

HOW HARD DO YOU WORK?

It's not the hours, it's the devotion

BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON
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Labor Day is the most puzzling of our great American jubileations. Are we celebrating how hard America works?

Or are we celebrating the fact that, for today at least, most of us don't have to lift a finger except in wholesome recreation?

If you think that's a perverse interpretation of a noble Puritan holiday, consider the fact that the Australian version is called Eight Hour Day, in celebration of the workers' struggle for shorter working hours. They spell it out: We're glad we don't have to work so hard anymore.

There's precedent for that attitude in America. For most of our nation's history, we've been gradually taking it easier, if "work" is defined simply as hours on the job.

In 1850, the average American workweek was 70 hours. In 1910, it dropped to 60. After World War I, the eight-hour day became the standard, and it seemed only a matter of a few generations until no one was working at all.

But since the United States turned from a manufacturing to a service economy — and the world trade balance shifted against us — no longer do most of us envision a day when machines liberate us from the workplace. In fact, "labor-saving" machines like VDTs and fax machines seem to bully us into more work rather than making our lives easier.

According to a recent Harris poll, the average workweek is now increasing, up from 40.6 hours in 1973 to 46.8



BY ERIC LUSE/THE CHRONICLE

Writer Armistead Maupin hangs out at home in his hammock, trying not to work too hard.

hours per week last year.

Time in the office is not necessarily equivalent to effort, of course. If that were the case, Carl Sandburg would have praised Chicago as the city of Long Hours, not Broad Shoulders.

Still, workaholism — which is always characterized by brutally long hours on the job — remains "the most socially accepted of all addictions," say psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaef and management consultant Diane Fassel in their book, "The Addictive Organization" (Harper & Row, \$16.95).

What's too much work? What's just right? How much credit do we get for sitting and thinking?

In this culture, no question is more loaded, more difficult to interpret and answer, than: "How hard do you work?"

That's what we asked a cross section of Northern California overachievers as they prepared for Labor Day.

Bob Armstrong, founder, Couch Potatoes of America:

"Since this has turned into a regular business, I spend a lot of time on the phone talking to lawyers and agents and businessmen, so I work at least a couple or three hours a day. I make calls during commercials. That adds up to quite a lot during the course of a day."