

## Busy Ireland

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**N**otwithstanding the Celtic Tiger, the *Rough Guide* has been consistent in its description of Ireland. The eighth edition of the popular guide, published in 2006, states:

It is the undoubted lure of the landscape, along with the easy pace and rhythms of life, which draw the majority of visitors to Ireland. Once there, few are disappointed: the green, rain-hazed loughs and wild, bluff coastlines, the inspired talent for conversation and the place of music and language at the heart of Irish culture all conspire to ensure that the reality lives up to expectations.

The travel guide refers to the 'easy pace and rhythms of life', but within Ireland an image of a slow-moving and traditional place has been superseded by one of a society that is fast-paced, dynamic and modern. This can particularly be seen in descriptions of the Irish economy that emphasise the speed of change. The new industries, particularly the information technology and pharmaceutical industries, are notable for the continual and rapid change of their products and markets.

This chapter looks at how the tempo and the timing of life in Ireland have changed. It asks: Are we as busy as we think we are? And if we are, what is to blame for this?

*Picturing time*

Time has an elusive quality. It is difficult to get a clear picture of the temporal culture of a society. Like the air that we breathe, time is so much part of the daily fabric of our lives that we only think about it when we feel we do not have enough time to do something we want to do. Rarely do we consider that there are different types of time in our lives: the time spent talking to friends is very different from that spent queuing in the bank; time daydreaming on a sunny beach is very different from that spent at work.

When we do consider how time is experienced in Ireland, our impressions can be distorted. It could be that we have an unrealistic vision of our past. As with the visiting tourist, perhaps it is our nostalgia that imagines Ireland as a place where we travelled at the speed of a donkey and whiled away the hours chatting by the fireside. In particular, our sense of past time may hark back to our memories of childhood. Rather than contrasting time now with time then, we are contrasting the times of our carefree childhood with the much fuller times of our adult life.

We often get our sense of how time has changed from discussions in the media. Yet these may be shaped by the experiences of the particular social groups that create them. Journalists whose working life is framed in accordance with very short deadlines may have a very particular experience of time, one that is not widely shared. The sociologist Jonathan Gershuny suggests it is the well-paid professionals who are now the cash rich/time poor in society,<sup>1</sup> but their experience is not necessarily that of society as a whole.

*Celtic time-squeeze?*

Even given these caveats, there is a sense that Irish society is suffering from time-squeeze; that we have less time at our

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gershuny, 'Are we running out of time?', *Futures*, vol. 24, 1992, pp. 3–22.

disposal than we used to or not enough time to do all the things we need to do. In an Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study, 57 per cent of working people reported feeling rushed or stressed on weekdays.<sup>2</sup> Ireland, it now seems, is a society in a rush.

The reason often cited for this is that the Celtic Tiger brought with it increasingly long working hours.<sup>3</sup> But this is not the case. We are not working longer hours. In 1983 men worked on average over 46 hours per week, while in 2007 they worked on average just under 41 hours.<sup>4</sup> In 1988 women worked on average over 37 hours per week, while in 2002 they worked on average 34 hours. Working hours in Ireland are shorter than in most other EU countries. In 2005 the average working week in Ireland was 38.5 hours. Only three countries – France, Finland and Belgium – had shorter working hours.<sup>5</sup> The decline in average working hours is in part due to the changing occupational structure, in particular the continuing decline in numbers employed in agriculture, where the longest hours are worked. The employment growth experienced during the Celtic Tiger era

<sup>2</sup> F. McGinnity and H. Russell, *Work Rich, Time Poor? Time-Use in Ireland*, Dublin: ESRI, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> For example, one freesheet headlined a report on work–life balance with ‘20% of employees work 50-hour week’, *Metro*, 29 February 2008, p. 2; the figures came from a study on stress commissioned by Vhi Healthcare, available at [www.vhi.ie/press/280208.jsp](http://www.vhi.ie/press/280208.jsp) (accessed March 2008). However, figures from the August 2007 Quarterly National Household Survey indicate that a much smaller proportion (11.7 per cent) report working more than forty-five hours per week, see table 5, available at [www.cso.ie/qnhs/main\\_result\\_qnhs.htm](http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/main_result_qnhs.htm) (accessed February 2008).

<sup>4</sup> 1983 figure from the 1983 Labour Force Survey, special extraction from CSO; 2007 figure from the Quarterly National Household Survey, *op. cit.* Both are based on the ISO definition of work, which includes all those who have worked at least one hour a week. See also J. Wickham, *Employment Options of the Future, National Report: Ireland*, Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Working Time Developments*, Dublin: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2006.

has mostly been in services, which now employs 69 per cent of the workforce. Many workers in this sector have shorter working weeks than the rest of the labour force.

Ireland is not alone in experiencing reductions in paid working hours. Even workers in the United States, the industrialised country with the longest working hours, have gained more than seven hours per week free time since 1965. Yet many commentators have also noted that US society seems to be increasingly busy, while survey results report its population seems to be increasingly harried. Why might this be so?

In order to find out why we feel busy we need to look for other explanations beyond time spent at work. Duration of the working day may have decreased, but there are definite indications that the pace of life has increased. We are living in a busier society, not because we are spending more time at our workplace, but because we expect to achieve more from our time, both in work and outside it.

### *Fast work*

This can be seen when we look at changes to the tempo of our working lives. By tempo I mean the speed and pacing of life, the intensity of time. As suggested, Ireland has traditionally been seen as a place of slow and natural rhythms. Indeed, Bord Fáilte for many years marketed Ireland by drawing on images that emphasised a slow-paced, agricultural way of life. Working hours in Ireland have decreased, in part due to the reduction in numbers working in agriculture, a sector in which very long hours are worked. Yet it is also a sector with a reputation for a slower, more task-based pace of work. Historian E. P. Thompson describes a rural economy as one where 'the work pattern was one of alternate bouts of intense labour and of idleness'. For those 'accustomed to labour timed by the clock', this attitude to labour 'appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Time and work discipline', in *Customs in Common*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, p. 358.

But more Irish people now live in the city. Robert Levine and his students timed the average walking speed of pedestrians in thirty-one cities around the world. They found that: 'people are prone to move faster in places with vital economies, a high degree of industrialisation, larger populations, cooler climates and a cultural orientation towards individualism'.<sup>7</sup> The Irish weather has always been cool, but could it be that the tempo of life has increased because we have in a relatively short period of time developed in precisely the way Levine describes? We have moved from the field to the office, the call centre and the shop floor. Each of these workplaces brings its own pressure to increase the speed of work.

Many sociological theorists have identified globalisation as a key force that influences our understanding of time. Decision-making takes place in shorter and shorter timescales. In the financial markets, stock rises and falls within minutes. In these globalised workplaces, turnover times are short and the pressure of the upcoming deadline is never far away. Company teams can often be spread across continents yet meet daily through teleconferencing. In the workplace, management by team or by direct customer relations intensifies the work experience, compressing the non-work times within work.<sup>8</sup>

Many jobs now require us to multitask. Computers are designed to allow one to work on many different tasks at once. In many public service occupations there has been an increase in the administration that accompanies the work. The number of tasks to be accomplished in the time available is increased. All this decreases the 'porosity' of the working day. By this I mean that in the normal working day the times of work are peppered with times of non-work.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Levine, 'A geography of busyness', *Social Research*, vol. 72, 2005, pp. 355–370, p. 357.

<sup>8</sup> A. O'Carroll, 'The long and the short of it: Working time in the Irish IT sector', in G. Boucher and G. Collins (eds.), *The New World of Work: Labour Markets in Contemporary Ireland*, Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2005.

Multitasking compresses holes; instead of taking a break from work, we switch from doing one task to another. Thus the tempo of the working day increases.

It is difficult to measure work intensity directly but a survey of workplace attitudes conducted by the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCP) and the ESRI found that over half of those surveyed experienced some kind of work pressure:

- 82 per cent agree that their job requires them to work very hard
- 51 per cent agree that they work under a great deal of pressure
- 38 per cent agree that they never have enough time to get everything done in their job
- 47 per cent agree that they often have to work extra time over and above their formal hours to get through the job or help out.<sup>9</sup>

These results suggest that tempo is increasing in the workplace. Earlier we saw that working hours have decreased over time; but given the increased pace of work in the workplace, perhaps we need to ask whether they have decreased enough. Arguments on working time often draw on comparisons with the past ('we are working more than we did') or with other countries ('we are working more than they do in Sweden') to support the idea of working time reduction. Perhaps it is time to consider instead what sort of society we aspire to live in, and from this position decide whether the hours we are working bring us closer to or farther from the Ireland we desire.

So far we have been concerned with changes associated with the way we work. The Celtic Tiger has brought with it other changes, in particular changes in where and how we

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<sup>9</sup> P. O'Connell, H. Russell, J. Williams and S. Blackwell, *The Changing Workplace: A Survey of Employees' Views and Experiences*, Dublin: NCPP, 2006, p. 8.

live, that also affect the tempo of our lives. We may not be working longer hours, but this does not mean we have more time for leisure. In the next section I will look at three ways in which our time outside the workplace is spent less on leisure and more on other work.

### *Fast lives*

One of the key changes to employment in Ireland has been the feminisation of the labour force. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has highlighted that one of the most notable increases in employment participation has been among mothers of children aged 5 to 14 years (from 47 per cent in 1998 to 56 per cent in 2001).<sup>10</sup> So, although working time in general is in decline, the increase in women working has led to time scarcity among a certain group in Irish society: families with young children. Dual-earner couples have the highest joint weekday workloads. When asked, 62 per cent of dual-earner couples reported feeling rushed or stressed during the weekdays.<sup>11</sup> The highest levels of rush/stress were found among those with a youngest child under the age of 10 years (67 per cent). With more women entering the workplace, the work of caring for our children or looking after ageing parents now has to be squeezed into the time left over from paid employment. Figures from Australia and the UK suggest similar experiences in those countries; women are busier now than they have been in the past because more of them are combining work outside the home with work inside the home.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Central Statistics Office, *Quarterly National Household Survey: Households and Family Units*, Q4 117–Q3 2001, Dublin: CSO, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> McGinnity and Russell, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> J. Gershuny, 'Busyness as the badge of honor for the new superordinate working class', *Social Research*, vol. 72, 2005, pp. 287–314; M. Bittman, 'Parenting and employment: What time-use surveys show', in N. Folbre and M. Bittman (eds.), *Family Time: The Social Organisation of Care*, London: Routledge, 2004.

More of us live further away from our place at work. One-third of Ireland's workforce is located in the greater Dublin area. Increased affluence brought with it increased house prices, which contributed to the widening of the commuter belt to a reported 110-kilometre radius around Dublin.<sup>13</sup> This, in conjunction with poor public transport, has led to an increase in the numbers driving to work (46 per cent of the population in 1996; 55 per cent in 2002). There has been a decline in the percentage of people using public transport, cycling or car sharing. The distances travelled to work have also increased: urban workers travelled on average 6.4 km to work in 1981; by 2002 this had almost doubled to 12.5 km. The increase was even greater for rural workers: 7.2 km in 1981 to 21.4 km in 2002.

The average Irish commuting time of 26 minutes is low by European standards,<sup>14</sup> though if figures are disaggregated, we can see that more drivers in Ireland than in other EU countries are commuting for between 60 and 120 minutes a day. For drivers in Dublin and its commuter belt, just under one-quarter (23 per cent) are commuting more than 90 minutes a day. Nevertheless, most people (42 per cent in Dublin, 52 per cent in the commuter belt) commute less than 60 minutes a day. This figure perhaps accounts for the surprisingly high levels of satisfaction (77 per cent in Dublin, 89 per cent elsewhere) with commuting time reported in an NCPP survey.<sup>15</sup> We can see that while it may not be an experience shared by everyone, there has been an increase in commuting time for some and this can lead to a sense of time scarcity.

In addition, we are not just spending more time driving to work. Another change throughout the Celtic Tiger years is a substantial decrease in the numbers of primary school

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<sup>13</sup> E. Morgan, 'Commuter belt reaches the Shannon', *The Irish Times*, 9 February 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Central Statistics Office, *Census 2002. Volume 9: Travel to Work, School and College*, Dublin: CSO, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> O'Connell *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.



children walking to school (47 per cent in 1981 to 26 per cent in 2002). This has been matched by an increase in numbers being driven to school (one-fifth of children in 1981 to one-half in 2002).<sup>16</sup> We spend more time in our cars; getting ourselves to and from work and our children to and from school.

There are indications that we are doing more 'work' in our non-working hours. It is difficult to find Irish information on changes in how we spend non-working hours. For the UK, Gershuny reports that while people in general have more leisure time, their perception is that they have less.<sup>17</sup> He looked at the different types of unpaid work that people do, focusing on four main areas: shopping and associated travel; odd jobs (gardening, pet care); childcare; and routine or core domestic work (cooking, cleaning, clothes care). He found that there was an increase in men's involvement in routine jobs and that for both men and women there was a marked increase in all the other non-routine elements of unpaid work. He links the growth in time spent in these activities to the increased use of the car. The leisure activities that we are involved in are further away from home, so more time is spent ferrying children about, and there is increased use of shopping malls, which also require us to travel further. There is also an increase in what Gershuny terms 'self-servicing': odd jobs, gardening and DIY home improvement. There are indications that there has been a similar increase in Ireland. Sales in hardware, paint and glass increased by 22 per cent between 2000 and 2007.<sup>18</sup> There was also an increase in time spent on childcare by men, and most particularly by women; this perhaps reflects changing expectations of the parenting role.

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<sup>16</sup> CSO, 2002, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> J. Gershuny, *Changing Times. Work and Leisure in Post-Industrial Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Central Statistics Office, *Retail Sales Index: May 2007*, Dublin: CSO, 2007.

Some suggest that busyness results from the exhausting attempt to construct meaningful identities in a world of endless identity choice; some feel that it may emanate from a psychological need to be active and engaged and an aversion to stillness; others argue that the appearance of busyness is a way of making a social statement about one's importance.<sup>19</sup> There is little research as to whether or which of these factors might apply in the Irish context.

### *Complex timetables*

We work faster in work, we try and squeeze more things into non-work time, but these are not the only changes that lead to a sense of busyness. Timing refers to the synchronisation and placing of time. The sense that there is a standard timetable shared by most of society no longer holds. Although absolute working hours have been decreasing, this is not the only change that has occurred with respect to working time in Ireland. We also have seen an increased variation in the types of hours worked.

One aspect of this variability is the increased use of shift-work. Just over 10 per cent of people normally work shifts, with another 5 per cent occasionally engaging in shift-work.<sup>20</sup>

Another aspect of this variability can be seen in how working hours are organised. Although most men and women work the same number of hours each day, the time people leave home for work is quite varied. In Dublin, there is a fairly even spread among the numbers of men leaving for work between 7.30 a.m. and 9.00 a.m.<sup>21</sup> A similar spread can be seen for women workers, though they tend on

<sup>19</sup> Levine, *op. cit.*; L. Greenfeld, 'When the sky is the limit: Busyness in contemporary American Society', *Social Research*, vol. 72, 2005, pp. 315–338.

<sup>20</sup> Central Statistics Office, *Quarterly National Household Survey: Work Organisation and Working Time, Quarter 2, 2004*, Dublin: CSO, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> CSO, 2002, *op. cit.*

average to leave later, with the largest proportion leaving between 8.30 a.m. and 9.00 a.m. It is likely that women are leaving later because they are dropping children off at school on their way to work. Assuming that people also return home within a two-hour range, this indicates that communities' and indeed households' working times are to a certain degree out of sync. This means that arranging group activities, whether that be the family meal, an evening sporting event, voluntary activity or a political meeting, now requires much more thought and organisation as we try to co-ordinate our complex schedules. The problem with this is, as William Scheuerman argues, 'at worst, busyness generates political disinterest and apathy ... At best, it seems to privilege an acceleration of political activity: we seek speedy and rapidly consummated types of involvement that do not unduly add to the enormous time pressures we already feel'.<sup>22</sup>

As in our working life, these changes in our non-working life suggest that the pace of time is increasing. The combination of paid labour and all the necessary unpaid 'work' of life, increased expectations of our leisure time and our efforts to co-ordinate our complicated schedules with those of others leads to a sense that we are trying to fit more things into shorter chunks of time. The result of all this is the feeling that we do not have enough time.

Why then do Irish people feel so busy? Long working hours can cause us to feel rushed as we try to cram all our domestic work and leisure activities into shorter time periods. But working hours are shorter in Ireland than they have been in the past, and than they are in most EU countries. We feel busy because the pace of our life has increased. We expect to fit more activity into the time periods available. For some, this is because there actually is less time available, as commuting time expands or as caring responsibilities have to share time with paid employment.

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<sup>22</sup> W. E. Scheuerman, 'Busyness and citizenship', *Social Research*, vol. 72, 2005, pp. 447–469, p. 447.

In the absence of supportive government policy on transport and childcare, it is difficult to alter this reality.

There is another dimension to the busyness of Irish society. We need to ask ourselves, why do we want more time? When we remember fondly the long, lazy days of childhood, what is it about that type of time that we miss? We live in a society that idealises speed. Do we want more time to do more things, faster? If that is the case, busyness will always be a complaint, and slow rhythms and lazy days will permanently be consigned to the past.