Time Spent: The Forty-Hour Workweek

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INTRODUCTION

Time is money, or so goes the cliché. We can spend our time, invest our time, and even donate our time. These monetary terms may serve as reminders that time is a limited resource—none of us is allotted more than 24 hours in a day—which may inspire us to use our time wisely. Or it may cause us to avoid needed rest and relaxation, believing that, unless we are working toward profit, time is wasted.

For voice teachers, lines between time spent working and time spent in leisure are sometimes blurred. Activities that are recreational for most of the population can be occupational for us. Am I listening to music for pure enjoyment, or because I am exploring potential repertoire options for my students? Am I attending a show simply to enjoy an evening out, or in order to assess the performance of a client who is in the cast? Am I choosing books for entertainment and escape, or is my reading time consumed by pedagogic materials?

Certainly, these do not need to be either/or situations. We can enjoy listening to music while still being mindful of how the songs we hear may fit the voices of our students, for instance. But listening with these considerations at the forefront of our minds can make it difficult to know when, as voice teachers, we are officially "off the clock."

One aspect of our time that we can clearly measure, however, is how many hours each week we dedicate to teaching. Knowing how much energy and focus is required for intentional, engaged, individualized instruction, is there a recommended limit for how many hours we can spend teaching before effectiveness or passion for the work begins to wane?

Our culture has an established precedent of a 40-hour workweek. Does that model apply to studio teaching? If so, how many of those working hours can be spent in face to face studio teaching and how many should be reserved for all of the other work required to run a voice studio (bookkeeping, practicing, studio building, etc.)?

This column is the first of a series that will consider "time spent" in the independent teaching studio. To begin, I will explore the origin of the 40-hour workweek, how it currently functions in our society, and how applicable it may be to studio teaching. I will also present data on how the number of hours worked each week can impact worker effectiveness, and how many weekly hours teachers in particular tend to dedicate to their profession. Throughout this series, I will examine how traditional approaches to the workweek may or may not be the most useful ways for teachers to spend their time.

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"HOW AM I EVER GOING TO DO THAT?"

Kari Ragan's November 2020 NATS Chat featured an interview with author and voice teacher Claudia Friedlander titled, "Academic or Entrepreneur? How to Steer Your Teaching Career."[1] One of the first questions an audience member presented to Friedlander was, "How many hours a week do you teach one on one?" In her response, Friedlander recalls interactions with her own voice teacher, W. Stephen Smith, Professor of Voice and Opera at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music and author of *The Naked Voice: A Wholistic Approach to Singing*. "Steve is a machine," she says. "He parks himself on his piano bench at 10:00 in the morning [and] doesn't get up again till 6:00 in the evening, most days." Although, she adds, "I understand he gets a lunch break now, sometimes."[2]

She expresses how continually astounded she is at how he can work a 40-hour week "the way that you would at another job," seemingly without succumbing to fatigue or any lack of focus. "He was always energetic," she says. "If he was ever tired, if he was ever like, 'Oh, God, I can't do another hour of this,' I never saw it, because he loves it so much." She realized, however, that she could not replicate that pace herself, as she wondered aloud, "How am I ever going to do that? I'm supposed to be able to do that?"[3]

Friedlander took some solace when she discovered the parameters of what constitutes a full time teaching load for voice faculty at many colleges and universities. As defined by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), the upper limit for a full load for private studio instruction is approximately 18 clock hours per week.[4] This limit is imposed due to the understanding that "All faculty should have sufficient time for artistic, scholarly, and professional activity in order to maintain excellence and growth in their respective areas of expertise."[5] It also accounts for administrative or consultative duties, stating that faculty who have significant amounts of this type of work should have their teaching loads appropriately reduced.

These numbers helped Friedlander understand that the example set by Smith, though impressive, may not be what is expected or even necessary for every studio teacher. Instead, she encourages teachers to experiment to find the right number of teaching hours for themselves. "For someone like Steve, teaching 40 hours a week might be really fantastic and energizing," she says. "For me, it's exhausting. Especially the way that I want to teach now, which is that I'm going to see you for that hour, but I'm going to give you some homework, and I'm going to be checking in with you over the course of the week to find out how you're doing . . . that would just not be conceivable to do [with] 40 hours of teaching a week."[6]

So what is Friedlander's preferred number of weekly teaching hours? "It has varied, as things have evolved—between 15 hours a week and 24 hours a week, depending on what's going on," she says. "Ideally, the right number of hours for me to be teaching every week is probably somewhere between 15 and 18."[7]

For another perspective, NATS Chat moderator Ragan admits to following a schedule closer to Smith's than to Friedlander's. In her book, *A Systematic Approach to Voice: The Art of Studio Application*, Ragan reveals that she averages 36 contact hours per week of studio instruction. The hours, however, are divided among a university studio, an independent studio, and working in affiliation with a medical voice team to rehabilitate singers with injuries and pathologies.[8] For Ragan, this variety may indeed be the "spice of life" that allows her to teach such a demanding schedule. Regardless, if Smith, Ragan, and Friedlander are indicative of the profession as a whole, there is clearly no one-size-fits-all model for voice teachers.

THE 40-HOUR WORKWEEK

Even if the idea of 40 hours of teaching each week seems exhausting, history proves that it represents a significant victory for American workers. Organized discussions about instituting a daily cap at eight hours of work began as early as the 1860s, eventually prompting the U.S. government in the 1890s to begin tracking workers' hours. The government then discovered that, devoid of any regulation, the average workweek for full time manufacturing employees reached as high as 100 hours. In 1926, Ford Motor Company adopted a five-day, 40-hour workweek, but it was not until 1938 that Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which limited the workweek to 44 hours. In June of 1940, Congress amended the act, limiting the workweek to 40 hours.[9]

Considering that these limits were set for workers in the manufacturing industry, there is an increasing call for a different set of parameters that are more applicable to today's workforce. CEO Steve Glaveski recognized that the nature of work in the twenty-first century has shifted from algorithmic tasks (where a worker follows a set of instructions to reach an expected end, as occurs in much of manufacturing work) to heuristic tasks that require critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.[10] Therefore, he conducted a two-week experiment with his own Australia-based company, instituting a six-hour workday to see how productivity might be impacted when employees were given 10 fewer working hours each week. To his delight, his team maintained, and in some cases increased, both quantity and quality of work, while also reporting an improved mental state. He believes that the shorter workday forced the team to prioritize their efforts, limit interruptions, and operate at a much more deliberate level, especially for the first few hours of the day. The added employee benefit is that each person had more time for rest and other endeavors.[11]

Even amid successful experiments such as this, tradition reigns supreme in many workplaces. As author Oliver Burkeman posits, the five-day workweek/two-day weekend is not as "natural" as we have come to believe. "The seven-day week itself is a human creation: unlike the year, month, or day, it has no close connection to nature," he says.[12] He further notes historical examples of experiments outside of the traditional workweek. "Revolutionary France had a 10-day week, and the Soviet Union tried a five-day 'continuous workweek,' with staggered days off, so production lines never needed to pause."[13] He believes that measuring work in hours, which is a legacy of the Industrial Revolution, may have outlived its usefulness and makes little sense for "knowledge work," other than the fact that it is easy to quantify.[14]

Psychologist Adam Grant agrees. In his book *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, he suggests that heads of companies should be willing to institute innovative approaches and outside-the-box workday structures. Otherwise, these companies will simply default to traditional models. "Like most humans," he says, "leaders are remarkably good at anchoring on the past even when it's irrelevant to the present."[15]

Freelance writer Lizzie Wade argues that, for some jobs, it is actually impossible to work productively for 40 hours each week.[16] As she writes in *Wired*, workers may log 40 hours, but she questions how much creativity is really occurring within that time frame. "I'm positive that if you tracked knowledge worker's time in an office the same way as I track mine—i.e., when they are actually at their computer doing something—you wouldn't come up with 40 hours for hardly anybody," she says. "Forty hours of availability, sure. Forty hours of office presence, probably. Forty hours of thinking about work—at least, and likely more. But the amount of time you're actually doing something, writing something, creating something? You can't do that work for eight hours a day without breaking down."[17]

As Friedlander implies above, voice teachers may have similar natural limits of productivity, even if those limits may vary from person to person. What happens, then, if we regularly reach or exceed our personal productivity limits?

A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

A 2009 research study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* examined the association between long working hours and cognitive function in a population of middle-aged, British civil servants.[18] Researchers found that working more than 55 hours per week, compared with working up to 40 hours per week, was associated with lower scores—at both baseline and follow-up—on a vocabulary test given to participants in the study. Long working hours also predicted a decline in performance on a reasoning test.

A 2014 Stanford University study of munitions workers similarly found that per-hour productivity declined sharply after working more than 50 hours a week.[19] After 55 hours, productivity dropped so much that "putting in any more hours would be pointless." Further, those who worked up to 70 hours a week were getting the same amount of work done as those who worked 55 hours.

Regarding how many weekly hours teachers generally work, a 2012 study from Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that American public school teachers work an average of 53 hours per week (10 hours and 40 minutes per day).[20] These numbers, from a survey of 20,000 teachers, represent 7.5 daily hours

in the classroom, 90 additional minutes beyond the school day for mentoring, providing after-school help, and attending staff meetings, and another 95 minutes at home grading, preparing classroom activities, and doing other job-related tasks. The workday is even longer for teachers who advise extracurricular clubs and coach sports—11 hours and 20 minutes, on average.

These numbers are not unique to teachers in the United States, or even in North America. A 2019 survey of more than 4,000 teachers in England found the average workweek to be 47 hours.[21] However, a quarter of the teachers surveyed reported working more than 60 hours per week, and one in 10 were working more than 65 hours per week.

Of course, it may not be apples to apples when comparing all of these studies. Certainly, munitions workers and teachers engage in significantly different work activities. And data collected from classroom teachers may not exactly reflect what is logged by studio voice teachers. But, as we saw from the earlier examples, voice teachers can also approach or exceed 40 hours per week, just like classroom teachers do (especially when considering all work-related activities). It is also clear that there is a point of diminishing returns for all workers, where cognitive function and productivity begin to decline. Therefore, it stands to reason that when we begin to reach our personal productivity limits, our voice students are no longer receiving us at our best. And our students may not be the only ones suffering.

RAMIFICATIONS OF OVERWORKING

Although hard work is often seen as a virtue, and practically all success requires some degree of discipline, sacrifice, and tenacity, working too much comes with consequences, as well. A recently released World Health Organization (WHO) study identifies "overwork" as the single most significant risk factor for occupational disease.[22] The WHO reports that those working more than 55 hours a week have a 35% higher risk of stroke and a 17% higher risk of heart disease compared to those who work 35 to 40 hours. The study also reveals that overwork has considerable negative effects on other aspects of our health and behavior, including poor sleep, inadequate exercise, unhealthy diet, and excessive drinking.

In addition, working too much can mean that our time spent can leave us *feeling* spent. In 2019, the WHO added "burn-out" to the eleventh revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), identifying it as an "occupational phenomenon."[23] The definition reads, "Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy."[24]

Friedlander is all too familiar with the term, since voice lessons are only one of the professional demands on her time. She is the author of two books and also maintains a website of online content and resources for clients and subscribers. She experienced firsthand how difficult it can be to give your full self to multiple demanding projects while trying to maintain the mental energy needed to be an effective teacher. "You can't teach your full time load and then try to squeeze in writing books and creating content on the side," she says.[25] "I kind of learned that the hard way, because when I took on these book projects, I wished that I had been more intentional about it and said, 'Okay, here's how I'm going to modify my teaching schedule. These are now the hours that I'm just going to spend writing.' It kind of evolved haphazardly, so I was just exhausted and burned out after a while . . . In retrospect, I wish I had been more intentional about it."[26]

WHY DO WE DO IT?

When we consider how overwork can make us less impactful as teachers, how it can hinder our ability to do effective work outside of the studio, and how it can make us prone to negative health consequences, why do so many of us work such long hours? There are several possible reasons. As stated above, time is money. When independent teaching studios are set up on the traditional hourly fee model, teachers are only paid for face to face time with students. Therefore, more hours in the studio means more income. To help voice teachers combat this "pricing pitfall," entrepreneur Michelle Markwart Deveaux offers alternate pricing models to the "hourly rate" in a 2019 *Journal of Singing* article.[27]

There is also a cultural expectation that working long hours is simply part of what it means to be a teacher. In reaction to one of the aforementioned studies, Chief Academic Officer of Scholastic Francie Alexander commented that the daunting number of hours teachers worked is an indication of their dedication to the profession and their willingness to go above and beyond to meet students' needs. "Teaching isn't a bell-to-bell job," she says. "As the study shows, teachers are deeply engaged in their work beyond the walls of the school . . . Their students are front of mind throughout their increasingly long work days."[28] As much as her statements ring true, they also reflect a potentially dangerous mindset that could create an expectation that, unless teachers are working to the point of burn-out or exhaustion, they are not sufficiently dedicated to the profession or to their students.

Another reason teachers are prone to working too much may be what author Bryan Lufkin describes as the "cult of overwork." He believes that millions of us view working long hours as a status symbol. He admits that some of us seek additional hours in order to pay off debt or to work our way up the employment ladder. "But for those who embrace the overwork culture," he says, "there's also a performative element, whether that manifests as a new car to show off, a 'dream career' doing something meaningful or even exhaustion that can be displayed like a bizarre kind of trophy."[29]

Certain icons in the business world may be contributing to this cultural phenomenon, as well. New York University professor Anat Lechner believes that, although many elements of burn-out culture originated in Wall Street, that culture has now spilled over into the tech world. "We put tech entrepreneurs who barely sleep on a pedestal," she says, while noting that Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk tweeted in 2018, "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week."[30]

One other entrapment is the sense of identity that can come with a career in the performing arts. There is still a pervasive "starving artist" mindset in the industry, implying that those of us pursuing careers in this field are simply destined to be overworked and underpaid. *Journal of Singing* associate editor Lynn Maxfield writes, "As artists or artist-adjacent workers, we may be lulled into a false sense of safety by the notion that we get to do what we love, so we should be content to be defined by that career. Furthermore, we likely have been told along the way that our success in the industry required singular focus on the profession. We have been conditioned for potential enmeshment with our careers."[31] If that identity embraces starving artist status, voice teachers may expect that overly long hours are assumed to be a necessary part of the profession. Maxfield points out that we may unknowingly be conditioning our students to think in the same way.

CONCLUSION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies allowed employees to work from home in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus. What surprised many CEOs was that this shift did not generally result in a drop in productivity. In fact, in one survey of 800 employers, 94% said that productivity was the same or higher than it was before the pandemic, even with their employees working remotely.[32] As a result, there is a newfound willingness in the corporate world to rethink many aspects of what were previously assumed to be best practices when it comes to how business is done.

We may similarly consider revisiting and adjusting the concept of the 40-hour workweek. Teaching voice requires creativity, ingenuity, and, yes, some long hours. But it also requires rest, time dedicated to skill building, and self-care. Finding a work model more applicable to the independent studio may help ensure that we can keep our bodies healthy, our minds sharp, and our students progressing.

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