

What work-life balance looks like in other countries, according to a global report ^[1]

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Source: Bustle

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Jan 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

How good are you at juggling work commitments with the rest of your life — seeing friends, going to the gym, doing laundry, taking chill-out time for yourself? We might think of the struggle of work-life balance as a uniquely American thing, what with our go-go-go work culture and constant connectivity. However, it turns out that the ratio of work to other activities isn't just personal; it's cultural. Different countries have different ideas of what work-life balance and a 'healthy' working week looks like. There's actually a metric for this called the Better Life Index, which compares the work-life balances of many countries around the globe.

The OECD, which puts together the Better Life Index, states that a lot of factors go into calculating the work-life balances of the world's nations, particularly the availability of flexible work. Its ranking for work-life balance uses three primary sets of statistics: the percentage of hours worked per week, the amount of working moms, and the amount of time that people spend on "personal care," like leisure activities, hygiene, and sitting around watching Netflix. Work-life balances are formed by laws and structures in society, available employment, gender roles, economic health and a host of other things. So how does the U.S. compare to other countries worldwide? Here are ten countries with vastly different ideas about work-life balance than the U.S.

The Netherlands

According to the OECD, the Netherlands had the best work-life balance in 2018, with Denmark, last year's winner, losing out narrowly. In every area, the Dutch came out on top.

One of the big factors for the Dutch, says the OECD, is hours worked. "In the Netherlands, less than 0.5 percent of employees work very long hours, the lowest rate in the OECD where the average is one percent," they write. About one percent of men work very long hours, compared with almost no women." They define "long hours" as over 50 hours per week.

In the U.S., by comparison, the OECD says that 11 percent of employees put in long slogs, including 16 percent of men and 7 percent of women. The Netherlands has strict working week laws to prevent people working over 60 hours. Dutch culture doesn't put as much emphasis on working till you're exhausted, writes Business Culture, and encourages leaving leisure time. "They have clearly defined working hours and they respect them," Business Culture writes.

Australia

The OECD reports that "when asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10, Australians gave it a 7.3 grade on average, higher than the OECD average of 6.5." In the U.S., the grade is 6.9. Comparatively, though, Australia isn't actually that good at work-life balance.

"Full-time workers devote 60 percent of their day on average, or 14.4 hours, to personal care (eating, sleeping, etc.) and leisure (socialising [sic] with friends and family, hobbies, games, computer and television use, etc.) — less than the OECD average of 15 hours," says the OECD. It's only just behind the U.S. in work-life rankings, ranking 32nd to the U.S.'s 31st. Less time for leisure and fun means a less balanced, more stressed country.

Brazil

In Brazil, work-life balance goes in a different direction: while only 7 percent of workers work long hours, the average income is significantly lower than the OECD average, and 64 percent of people have a paid job, compared to 69 percent in the U.S. The Brazilian economy is recovering from a slump, which is why working hours are currently a bit lower than other countries.

Canada

Canadians do a lot better than the U.S. or Australia on the OECD index, but they still lag behind large numbers of European countries, particularly Scandinavian ones where there are many social safety nets and supports for working parents. 70 percent of women are employed, says the OECD, and only 1 percent work long hours, compared to 6 percent of working men. Flexible working arrangements are

becoming more popular in Canada, with job-sharing and flexible hours on the rise, which particularly helps working parents achieve better balance.

Japan

Japan is renowned for its intense cultural work ethic, so it's not surprising that it scores pretty low on work-life balance measures. Workers in Japan score their satisfaction with life as a 5.9 out of 10, which is below the OECD average. The OECD estimates that more than 13 percent of the workforce works "very long hours." The Wall Street Journal reported in 2018 that 99 hours of overtime per month wasn't uncommon among Japanese salaried workers, though legislation was introduced to help shorten working hours. Long hours take away from family time and leisure and heighten stress and stress-related health issues. Hours away from home also seem to contribute to falling fertility rates, according to Business Insider, though culturally there's a big emphasis on the multigenerational family unit in Japanese society, which can help with issues related to childcare.

Chile

Chile is relatively low-ranked in the table, but still comes out above the U.S. The OECD says that only 10 percent of employees work over 50 hours a week, less than the U.S., but the factor that really drives its work-life balance is childcare. "Between 2014 and 2018 the government will build more than 3,000 new childcare centres [sic] and will continue expanding existing establishments. Chile's plans to create new spaces for day care and middle level nursery schools over the next four years would bring Chile to the OECD average," explains the OECD. More subsidized or free nurseries means more women are able to balance their work lives with their family obligations. By comparison, annual childcare costs in some U.S. states exceed \$20,000 a year, according to CNBC.

France

The French work hard, but the OECD thinks that gender inequality in the workplace is holding it back. While 78 percent of women work full-time, they say, "access to the labour [sic] market of mothers of young or large families could be improved but would likely require a more equal share of caring activities between parents." In other words, women could be having a better work-life balance in France if their partners stepped up their childcare and were given longer paternity leave, and other support structures from their employers. That's also a factor that affects U.S. families, where paid paternal and maternal leave aren't mandated by national law.

Korea

Korea doesn't do very well on work-life balance because of very high working hours; the OECD estimates that over 13 percent of employees work more than 50 hours a week. However, the government is attempting to make work-life balance among its citizens better through making parenting easier. The OECD reports that government-funded childcare now cares for 92 percent of Korean kids aged between 3 and 5 years old, and the government has also introduced extensive maternity leave, paternity leave and general parental leave to help parents cope after childbirth.

South Africa

South Africa continues to battle high unemployment levels that impact its workers' sense of work-life balance. Only 43 percent of the population has a full-time job, according to the OECD, and 19 percent of employed people work long hours, with 23 percent of men and 14 percent of women putting in serious time on the clock.

A poll in 2018 found that a third of South African employees said their employers "didn't value" work-life balance, compared to 43 percent of Swedish workers who said their balance was "very valued" at work. South Africa only ranks slightly below the U.S. on the OECD's rankings, despite the U.S.'s much higher employment levels, which is a sign of how many different factors can impact work-life balance.

Mexico

Mexico has the worst work-life balance of all countries measured by the OECD, and the Index highlights multiple reasons for that. 30 percent of workers work over 50 hours a week, which is a large increase on the average (and far beyond the amount worked in the U.S.) However, there are other factors involved, some of them serious. "Apart from Israel and Turkey, Mexico has the highest child poverty rate in the OECD. Almost one in four Mexican children lived in poor households in 2011," the OECD says. Efforts have been made to raise household income and encourage more women to work, but there's little maternal leave, and the equality gap is tremendous, both at home and at work.

"At home, Mexican women spend 4 hours more per day on unpaid care and housework than men. Mexicans also work longer annual hours than workers in all other OECD countries, and have one of the longest average daily commute times in the OECD, after Japan and Korea," adds the OECD. All told, that adds up to a lot of time working and commuting, not much support for flexible work for parents, and an imbalanced work culture.

The U.S. isn't a stellar place for keeping a good ratio of work to the rest of your life, and other examples worldwide show various ways in which it could be better — or worse. If you're feeling overwhelmed and worried about the way your job is encroaching on the rest of your waking day, don't worry — it's definitely not just you.

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