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The ‘Busy’ Trap

By TIM KREIDER

If you live in America in the 21st century you've probably had to listen to a lot of people tell you how busy they are. It's become the default response when you ask anyone how they're doing: "Busy!" "*So* busy." "*Crazy* busy." It is, pretty obviously, a boast disguised as a complaint. And the stock response is a kind of congratulation: "That's a good problem to have," or "Better than the opposite."

Notice it isn't generally people pulling back-to-back shifts in the I.C.U. or commuting by bus to three minimum-wage jobs who tell you how busy they are; what those people are is not busy but *tired. Exhausted. Dead on their feet*. It's almost always people whose lamented busyness is purely self-imposed: work and obligations they've taken on voluntarily, classes and activities they've "encouraged" their kids to participate in. They're busy because of their own ambition or drive or anxiety, because they're addicted to busyness and dread what they might have to face in its absence.

Almost everyone I know is busy. They feel anxious and guilty when they aren't either working or doing something to promote their work. They schedule in time with friends the way students with 4.0 G.P.A.'s make sure to sign up for community service because it looks good on their college applications. I recently wrote a friend to ask if he wanted to do something this week, and he answered that he didn't have a lot of time but if something was going on to let him know and maybe he could ditch work for a few hours. I wanted to clarify that my question had not been a preliminary heads-up to some future invitation; this *was* the invitation. But his busyness was like some vast churning noise through which he was shouting out at me, and I gave up trying to shout back over it.

Even *children* are busy now, scheduled down to the half-hour with classes and extracurricular activities. They come home at the end of the day as tired as grown-ups. I was a member of the latchkey generation and had three hours of totally unstructured, largely unsupervised time every afternoon, time I used to do everything from surfing the World Book Encyclopedia to making animated films to getting together with friends in the woods to chuck dirt clods directly into one another's eyes, all of which provided me with important skills and insights that remain valuable to this day. Those free hours became the model for how I wanted to live the rest of my life.

The present hysteria is not a necessary or inevitable condition of life; it's something we've chosen, if only by our acquiescence to it. Not long ago I Skyped with a friend who was driven out of the city by high rent and now has an artist's residency in a small town in the south of France. She described herself as happy and relaxed for the first time in years. She still gets her work done, but it doesn't consume her entire day and brain. She says it feels like college - she has a big circle of friends who all go out to the cafe together every night. She has a boyfriend again. (She once ruefully summarized dating in New York: "Everyone's too busy and everyone thinks they can do better.") What she had mistakenly assumed was her personality - driven, cranky, anxious and sad - turned out to be a deformative effect of her environment. It's not as if any of us wants to live like this, any more than any one person wants to be part of a traffic jam or stadium trampling or the hierarchy of cruelty in high school - it's something we collectively force one another to do.

Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day. I once knew a woman who interned at a magazine where she wasn't allowed to take lunch hours out, lest she be urgently needed for some reason. This was an entertainment magazine whose raison d'être was obviated when "menu" buttons appeared on remotes, so it's hard to see this pretense of indispensability as anything other than a form of institutional self-delusion. More and more people in this country no longer make or do anything tangible; if your job wasn't performed by a cat or a boa constrictor in a Richard Scarry book I'm not sure I believe it's necessary. I can't help but wonder whether all this histrionic exhaustion isn't a way of covering up the fact that most of what we do doesn't matter.

I am not busy. I am the laziest ambitious person I know. Like most writers, I feel like a reprobate who does not deserve to live on any day that I do not write, but I also feel that four or five hours is enough to earn my stay on the planet for one more day. On the best ordinary days of my life, I write in the morning, go for a long bike ride and run errands in the afternoon, and in the evening I see friends, read or watch a movie. This, it seems to me, is a sane and pleasant pace for a day. And if you call me up and ask whether I won't maybe blow off work and check out the new American Wing at the Met or ogle girls in Central Park or just drink chilled pink minty cocktails all day long, I will say, what time?

But just in the last few months, I've insidiously started, because of professional obligations, to become busy. For the first time I was able to tell people, with a straight face, that I was "too busy" to do this or that thing they wanted me to do. I could see why people enjoy this complaint; it makes you feel important, sought-after and put-upon. Except that I hate actually being busy. Every morning my in-box was full of e-mails asking me to do things I did not want to do or presenting me with problems that I now had to solve. It got more and more intolerable until finally I fled town to the Undisclosed Location from which I'm writing this.

Here I am largely unmolested by obligations. There is no TV. To check e-mail I have to drive to the library. I go a week at a time without seeing anyone I know. I've remembered about buttercups, stink bugs and the stars. I read. And I'm finally getting some real writing done for the first time in months. It's hard to find anything to say about life without immersing yourself in the world, but it's also just about impossible to figure out what it might be, or how best to say it, without getting the hell out of it again.

Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice; it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body, and deprived of it we suffer a mental affliction as disfiguring as rickets. The space and quiet that idleness provides is a necessary condition for standing back from life and seeing it whole, for making unexpected connections and waiting for the wild summer lightning strikes of inspiration - it is, paradoxically, necessary to getting any work done. "Idle dreaming is often of the essence of what we do," wrote Thomas Pynchon in his essay on sloth. Archimedes' "Eureka" in the bath, Newton's apple, Jekyll & Hyde and the benzene ring: history is full of stories of inspirations that come in idle moments and dreams. It almost makes you wonder whether loafers, goldbricks and no-accounts aren't responsible for more of the world's great ideas, inventions and masterpieces than the hardworking.

"The goal of the future is full unemployment, so we can play. That's why we have to destroy the present politico-economic system." This may sound like the pronouncement of some bong-smoking anarchist, but it was actually Arthur C. Clarke, who found time between scuba diving and pinball games to write "Childhood's End" and think up communications satellites. My old colleague Ted Rall recently wrote a column proposing that we divorce income from work and

give each citizen a guaranteed paycheck, which sounds like the kind of lunatic notion that'll be considered a basic human right in about a century, like abolition, universal suffrage and eight-hour workdays. The Puritans turned work into a virtue, evidently forgetting that God invented it as a punishment.

Perhaps the world would soon slide to ruin if everyone behaved as I do. But I would suggest that an ideal human life lies somewhere between my own defiant indolence and the rest of the world's endless frenetic hustle. My role is just to be a bad influence, the kid standing outside the classroom window making faces at you at your desk, urging you to just this once make some excuse and get out of there, come outside and play. My own resolute idleness has mostly been a luxury rather than a virtue, but I did make a conscious decision, a long time ago, to choose time over money, since I've always understood that the best investment of my limited time on earth was to spend it with people I love. I suppose it's possible I'll lie on my deathbed regretting that I didn't work harder and say everything I had to say, but I think what I'll really wish is that I could have one more beer with Chris, another long talk with Megan, one last good hard laugh with Boyd. Life is too short to be busy.

Degrees and Dollars

By Paul Krugman

It is a truth universally acknowledged that education is the key to economic success. Everyone knows that the jobs of the future will require ever higher levels of skill. That's why, in an appearance Friday with former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, President Obama declared that "If we want more good news on the jobs front then we've got to make more investments in education."

But what everyone knows is wrong.

The day after the Obama-Bush event, The Times published an article about the growing use of software to perform legal research. Computers, it turns out, can quickly analyze millions of documents, cheaply performing a task that used to require armies of lawyers and paralegals. In this case, then, technological progress is actually reducing the demand for highly educated workers.

And legal research isn't an isolated example. As the article points out, software has also been replacing engineers in such tasks as chip design. More broadly, the idea that modern technology eliminates only menial jobs, that well-educated workers are clear winners, may dominate popular discussion, but it's actually decades out of date.

The fact is that since 1990 or so the U.S. job market has been characterized not by a general rise in the demand for skill, but by "hollowing out": both high-wage and low-wage employment have grown rapidly, but medium-wage jobs — the kinds of jobs we count on to support a strong middle class — have lagged behind. And the hole in the middle has been getting wider: many of the high-wage occupations that grew rapidly in the 1990s have seen much slower growth recently, even as growth in low-wage employment has accelerated.

Why is this happening? The belief that education is becoming ever more important rests on the plausible-sounding notion that advances in technology increase job opportunities for those who work with information — loosely speaking, that computers help those who work with their minds, while hurting those who work with their hands.

Some years ago, however, the economists David Autor, Frank Levy and Richard Murnane argued that this was the wrong way to think about it. Computers, they pointed out, excel at routine tasks, "cognitive and manual tasks that can be accomplished by following explicit rules." Therefore, any routine task — a category that includes many white-collar, nonmanual jobs — is in the firing line. Conversely, jobs that can't be carried out by following explicit rules — a category that includes many kinds of manual labor, from truck drivers to janitors — will tend to grow even in the face of technological progress.

And here's the thing: Most of the manual labor still being done in our economy seems to be of the kind that's hard to automate. Notably, with production workers in manufacturing down to about 6 percent of U.S. employment, there aren't many assembly-line jobs left to lose. Meanwhile, quite a lot of white-collar work currently carried out by well-educated, relatively well-paid workers may soon be computerized. Roombas are cute, but robot janitors are a long way off; computerized legal research and computer-aided medical diagnosis are already here.

And then there's globalization. Once, only manufacturing workers needed to worry about competition from overseas, but the combination of computers and telecommunications has made it possible to provide many services at long range. And research by my Princeton colleagues Alan Blinder and Alan Krueger suggests that high-wage jobs performed by highly educated workers are, if anything, more "offshorable" than jobs done by low-paid, less-educated workers. If they're right, growing international trade in services will further hollow out the U.S. job market.

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Open Education for a Global Economy

By DAVID BORNSTEIN

If you or your kids have taken an online lesson at the Khan Academy (3,200 video lessons, 168 million views), been enlightened by a TED Talk (1,300 talks, 800 million views), watched a videotaped academic lecture (Academic Earth, Open Courseware Consortium, Open Culture), enrolled in a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course, now being offered by companies like Udacity and a growing list of universities, including M.I.T., Harvard and Stanford), or simply learned to play guitar, paint a landscape or make a soufflé via YouTube - then you know that the distribution channels of education have changed - and that the future of learning is *free* and *open*.

This is good news for everyone, but it is particularly good for the vast number of people around the world whose job prospects are constrained by their skill levels and who lack the resources to upgrade them through conventional training. It's a problem that a company based in Ireland called ALISON - Advanced Learning Interactive Systems Online - is helping to address with a creative model.

ALISON provides free online interactive education to help people acquire basic workplace skills. It's not a megasite. It has a million registered learners, the bulk of whom live in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Nigeria and the Middle East, where ALISON has 200,000 students. It is adding 50,000 learners each month, but the kinds of services it offers are likely to proliferate in the coming years.

To understand why, we only have to think back to last week, when the big news was the release of the June jobs report, which found that the unemployment rate had stalled disappointingly at 8.2 percent. As always, the story behind that number is more noteworthy than the political spin it gets. According to the Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for people in "management, business and financial operations" is nowhere near 8.2 percent; it's only 3.8 percent. For workers in "installation, maintenance and repair," it's 5.3 percent. It's workers in certain occupations - like "transportation and material moving" (10.3 percent unemployment) and "construction and extraction" (13 percent) - who are experiencing the most severe economic pain.

That's because the skills of many workers are increasingly out of sync with the demands of the job market, and the gap is likely to grow, particularly given that only a minority of companies provide formal training to employees. This isn't just an American problem, however. There are 200 million unemployed people around the world, 75 million of whom are youths, and many lack rudimentary workplace skills - the ability to use a computer, make a budget, communicate in an office environment. According to a study published last month by the McKinsey Global Institute, by 2020, the world will have a *surplus* of up to 95 million low-skill workers and a *shortage* of up to 40 million college graduates.

Free and open online education could help close this gap, but only if it's intentionally directed to the people around the world who most need it. Right now, a lot of free education is thrown online without a clear sense of how it will help people prepare themselves for employment. In May, Unesco, the branch of the United Nations that focuses on education, held an international gathering in China, where representatives concluded that the development of technical and vocational education and training - what one official called the "poor cousin of mainstream education" -- should be deemed a "top priority" to tackle global unemployment.

ALISON addresses this need. It offers some 400 vocational courses at "certificate level" (1 to 2 hours of study) or "diploma level" (about 9 to 11 hours of study) and plans to add 600 more in the coming year. Its most popular course, ABC IT, is a 15- to 20-hour training suite that covers similar ground to the widely recognized International Computer Driving License curriculum. (ALISON's certification is free; ICDL certification can cost over $500). Other popular offerings are project management, accounting, customer service, human resources, Microsoft Excel, health studies, basic study skills, operations management and psychology.

Last year, 50,000 users earned certificates or diplomas, which indicate that they completed courses and scored 80 percent or above on ALISON's online assessment. Employers can verify an applicant's knowledge with an online "flash test" of randomized questions (reminiscent of typing tests for stenographers). ALISON doesn't have the capacity to track its learners' career progress, but it has thousands of testimonials on its Web site. A typical example is one from Mariyam Thiseena, from the Maldives, who wrote: "I love ALISON because you give the feeling that even the poorest person deserves an education." (Thiseena wrote to me that she found ALISON through Google and is currently pursuing a diploma in environmental engineering.)

Another student, Zakiyu Iddris Tandunayir, from Accra, Ghana, completed a diploma in social media marketing. "I've been interested in social media for a long time," he told me by phone, "but when I discovered ALISON, I committed myself to it. I studied day in and day out. I passed my exam, then I set up a page on Facebook to do social media for businesses. I put my number in there and people started calling me." Tandunayir added that he has since received contracts worth $700. "For my eight years of Internet experience I have never felt the way I feel now," he commented.

ALISON is a for-profit social enterprise. "My vision is that all basic education and training is freely accessible online worldwide and accessible by everyone," explains the company founder Mike Feerick, who received an award last year from Unesco for innovation in online workplace education and has been recognized by Ashoka as a social entrepreneur. "Education underpins all social progress. If we can improve the general education level worldwide, global poverty can be dealt with profoundly and a general standard of living can be vastly improved."

Feerick says that the scope of the problem necessitates a business approach. There is not enough philanthropy, and perhaps not even enough government investment, to meet the world's workplace development needs. (Seven percent of the world's people currently have college degrees.) ALISON works to leverage and redirect the large supply of for-profit courses, searching for high-quality vocational offerings and inviting publishers to put some of their courses on ALISON, available free. For example, it carries hundreds of hours of English and French language instruction from the British Council and Alliance Francaise. (It never offers short "teaser" courses that link to paid sites, only modules at a minimum of a certificate level.) It hunts for courses that meet the specific needs of workers or employers in specific industries. For instance, it offers a 5 to 6 hour diploma in European Union public procurement, which sounds a bit dry - unless you're applying for a job in a company that hopes to win contracts from the E.U., in which case it is a standout credential.

Publishers agree to work with ALISON because the company generates business leads for them and shares its revenues, mostly from advertising, sales of certificates and token fees from learners. (A graduate can purchase a paper certificate for $30 or one on parchment for $120, and opt to pay for premium access that loads slightly more quickly and has no ads.) Given its model, the more ALISON grows, the more free courses it will be able to offer.

The decision to make everything on ALISON free remains the key factor that distinguishes the site from others of its type, and makes it globally valuable. (In addition to English, there are courses in French, Spanish, Farsi and Arabic, and the platform is going to be translated into Arabic, Mandarin, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese.) Unlike academic instruction, which is increasingly free online - you can take hundreds of lessons in algebra or calculus at the Khan Academy - quality workplace skills training is usually pricey. So is certification. Sites like Lynda.com, which offer training in software tools, require a paid subscription. Udemy, a relatively new education company with some excellent free courses, charges fees for many courses that offer workplace skills. If you're a would-be programmer from Egypt, there is a world of difference between a free course in Microsoft Access and one that costs $99.

Just as there is great variability in teacher quality, online education is a mixed bag. "There's an enormous amount of learning out there," notes Feerick. "There's also an enormous amount of rubbish. It's hard to make out the difference if you don't know what's coming. We turn down a huge number of courses that are low quality." What does ALISON look for? Feerick's staff members ask the following. "Is it good content? Is it interactive? Does it ask you to do something? Sometimes the content really lends itself to video - like language learning where you need pronunciation help. Does it flow logically? Is the content from a reliable source? Is there a way to assess the learning?"

In the United States, ALISON is now offered through government workplace centers in 18 states. When a job seeker goes to EmployFlorida or Virginia Workforce Connection, for example, he or she can work with a counselor to survey the job market and assess skill gaps. The client may then be referred to traditional brick and mortar training or ALISON courses. ALISON also supplies digital literacy training to public schools in the United States.

Jaime Maniatis, the technology instructor at the Daylight/Twilight Alternative High School, in Trenton, N.J., which serves students who have previously dropped out, has been using its ABC IT course for a number of years. "It's accessible from any computer in the building," she said. "You can listen to it or read it, so it's good for E.S.L. students. It's interactive and has quizzes that help the students stay focused. And with all the cuts in education, it gives me security because I know I'll always be able to use it - because it's free." She added that this year, she plans to spend $165 for a premium service that is ad-free and allows her to track students' progress in three classrooms.

As the cost of formal education has skyrocketed and the job market continues to change at a rapid clip, the responsibility for keeping their skills up-to-date will likely fall more and more on individuals. Many will turn to online learning - for convenience and affordability. There are, of course, drawbacks to this. But there are advantages too - including the ability to work at your own pace and gain exposure to a broad array of topics. (The long tail of the Internet means that online courses can be highly specialized and still cost-effective. A university may offer a general electrical engineering course, but an online site can offer a course in how to operate a Siemens generator.) Perhaps the biggest advantage of online learning will be that women can more easily bypass the sexism and discrimination associated with traditional vocational education.

At ALISON, all students receive a learning record, a kind of archive of their response to life's vicissitudes. Feerick notes: "The record says, 'I might be 58 years of age, but I'm still learning.'"