

## Labor Day

Your great-grandfather knew what it meant to work hard. He hauled hay all day long, making sure that the cows got fed. In [Fast Food Nation](#), Eric Schlosser writes about a worker who ruptured his vertebrae, wrecked his hands, burned his lungs, and was eventually hit by a train as part of his 15-year career at a slaughterhouse. Now that's hard work.

The meaning of hard work in a manual economy is clear. Without the leverage of machines and organizations, working hard meant producing more. Producing more, of course, was the best way to feed your family.

Those days are long gone. Most of us don't use our bodies as a replacement for a machine -- unless we're paying for the privilege and getting a workout at the gym. These days, 35% of the American workforce sits at a desk. Yes, we sit there a lot of hours, but the only heavy lifting that we're likely to do is restricted to putting a new water bottle on the cooler. So do you still think that you work hard?

You could argue, "Hey, I work weekends and pull all-nighters. I start early and stay late. I'm always on, always connected with a BlackBerry. The FedEx guy knows which hotel to visit when I'm on vacation." Sorry. Even if you're a workaholic, you're not working very hard at all.

Sure, you're working long, but "long" and "hard" are now two different things. In the old days, we could measure how much grain someone harvested or how many pieces of steel he made. Hard work meant more work. But the past doesn't lead to the future. The future is not about time at all. The future is about work that's really and truly hard, not time-consuming. It's about the kind of work that requires us to push ourselves, not just punch the clock. Hard work is where our job security, our financial profit, and our future joy lie.

It's hard work to make difficult emotional decisions, such as quitting a job and setting out on your own. It's hard work to invent a new system, service, or process that's remarkable. It's hard work to tell your boss that he's being intellectually and emotionally lazy. It's easier to stand by and watch the company fade into oblivion. It's hard work to tell senior management to abandon something that it has been doing for a long time in favor of a new and apparently risky alternative. It's hard work to make good decisions with less than all of the data.

Today, working hard is about taking apparent risk. Not a crazy risk like betting the entire company on an untested product. No, an apparent risk: something that the competition (and your coworkers) believe is unsafe but that you realize is far more conservative than sticking with the status quo.

Richard Branson doesn't work more hours than you do. Neither does Steve Ballmer or Carly Fiorina. Robyn Waters, the woman who revolutionized what Target sells -- and helped the company trounce Kmart -- probably worked fewer hours than you do in an average week.

None of the people who are racking up amazing success stories and creating cool stuff are doing it just by working more hours than you are. And I hate to say it, but they're not smarter than you either. They're succeeding by doing hard work.

As the economy plods along, many of us are choosing to take the easy way out. We're going to work for the Man, letting him do the hard work while we work the long hours. We're going back to the future, to a definition of work that embraces the grindstone.

Some people (a precious few, so far) are realizing that this temporary recession is the best opportunity that they've ever had. They're working harder than ever -- mentally -- and taking all sorts of emotional and personal risks that are bound to pay off.

Hard work is about risk. It begins when you deal with the things that you'd rather not deal with: fear of failure, fear of standing out, fear of rejection. Hard work is about training yourself to leap over this barrier, tunnel under that barrier, drive through the other barrier. And, after you've done that, to do it again the next day.

The big insight: The riskier your (smart) coworker's hard work appears to be, the safer it really is. It's the people having difficult conversations, inventing remarkable products, and pushing the envelope (and, perhaps, still going home at 5 PM) who are building a recession-proof future for themselves.

So tomorrow, when you go to work, really sweat. Your time is worth the effort.