Time Scarcity and Its Implications for Leisure Behavior and Leisure Delivery

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ABSTRACT: Time scarcity is one of the great problems facing Americans in the last 30 years. Time scarcity stems from the segmentation of work and leisure, our ability to consume many consumer goods, an information explosion, a quest for efficiency, and the inability of free time to keep pace with increasing demands. When confronted with time scarcity, people seek to maximize their leisure time by engaging in goods-intensive behavior, pursuing activities simultaneously or more quickly, using time more precisely, and becoming more self-directed in behavior. Leisure service agencies must respond to people’s need to save time. Some general methods for doing this include providing people opportunities to make reservations, insuring convenience in program offerings, providing more opportunities for short, self-directed leisure experiences, providing complete information about time requirements, and improving the overall quality of life in communities.

KEYWORDS: Time scarcity, leisure behavior, leisure delivery

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One of the great problems facing Americans in the last 30 years is time scarcity—the feeling that one lacks enough time to do all the things that one would like to do. Time scarcity does not receive the level of attention of other critical issues facing leisure service agencies, such as deteriorating infrastructure, massive public debt, and growing cultural diversity (Mobley & Tolson, 1992; Whyte, 1992). This is unfortunate because time scarcity has a significant impact on leisure behavior. The purpose of this paper is to define the problem of time scarcity and explain its significance for leisure behavior and delivery of leisure services.

The Roots of Time Scarcity

Time is an integral part of life. Hall (1983) noted that time exists as part of a society’s primary level culture, meaning that it is taken for granted and resistant to change. It also means that time underlies everything that people do. Time is reflected in a society’s institutions and how people think, feel, and act (Maines, 1987).
Clock time is the method by which most Americans measure time; Anglo-Americans particularly (Hall, 1983) have taken this standard of time and superimposed it on virtually every conceivable activity. We subject all that we do to precise measurement. When we talk about work time, leisure time, idle time, travel time, break time, start-up time, time to make a change, we are talking about activities that have a precise time referent associated with them, and we measure time as we would any other commodity. As noted by Smith (1961), “time can be spent, lost, saved, wasted, thrown away, or employed to best advantage” (p. 85).

Allocating time to activities in which we feel some compulsion (internal or external) to participate has become a highly challenging endeavor. An endless number of activities, products, and experiences compete for our time. This situation is fueled by (1) the segmentation of work and leisure; (2) a relatively high standard of living that allows us to purchase an inordinate number of consumer goods and experiences; (3) electronic media that provide us ever-increasing information about different products and lifestyles; (4) an increasing need to be more efficient in all that we do; and (5) the fact that free time has not kept pace with these increasing demands.

The Segmentation of Work and Leisure

Americans take for granted that work and leisure activities are different. We generally expect different outcomes from the two, and the two typically occur in different places and with different people. While many people enjoy and derive positive experiences from their work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), only a fraction of the population considers work a central life interest (Kelly, 1978). Also, many people would prefer working less, even if this meant a reduction in income (Robinson, 1991, November). Most of us implicitly believe that the “good life” occurs apart from work — that is, with family and/or within the context of leisure activities.

By segmenting work from leisure, we create artificial boundaries around the different spheres of our lives. This no doubt causes us to place greater demand on leisure time and activities for experiencing various benefits and outcomes (e.g., self-actualization, feeling of accomplishment, enjoyment, sociability). This tendency is increased by the fact that the weekend has become the chief occasion for many leisure pursuits (Rybczynski, 1991). In effect, we have come to believe that the experience of leisure is limited to specific activities, times, and spaces. This absence of fluidity between work and leisure necessarily creates in us a sense of urgency because we know that leisure time is limited.

Standard of Living

According to Schor (1991), technological advances have made it possible for most people to work far less than survival would dictate. Schor and others (e.g., Linder, 1971) have argued that the reason we continue to work longer hours than necessary is that we have become victims of our own material appetites. Statistics reported by Schor indicate that 100% of American households have electric refrigeration, 88% have motor vehicles, 75% have washing machines,
97% have kitchen ranges, 64% have air conditioners, 43% have dishwashers, 61% have microwave ovens, 93% have color televisions, and 80% have VCRs. Also, according to Schor, "Americans are buying many more services—like foreign travel, restaurant meals, medical attention, hair and skin care, and products of leisure industries such as health clubs and tennis lessons" (p. 112).

The American economy is grounded in what Schor (1991) describes as an "insidious cycle of work-and-spend." Few Americans regard the goods and services they currently have as sufficient. Most of us put into action the doctrine that more is better than less, bigger is better than smaller, and new is better than old. Accordingly, one reason we continue to work as hard as we do is because we need the money to buy newer, and seemingly better, goods. This creates a strain on time, because the more goods that we purchase, the more demand we put on free time to consume them (Linder, 1970). Given the abundance of material goods with which we surround ourselves, it is highly unlikely that we can ever devote sufficient time to them all. This contributes in no small part to a feeling of time scarcity.

Information Explosion

Technological innovations and the proliferation of electronic media have resulted in increased societal complexity. Godbey (1975) observed that people are "being forced to absorb more and more information at an increasingly accelerated rate" (p. 48). While this information explosion has probably made us more sensitive to the needs and plights of others, it has exacted a cost. Being a well-informed citizen today requires the investment of ever-increasing amounts of time and energy.

The media also bombard us with information about new products, new styles, and new ways of doing everything. Most of us are confronted with an avalanche of options for how we should spend both our time and money. In this culture where the norm is increasingly to "do it all," we find ourselves driven to become physically fitter, better read, more travelled, better dressed; better parents, better tennis players, better homeowners, better lovers, and so on. Given the finite amount of time on our hands, an "option overload" contributes to a feeling of time scarcity. Like being a good citizen, being a "good" consumer takes time.

The Quest for Efficiency

To be efficient means to minimize the amount of time it takes to complete a task and increase the yield on time (Rifkin, 1987). Today, efficiency has to be considered one of the most important values held by Americans. Rifkin argues that efficiency has become an all-pervasive social norm for how we use time: "It is the primary way we organize our time and has burrowed its way into our economic life, our social and cultural life, and even our personal and religious life" (p. 127). At the heart of this, according to Rifkin, is our increasing dependence on computers. Computers have extraordinary power to process data quickly, in a matter of seconds performing a task that would take a person hours to complete. While computers may have freed us from many mundane jobs, they
have contributed to a speed-up of time by creating accelerated time standards. We have come to expect speedy results in all that we do, including microwave cooking, postal services, mail orders, fax machines, airline travel, film developing, exercise, and even relationships. When confronted with long lines or delays, we often become anxious and feel time slipping away.

A Stable Work Week

Using time diary methods, Robinson (1989, July) reported that adults averaged about 40 hours of free time per week in 1985. This amounts to only a slight gain for men (2 hours) and women (1 hour) since 1975. The situation for those holding full-time jobs may be even more bleak. Using labor force statistics collected between 1969 and 1987, Schor (1991) shows that men who are employed full time worked an additional 98 hours per year, or two and a half extra weeks (p. 29). Among women employed full time the rise was even more dramatic, 305 additional hours per year. Schor attributes these increases to a longer work week, a shrinkage in paid time off, and an increase in commuting time. These data lead Schor to conclude that Americans today are working harder than they did two decades ago.

Many of us dream of a life of leisure, a life without the constant pressure of work and obligations. This dream remains elusive. The average work week has changed only slightly in recent years, and in the case of those employed full time, it appears to have actually expanded. In effect, free time has not kept pace with its own increasing demands.

Evidence for Time Scarcity

Given the segmentation of work and leisure, the multitude of options facing Americans, the amount of information they need to assimilate, the drive for increased efficiency, and the fixed amount of discretionary time, it is no surprise that time is perceived as a scarce resource. Most of us feel that we simply lack the time to do all that we would like to do.

Evidence for this assertion is widespread. Across an array of studies, time constraints are generally the most frequently mentioned reasons for ceasing participation in a leisure activity (Jackson & Dunn, 1991), not participating in leisure activities (McGuire, Dottavio, & O'Leary, 1986; Mannell & Zuzanek, 1991), and not using park and recreation services (Godbey, 1985; Howard & Crompton, 1984; Godbey, Graefe, & James, 1992; Scott, 1992). For example, in a recent study of people living in northeast Ohio, Scott (1992) found that over 70% of those who do not regularly use public parks said that lack of time and being busy with other activities were limiting factors. Time scarcity was particularly acute among younger cohorts: 85% of those between the ages of 40 and 49 years said that lack of time and being busy with other activities limited their use of public parks.

Stress is another indicator of widespread time scarcity. Robinson (1990, February) reported that the percentage of Americans who said they "always" feel rushed to do the things they have to do increased between 1975 to 1985. More
recently, Robinson (1991, November) reported that nearly one-third of Americans agreed with the statement, “I feel that I’m constantly under stress—trying to accomplish more than I can handle.” Over 40% agreed with the statement, “I often feel under stress when I don’t have enough time.” Thirty-three percent agreed with the statement, “At the end of the day, I often feel that I haven’t accomplished what I set out to do.” Robinson’s data revealed that time scarcity was most acute among females, men and women between the ages of 30 to 49 years, and men and women who are employed outside the home.

Another indicator of growing time scarcity is that more people are engaging in time-saving behaviors. According to a recent Roper poll (Staff, 1991), the percentage of Americans who ate at fast-food restaurants increased between 1986 and 1991. The same period also witnessed a growing number of Americans who said they paid someone else to clean, postponed house cleaning, brought home take-out food, shopped at convenience stores, ate frozen-prepared foods, and shopped by phone, mail, or computer. Also, automated teller machines increased tenfold during the 1980s (Melia, 1992). According to Melia, they have become particularly popular among younger generations of Americans, who “are more interested in completing a transaction rapidly than they are in receiving personal attention from a teller” (p. 6).

Growing time scarcity is probably reflected in declining interest in some leisure activities. Support for this proposition is provided by Scott (1991) in a study of contract bridge players. Scott reported that the bridge-playing population in the United States has decreased by as much as 75% since the 1950s. This decline is largely because people born during and after the baby boom either did not learn or did not take up the game. Scott explains that the game is unpopular among younger generations of Americans because it is perceived as taking too long to learn, it does not give instant gratification, and it is not goods-intensive.

Implications for Leisure Behavior

Time scarcity results in people making adjustments in how they use leisure time. In a general sense, people seek to maximize the yield on time (Linder, 1970). Hence, just as we have become more efficient and productive at work, we have also become more efficient and productive at leisure. This model of behavior is consistent with the exchange theory of leisure constraints outlined by Searle (1991). Searle observed that people cease participating in leisure activities and programs if expected rewards or benefits are not fulfilled. In economic terms, this means that inputs are weighted against outputs; the activities and services that are most desirable are those that are perceived to have the biggest payoff and to be the most efficient in terms of time usage. Outlined below are five ways people seek to maximize yield on free time.

Engaging in Goods-Intensive Behavior

When faced with long hours of work, people “reward” themselves by buying consumer goods (Linder, 1970). Using these goods during free time is one way to increase the yield on free time. In effect, goods-intensive leisure behavior is
a way of compensating for the extra time given up to work. Goods-intensive behavior generally takes one of two forms. First, we substitute new, more expensive products for older, less expensive ones (Linder, 1970). A golfer, for instance, may replace an old set of golf clubs with a more expensive set, regardless of whether the clubs contribute significantly to skill development. Second, consumer goods become an integral component of how we spend our leisure time. Video recorders are a case in point: For many, they are used to document a visit to the local zoo, a vacation, a birthday party, and even the birth of a child. While the goods we buy and use during leisure may partly reflect status needs or may improve the quality of the experience, they are primarily a symbol of free time lost to work.

**Engaging in Activities Simultaneously**

Pursuing activities simultaneously is another way to maximize the yield on free time (Linder, 1970). Jogging and walking are made more “productive” by listening to music. While riding an exercise bike we can read the paper or watch television. Linder observed that activities and goods that lend themselves to simultaneous consumption are likely to be more valued than those that do not. Robinson (1990, September) reported that, on average, Americans spend more time watching television (40% of free time) than any other leisure activity. This probably stems from the fact that television, which requires a relatively low attention level, allows us to do many other things at the same time: eat dessert, drink coffee, smoke, do crossword puzzles, and spend “quality time” with our families.

**Pursuing Activities More Quickly**

Increasing the yield on time may mean undertaking activities more quickly (Linder, 1970; Goodale & Godbey, 1988). Visiting a zoo, going to a park, or visiting family or friends may have been all-day affairs at one time; today such activities are pursued in a shorter time span. With the help of videocassette recorders we can watch taped television shows in a fraction of the time by simply “zapping” through the commercials. Even music is consumed more quickly with the purchase of a compact disc player. Listening to a selection of songs or pieces of music via a record player or cassette tape player requires frequent record and tape changes and fast forwarding of tapes. Compact disc players, in contrast, may be preprogrammed, allowing the listener to hear the same selections without interruptions.

Increasing the pace of activity may also be accomplished by cutting down on the time necessary to learn the activity. For example, board games like Trivial Pursuit® and Pictionary® have become hugely successful because they are fun and require only a few minutes to learn. This point of view is underscored in the following anecdote: “For sure, any board game in which the rules take longer than two to three minutes to explain or takes hours to play or requires a player’s undivided attention is unlikely to find an audience nowadays” (Williams, 1989, October 18, p. C1).
**Using Time More Precisely**

Using time more precisely is another way to maximize the yield on time (Goodale & Godbey, 1988). Activities are increasingly planned according to precise agendas and carried out within the context of strictly defined time limits. For many, exercising means riding a stationary bicycle for exactly 30 minutes at a specific time of day. Similarly, many joggers and walkers have standardized routes so they know exactly how long it will take them to complete a workout. Many Americans have taken advantage of advance ticket sales or reservation systems so as not to waste time waiting in line to see an exhibit, a ball game, or a movie, or traveling long distances only to find out that a campground is full.

**Becoming More Self-Directed in Behavior**

Finally, people may become more self-directed during their leisure time. This means that people will choose services in which they feel that their time schedules are not subordinated to the schedules of others. The growth in popularity of videocassette recorders, for example, is probably linked to people’s desire to control how they view movies, such as rewinding parts of a film that are missed or pausing the movie if one wishes to take a break (Wachter, 1992). Along these lines, William Penn Mott, Jr. (1992) explained that Yosemite National Park visitors prefer interpretive trails and exhibits over ranger-led programs because “in the ranger-led activities, the ranger controls the visitor’s time” while in the other activities “the visitors control their time” (p. 8).

**Implications for Leisure Service Delivery**

Leisure service agencies have much to lose if they fail to respond—and much to gain should they choose to respond—to people’s need to save time. The following statement by Berry (1990) concerning businesses can be readily applied to leisure service agencies: “In the 1990s, a store that wastes people’s time will be committing competitive suicide” (p. 31). In confronting the issue of time scarcity, leisure service agencies must build into their operations—via programming, planning, and marketing—a number of strategies that are designed to convince people that agency offerings are a wise use of their time. Some strategies for accomplishing this are already common practice in many agencies. Others are not or are perhaps used only sparingly. In this last section, a number of strategies are identified that may help leisure service agencies deal with the issue of time scarcity.

**Opportunities to Make Reservations**

Many, if not most, agencies already provide opportunities to make reservations for facilities and/or programs. The obvious merit of this strategy is that it allows patrons to use time more precisely. For example, most, if not all, private and public golf courses provide people the ability to reserve tee times; racquet clubs do the same for racquetball courts, squash courts, and tennis courts; national and many state parks have adopted reservation systems for camp sites;
and a number of municipal park and recreation agencies have done likewise for picnic facilities. While reservation systems may be standard features of many leisure service organizations, their actual usage tends to be limited to specific programs and services. In dealing with the issue of time scarcity, consideration should be made to adapting reservation systems to other programs and services. Under some circumstances, it may be appropriate to charge customers a fee for the right to make reservations; such fees, however, are frequently preferred over the cost of spending time waiting in lines.

Convenience in Program Offerings

Leisure service agencies must strive to insure convenience in program offerings. All agencies probably try to schedule programs or services at times that are convenient for the clients, but this effort alone may not be sufficient. In programming for adults, for example, there may be a need to provide some form of child care. A spinoff of this idea is to provide dual programming for children and adults. Too often leisure service agencies provide programs for one or the other, thus increasing the time it takes to coordinate schedules. By providing dual programming, both child and adult can simultaneously take advantage of agency offerings. Another example is the packaging of services in such a way that instruction, transportation, equipment, food, and housing are all covered. This strategy provides a full, rich experience and decreases the time people spend in preparing to participate in the activity.

Shorter and More Self-Directed Opportunities

A less frequently used strategy is to provide opportunities for shorter, more self-directed leisure experiences. Some ski areas, amusement parks, and golf courses do this now by providing half-day tickets or nine-hole rounds of golf at an adjusted rate. These strategies are popular for people who may feel that an all-day outing is an inefficient use of their time. Park planners may accommodate shorter visits by evaluating their existing trail systems. Linear trails, for example, may seem inefficient to those pressed for time; a simple solution is to provide loop trails that are perhaps shorter in length. Also, self-paced interpretive trails or displays may be preferred over ranger-led programs because visitors need not subdivide their time schedules to the schedules of others.

Provide Complete Information About Time Requirements

Another strategy is to provide complete information concerning time requirements in promotional literature. Many trail maps, for example, now include trail length in distance and approximate time. The logic of this strategy is obvious: hikers are provided the opportunity to select among trails that fit their time schedules. [Many people probably do the same when renting a video: by checking the box for the running time of the film, they make a judgment whether they have the time to watch it.] In advertising programs, exact information should be included about when programs begin and when they end.
Improving the Overall Quality of Life

Finally, leisure service organizations should strive to improve the general quality of life in their respective communities, and break down the boundaries between work and leisure. Also, we need to continue to press for more greenways, vest-pocket parks, and beautification projects. By making such benefits as enjoyment, feeling of accomplishment, and sociability accessible to clients in many of their life activities, we will help decrease the demand people place on those activities, times, and places generally associated with leisure. This may actually reduce the sense of urgency that plague so many people.

Summary

Time scarcity is a way of life among Americans and has a direct impact on leisure behavior. Many leisure service organizations have been slower in responding to time scarcity than issues such as deteriorating infrastructure and growing cultural diversity. While these problems are quite visible and thus command our immediate attention, time scarcity is also real and appears to be increasing in its impact. While the importance of other critical issues should not be minimized, leisure service organizations must confront the issue of time scarcity head on. If we fail to respond, clients and would-be clients will increasingly retreat into their homes (which they are already doing) and absorb themselves with videos and other home-based forms of leisure. In sum, we need to be committed to helping people save time. In the words of futurist J.P. Tindell (1991), “If time efficiencies are not there, quality had better make up for the extra time spent” (p. 5).

References


