to find a way to have a meaningful life, where I have a lot of time and space, I get to change people's lives while working when and where I want. And I found that way by accident when I almost burned out as a managing director. I've improved the principles while accompanying almost 1000 leaders and their teams in their personal transformation towards more balanced meaning and impact. And I often feel like an alien that sees all these crazy, busy robot like people that are destroying their health, their happiness, and sometimes their families. And I'd like to wake them up. I would like to wake you up, just like I woke up. Because working all the time is not the life you're supposed to live. It's time to slow down. And I really am curious, how does that make you feel when I say it's time to slow down? Can you feel deep inside of you that that's really the answer. You have to slow down. And it's, by the way, the best principle that I have found up until now, to help leaders find more impact meaning and balance, it's slowing down. And that's why I'm writing a book about slow and conscious leadership. And that's also what I teach in my online programmes at key leader and Solvay Brussels school. So I hope you'll find a way to escape this rat race and live a more meaningful life and simply start by slowing down.

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