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## Time is a network good

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Time is a network good: the value of time depends on whether others also have it. We can deepen our understanding of time from a comparison with other network goods like personal computers, Facebook, and communications technology that derive their value from widely shared usage. We review recent research on the importance of collective social time with family and friends, and the role that temporal coordination plays in enhancing community ties and subjective well-being. The standard workweek is one of the most taken-for-granted institutions that creates effortless social coordination of time. The weekend provides people with collective time off that facilitates social interaction and leads to remarkable gains in emotional well-being. A breakdown in the temporal coordination of the standard workweek can have a negative impact on individuals, families, and communities. Future directions for research emphasize the importance of recognizing the network properties of time and its implications for society at large.

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### Time is a network good

People often think about time in a way that suffers from a blind spot. We tend to see time as simply a quantity that we do not have enough of: ‘if I only had more time, I would be happier.’ In reality, the things that we most want tend to require interaction with other people. This means that the time schedules of *other people* are also important. The problem of time is fundamentally about coordination, and only partly a matter of individual choice. Things like work-life balance are not puzzles we can ever solve on our own. Time is a network good.

Network goods are things that derive their value, in part, from being widely shared [1\*,2]. Personal computers are a

simple example. The value of a computer depends on how many other people also have one. This is because computers are, at their core, a communication technology, heavily used for internet access, email, Facebook, and file sharing. When all one’s colleagues, friends, and family use personal computers, the technology is essential to daily life. But if you are the only person you know who owns a computer, the technology is of limited value and not worth the cost.

Network goods are characterized by benefits that increase with the number of users, especially the number of users one is personally connected to. Facebook is a uniquely valuable service, if for no other reason than that everyone else is on Facebook. Microsoft Word is an essential software package if for no other reason today than that all computer users can read and edit documents created in Word (but not those written in LaTeX). This network property is a feature of all communication technology, including language itself. For example, Esperanto was invented to be a global second language that would allow simple communication between all people. But since the take up rate has been so low, there is no practical value in learning Esperanto, as there is no one else to speak it with. Esperanto, like other network goods, is only useful if it can be shared with others.

Time is likewise a good that increases in value as more and more people have it and can share it [3–6]. Most activities are more productive or enjoyable when done with others. Work time is generally more productive when more people are focused on working — especially when they are your immediate colleagues and co-workers. Similarly, free time is more valuable when other people are also off work and available for social contact — especially when they are your family and friends. The success of family dinners, holiday parties, religious gatherings, political protests, and sporting events all depend on other people showing up for them. Of course people also enjoy having some quiet time to themselves, and there can be congestion problems when too many people participate. But the real bounty of free time comes from shared social experiences that build and replenish personal relationships [7].

In American culture, there is a growing perception of ‘time famine.’ People often complain of not having enough hours in the day or enough ‘time for life’ [8–12]. Indeed, Americans work some of the longest hours in the Western world — far higher than in most of Europe. Yet the time famine problem derives not so much from a shortage of time, but rather from problems of scheduling

and the social coordination of time. Spending a greater share of leisure time with family and friends contributes to greater happiness and well-being [13,14,15\*,16\*]. Often, people's desire for more time is really a desire for better temporal scheduling that allows more joint activity with friends and loved ones [17]. However, converting free time into social time involves a fundamental coordination problem. The challenge is not simply that 'I am too busy, but also that 'other people' are too busy. In theory, an individual could solve their personal time famine — if it were important enough — by cutting back their work hours (and their earnings) to get more free time. But if other people are still going to work, cutting back one's hours simply results in spending more time alone, waiting for other people to get off work. People might be able to change their own work hours, but unless they can also change the work hours of others, extra time off work does not provide the valued good — more time with family and friends. At the heart of 'time famine' in America is a large-scale collective action problem.

### The standard work week and the social coordination of time

The standard workweek is a remarkable invention, and one of the most taken-for-granted institutions in society. Our core temporal concepts such as the day and the year are derived from the cycles of the natural world [6]. Even the month derives from the 30-day lunar cycle. But the seven-day week is a completely arbitrary construction, with no basis in nature; its salience and importance is based purely on the fact that we all agree on it and coordinate around it. Similarly, there is no natural basis for the idea that Monday to Friday are 'work days,' while Saturday and Sunday are 'rest days.' But these conventions facilitate a tremendous amount of social coordination of time and participation that would be otherwise very difficult to schedule among autonomous individuals [17,18]. The standardized workweek serves to optimize the value of both work and leisure. During standard work times, it makes sense to be at work because there are few alternative social activities available, and the gains from collaborative work are highest. And it is during standard 'rest' times that the social lives of one's family and friends are most active and most memorable (and nothing much is happening at work). For a long time, this rough consensus on when people should work, and when they should not, was self-reinforcing because it maximized the benefits of both work and leisure.

Many American workers today do not have standard workweeks. Nonstandard work hours have been referred to as 'unsociable work' [19:394,20] and those working nonstandard hours such as nights and rotating shifts face hard scheduling constraints. Much research has identified the deleterious effects of unsociable work hours on families including problems with children and higher risk of

divorce [19,21\*,22\*,23]. Other research has identified that nonstandard working hours have a negative impact beyond family relationships, affecting other aspects of social connectedness. Cornwell and Warburton [24] show that shift work weakens community ties and involvement, even on non-work days, due to non-synchronized daily schedules with others in the community.

### Weekend well-being and the free time of unemployment

To better understand the benefits of coordinated social time, Young and Lim [17] drew on data from more than 500 000 respondents to the Gallup Daily Poll, examining day-to-day fluctuations in emotional well-being. They report two core findings about daily emotional well-being, one that was intuitive, the other surprising. First, people's feelings of emotional well-being (as measured by anxiety, stress, laughter and enjoyment) closely follows the standard work week. Well-being is low during the week, and peaks sharply on weekends. As shown in Figure 1, weekends are clearly the high points of working people's daily lives. The surprising result comes from looking at unemployed workers, who have time off work every day of the week. The unemployed show almost exactly the same pattern in day-to-day well-being. Their emotional well-being is low overall, and lower than that of workers every day of the week (c.f. [25,26\*,27,28]). But well-being among the jobless also soars on the weekend, and sinks back down again on Mondays.

It is a tempting idea that weekends are valuable to individuals because they deliver a large quantity of free time — two days of freedom from the drudgery of work, with time to do 'whatever one wants.' But this evidence suggests the benefits of the weekend are in large part due to social coordination of free time — two days of *free time with others* — rather than individual respite from work. The unemployed look forward to the weekend just as much as working people.

In a second study using the American Time Use Survey, Young and Lim [17] show that the amount of social time with family and friends roughly doubles on weekends (Figure 2). This accounts for about half of the reason why individual well-being rises on weekends. And indeed, the social time of the unemployed also doubles on the weekend, just like that of working people. For unemployed individuals, Monday to Friday offers five days of free time mostly spent alone, waiting for other people to finish work. For the jobless, weekend free time is remarkably different from and far more social than the spare time they have during the week. Large injections of free time, when not coordinated with the cycle of other people's free time, are mostly experienced as a waste of time. Time off during the week is fine for a day, but soon gives rise to a 'bowling alone' problem [29].

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