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Balancing Leisure and Work: Evidence from the Seasonal Home

BALANCING LEISURE AND WORK: EVIDENCE FROM THE SEASONAL HOME

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Abstract

Seasonal homes are used during leisure time for many recreational activities, yet recent technological innovations have diminished the separation between the work place and the seasonal home. In a survey of Walworth County seasonal home owners, most who work full time report they seldom work during vacations and weekends from their seasonal home. Yet there is a distinct subgroup who do mix work into weekends and vacations for a variety of reasons. The most frequent reasons given by these people for working from the seasonal home were related to the expectations of co-workers and clients. Understanding more about the habits and motivations of those who frequently work during weekends and on vacations could provide a new perspective on the obstacles everyone faces in balancing work and leisure.

1.0 Introduction

Balancing work and leisure is often a challenge because it involves many people and complex circumstances that change over time. Failure to achieve the right balance can carry serious consequences including diminished career opportunities, family problems, and stress-related mental and physical ailments. The difficulty of balancing leisure and work make it a source of frequent concern for some, and a focus of thought, planning, inventiveness, and effort for many others.

The relationship between work and leisure changes as society changes. Women's participation in the labor force, the growing variety of work arrangements (e.g., flexible scheduling, job sharing), technological advances in communications (including voicemail, e-mail, cell phones, and other wireless technologies), increased time

spent commuting, and the growing diversity of family configurations all affect what people can do, and what they need to do, to balance work and leisure.

Seasonal homes are one component of a strategy for achieving the work-leisure balance. They are used as family retreats, places separate from everyday life, and in particular, places separate from work. They are special places where people escape from work, retire from their job, or retreat for solitude and contemplation. Weekend, summer, and holiday use – that is, time periods traditionally devoted to non-work activities – dominate patterns of seasonal home use. Summer holiday and weekend occupancy rates at seasonal homes in Michigan are estimated to range from 50 to 80 percent (Stynes et al. 1997). Seasonal home buyers reported the three most important reasons for purchasing their homes were to get away and relax, to be with friends and family, and to recreate outdoors (Stynes et al. 1997). Seasonal home concentrations in areas with extensive outdoor recreation opportunities (Beale and Johnson 1998) and the wide assortment of recreational equipment kept at second homes (Stynes et al. 1997) further underscore the link between second homes and resource-based recreation. However, recent technological developments that facilitate contact with the workplace raise new questions about how completely seasonal home owners are able to or willing to retreat from work activities. This paper explores the relationship between work-related activities and attitudes and seasonal homes using a survey of seasonal home owners in an urban-proximate, resource rich county in southern Wisconsin.

1.1 Previous Research

The balance between work and leisure is often an implicit theme in leisure research, but is seldom directly studied. Kelly and Kelly (1994) set out to determine whether work, leisure, and family are domains that people clearly distinguish in meaning and function. Based on surveys and interviews, they conclude that the meanings people associate with these three domains overlap, particularly across family and leisure domains.

Time use studies take a different approach, questioning people about how they allocate their time to a wide range of activities, then assigning activities to categories such as paid work, unpaid work, or leisure (Gershuny 2000); or productive, maintenance, expressive, or travel time (Robinson and Godbey 1997). The information obtained in time-use diaries is used to construct a portrait of how time is spent and to explore the social implications of these time allocations. Success or failure in balancing work, leisure, and family is a prominent theme emerging from time use studies (Robinson and Godbey 1997; c.f., Hochschild 1989). Time use studies have also identified covariates, including age, sex, race, marital status and whether there are children living at home. Some of the disputes over interpretation of time use data concerns the origin and true extent of differences between these covariate groups, particularly between men and women, and the amount of time each group devotes to housework and childcare.

Another perspective on the work-leisure balance comes from occupational behavior research. Concerns about work-related stress and job satisfaction have focused attention on coping strategies (Latack and Havlovic 1992), work/family role conflicts (Kopelman et al. 1983), and work-related attitudes such as job involvement and work centrality (Paullay et al. 1994). In examining work/family role conflicts, the concept of the permeability of work and family domains is important (Eagle et al. 1997). Permeability is the extent to which time during the work day is used for personal or family duties; and conversely, the extent to which family time is used for work duties. It is useful for describing the effectiveness of divisions between leisure and work time. Like Kelly and Kelly's work (1994), it suggests that clean distinctions between work and leisure are illusive. Work from home is classified as telecommuting, where work at home replaces work at the office; or supplemental work-at-home (SWAH), which augments time in the office (Duxbury et al. 1996). Second home owners who work from their second home are more likely to be engaged in SWAH, because telecommuting involves maintaining a regular schedule of work from one place; though data are not available to determine the specific types of work being conducted from seasonal homes.

1.2 Study Area

Walworth County is located in southeastern Wisconsin just beyond the fringe of the Milwaukee and Chicago metropolitan areas (the cities are 40 and 72 miles from Walworth County's center, respectively). More than 10 million urban residents live within a 2-hour drive of the county. It is an attractive resource-based recreation area with a long history as a seasonal homes area, one now experiencing growth and change and the challenges to resource management that often accompany rural growth. Some 25 percent of local property tax bills are sent to addresses in Illinois (Betts 1997). Managers, planners and extension agents in the county are working to better understand all the factors that drive growth in the area, including the demand for seasonal homes near the cities, and the gradual conversion of seasonal homes to permanent residences.

2.0 Methods

Data on work activities from the seasonal home come from a mailed, self-administered survey with a probability sampling strategy designed to maximize the number of seasonal homeowners and amenity migrants without specifically identifying them (e.g., through property tax records, c.f. Stynes and Stewart 1994b). The primary recreational areas in Walworth County surround 12 lakes. With the exception of Lake Geneva, each of these have special lake management districts that are taxing bodies responsible for preserving and maintaining the lakes. The districts include both lakefront properties and other properties in very close proximity to the lake (e.g., across the road from the lake).

The sample was selected from the residential tax records for the lake management districts. The selection process for Lake Geneva was more complex because it lacked a lake management district. The initial sample pool for Lake Geneva included properties that were residential with a fair market value of at least \$150,000, a value set in consultation with the county assessor to include all properties near the lake. Combining the lake management districts and the properties in the Lake Geneva area resulted in an initial pool of 14,686 properties. A random sample of 1,440 was selected from these, and the initial sample was screened to ensure the property was not a vacant lot, and was in close proximity

to one of the lakes. This screening process resulted in 984 cases. Questionnaires with cover letters were mailed to each of the 984 households. Two follow-up mailings were sent to those who did not respond. A total of 519 surveys were returned resulting in an adjusted response rate of 54 percent. A comparison of the value of the property and the improvements (homes and related buildings) by those who responded to the survey and those who did not shows no significant difference between the two groups. Thus, there is good reason to believe that the sample is broadly representative of residents of lake areas in the county. The analysis here is limited to seasonal home owners who currently work full time (n=180).

2.1 Survey Development

Original measures of work-related behavior and attitudes about working from a second home were developed for this survey. Following a comprehensive review of literature on current patterns and types of work from home, coping with work stress, and role conflicts between work and family, a survey was drafted to elicit information about technology used to work from home, the frequency of engaging in work-related tasks from Walworth County, and attitudes toward working from the Walworth County home. Informal discussions with peers, friends and family about their work habits during non-work time or from a second home helped us to reduce the number and scope of questions. The questions were pre-test using a cover letter and brief survey given to a purposive sample of 35 people. The pre-test sample represented people from a wide range of occupations, male and female, of different ages and family situations. Discussions with many pre-test participants indicated some initial skepticism because they “never work from home.” However, once they read the questions everyone we surveyed realized they did at least a modest amount of work from home during weekends and vacations. Based on the pre-test results and reliability analysis several questions were revised or dropped.

In addition to the work-related items, the Walworth County survey asked basic demographic questions and the location of the primary residence. Selected items from prior surveys of seasonal home owners (Stewart and Stynes 1994a, Stynes et al. 1997, Williams and Van Patten 1997) were also included. Because occupation is

so important to the opportunities and pressures affecting work from home, we used an open-ended question adopted from Salant, Carley and Dillman (1996) that asks the respondent to describe exactly what kind of work they do in their main job. Responses to the question were then coded using the Standard Occupational Classification system (U.S. Department of Labor 2004).

3.0 Results

Our analysis focuses on determining whether and how much seasonal home owners worked from their second home, what role technology played in facilitating that work, and on their attitudes about working from home. Gender, income, marital status, children at home, and occupation were considered as potential covariates or independent variables.

The sample of 138 seasonal home owners who work full time was mostly male (78%) and married or partnered (87%). One-third had children under 18 living at home. Most lived in households with significant income; only 30 percent had household incomes below \$100,000 in 1999. Seventy-three percent rated recreation a very important factor in their decision to purchase their seasonal home. Proximity to Chicago was a very important factor for 75 percent of them in the purchase decision, and for 80 percent, the drive to reach their seasonal home typically took less than 2 hours.

Only two respondents reported having all the work-related technological devices and services we asked about (telephone, cell phone, pager, fax, voicemail or answering machine, Internet access, computer, and e-mail), and six did not own any of them. As a group they averaged 3.4 devices, usually including telephone, voicemail, and cell phone. Only 33 percent had computers, and 25 percent had e-mail (the reader should recall that the data were collected in 2000).

Our sample of full-time workers mirrors the larger Walworth County study which shows a broad mix of occupations, including white and blue collar work (Table 1). It is interesting to note that permanent and seasonal residents, working or retired, are more alike in their occupations than any of the Walworth County groups is to workers nationwide. A higher percentage of

Table 1.—Occupations of Walworth County residents by retirement and seasonal status

2000 Standard Occupation Classification Groups	Walworth County, WI				Nationwide ¹
	Working Full Time		Retired		
	Seasonal	Permanent	Seasonal	Permanent	
Management occupations	24%	4%	8%	20%	
Business & financial operations	17%	18%	4%	15%	
Computer & mathematical	3%	8%	6%	0%	
Architecture, engineering	3%	1%	4%	2%	
Life, physical, social sciences	1%	4%	4%	0%	
Community & social services	2%	4%	4%	0%	
Legal	6%	1%	0%	5%	
Education, training & library	3%	6%	17%	8%	
Arts, design, entertain., sports & media	1%	4%	2%	0%	
Healthcare practitioners & technicians	9%	7%	8%	8%	
All Management and Professional Services	68%	55%	56%	59%	34%
Healthcare support	1%	1%	2%	1%	
Protective services	6%	1%	2%	6%	
Food preparation & serving	1%	6%	2%	0%	
Personal care, service	1%	5%	2%	1%	
All Service Occupations	8%	13%	8%	8%	15%
Sales	13%	9%	15%	5%	
Office & administrative support	1%	5%	6%	14%	
All Sales and office occupations	14%	14%	21%	19%	27%
Construction, extraction	5%	12%	8%	4%	
Installation repair & maintenance	3%	6%	0%	5%	
All Construction, extraction, and maintenance	8%	18%	8%	8%	9%
Production	3%	8%	4%	4%	
Transportation & material moving	2%	4%	4%	2%	
All Production, transport., & material moving	4%	12%	8%	6%	15%

¹Source: Occupations 2000, Census 2000 Brief, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/ioindex/reports.html>

those living in Walworth County are in management and professional services occupations, and a lower percentage are in production and transportation, and service occupations.

Respondents were asked how often they engaged in several work-related behaviors. The five-point response scale ranged from never to very often. The average across

items and respondents is 2.0, or “seldom.” Participation in leisure activities was assessed by asking respondents how many of the listed recreational activities they had engaged at the Walworth County home over the past 12 months. The average number of activities checked was 7.2, with individual responses ranging from 0 to 15 activities. Overall, most of our respondents use their seasonal home for recreation, not work. However, there

Table 2.—Attitudes toward working from the seasonal home by frequency of work

	All Workers	Less Frequent Workers	More Frequent Workers ¹	F-test ²	Sig.
Statements about reasons for working from the seasonal home	n=138	n=98	n=40		
My clients, co-workers or employees have to be able to reach me quickly.	3.14	2.88	3.79	15.62	0.00
I enjoy my job and choose to work whenever I can.	3.07	2.96	3.33	3.49	0.06
My co-workers or employees seek out my advice and guidance even when I'm not working.	2.98	2.65	3.79	28.03	0.00
I monitor workplace activity to avoid surprises upon my return.	2.97	2.66	3.74	23.14	0.00
I work extra hours to catch up.	2.79	2.64	3.15	5.35	0.02
My employees/manager expect me to check in when I'm away.	2.69	2.47	3.23	10.40	0.00
I can spend more time away from my workplace if I work during time off.	2.64	2.39	3.28	18.46	0.00
I cannot keep up with my job without working extra hours.	2.64	2.45	3.10	7.79	0.01
I can be required to report to my workplace on short notice.	2.45	2.39	2.59	0.67	0.41
I have to monitor workplace politics when I'm away.	2.42	2.12	3.18	20.80	0.00
I work during my time off to get ahead.	2.40	2.20	2.90	11.21	0.00
I recruit new customers or clients in every setting, at every opportunity.	2.29	1.96	3.13	31.05	0.00
I am preoccupied with my job.	2.29	2.11	2.74	10.06	0.00

Note. Statements were rated on a 5-point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

¹More frequent workers are those whose average response to questions of work frequency were in the top quartile.

²The F-test measures the equality of more and less frequent workers' mean ratings.

were people who reported working more frequently. The 40 "frequent workers" whose average response on frequency of work items was in the top quartile at 2.5 or higher (where 2 is seldom and 3 is sometimes) were very likely to be in the highest income category (81% versus 68% of less frequent workers), male (85% vs. 76%), and in management, business or finance occupations (55% vs. 35%). They also visited Walworth County more during the course of the year (90 vs. 81 visits) and spent more money on the Walworth County home (about \$20,000 vs. \$15,000). They engaged in more recreational activities (8.2 vs. 7.2, $F=3.34$, $p=.07$), and

reported owning more home technology items (5.1 vs. 3.0, $F=43.8$, $p=.000$).

The most consistent and interesting differences between frequent workers and the rest of the sample were responses to statements about why work from the second home was necessary, advisable, or desirable. Thirteen items were listed and respondents were asked to mark how strongly they agreed or disagreed, using a five-point scale. The items and mean responses for frequent and less frequent workers and for the whole sample are shown in Table 2. Frequent workers consistently express more

agreement with these statements, and give their highest ratings to a different set of statements than those who did not frequently work from home. For frequent workers, the most compelling reasons to work from the seasonal home related to doing what others wanted them to do. This may reflect genuine social interdependency in the workplace, or it could be the least guilt-inducing answer regarding behavior the respondent senses is not socially ideal (i.e., working while on vacation). It could also be a reflection of how co-workers actually behave. We can only speculate about why these frequent workers agreed most strongly with those items that are most socially oriented, in a list that otherwise emphasizes very personal reasons for needing and choosing to work.

4.0 Conclusions

Seasonal homes are settings for leisure where the classic issues and conflicts over how time is spent are played out. Seasonal or second homes research has emerged as an important area of study because tourism and recreation are both involved; seasonal home use is a window into both leisure activities. This study demonstrates that the realms of work and leisure overlap in the seasonal home setting. Previous research documented the relationship between retirement and seasonal homes (Stewart 1994), and this study adds active work life as a potential component of seasonal home use. To the extent that the ability to work from a seasonal home facilitates early or partial retirement, or long-distance commuting, these findings also have implications for amenity migration and the community growth and land use pressures it entails.

While time use studies have been a major focus of interest and disagreement among leisure scholars, occupational behavior research is equally useful for understanding how work relates to leisure. The skills and strategies people develop to cope with work-related stresses and demands is particularly relevant to the study of the leisure repertoire and leisure over the lifespan. The measures of attitudes toward work are meant to capture coping strategies, and the differences we found between those who do and do not frequently mix work into weekends and vacations suggest that motivations for work during leisure time deserve closer examination. Stress is endemic in many workplaces,

which can make working during unobligated time ultimately more relaxing, or at least a better mitigation for stress, than recreation. Understanding more about the habits and motivations of those who frequently work during weekends and on vacations could provide a new perspective on the obstacles everyone faces in balancing work and leisure.

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