



A New Year's Resolution to Reject Over Work — A Book Talk with Brigid Schulte: Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, Jan 16, 2025

Description

A key piece of the American dream is that hard work leads to economic success. Yet in recent years, many people seem to be working harder while reaping fewer rewards. Moreover, even people who are successful in economic terms often feel compelled to participate in overwork. In her new book "[Over Work: Transforming the Daily Grind in the Quest for a Better Life](#)," author Brigid Schulte dismantles the pervasive idea that overwork guarantees success, happiness, or economic security.

Drawing on her experience as a journalist and director of New America's Better Life Lab, Schulte reframes the conversation about work in the United States. Using real-life stories, data, and ideas from leading thinkers and activists, she challenges readers to rethink their conceptions about time use and productivity, to envision new and healthier relationships to work and to advocate for bold policy changes, like paid family leave, that would support better work and better lives. Schulte makes a compelling case that rejecting a culture of overwork can reduce burnout, promote fairness, and

contribute to a more stable economy and a future rooted in shared prosperity, well-being, and dignity.

Schulte's work is a call to action for policymakers, employers, and individuals to rethink what it means to lead a fulfilling life and the role work should play in that. By confronting the glorification of overwork and advancing practical, people-centered policies, "Over Work" offers a roadmap toward a balanced and better life for all.

For more information about this event, including video, audio, transcript, and additional resources, visit:

[https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/a-new-years-resolution-to-reject-over-work-a-bo-
ok-talk-with-brigid-schulte/](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/a-new-years-resolution-to-reject-over-work-a-bo-ok-talk-with-brigid-schulte/)

Speaker



Brigid Schulte

Director, Better Life Lab, New America

Journalist and Author, "Over Work: Transforming the Daily Grind in the Quest for a Better Life" and bestseller

"Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time.

Brigid Schulte is the author of the bestselling "Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time" and the newly released "Over Work: Transforming the Daily Grind in the Quest for a Better Life." She's an award-winning journalist formerly for the Washington Post, where she was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize. She is also the director of the Better Life Lab, the work-family justice and gender equity program at New America. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with her husband and two children.

Moderator

Maureen Conway



Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director,
Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as vice president at the Aspen Institute and as executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program (EOP). EOP works to expand

individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. View [Maureen's full bio](#).

Transcript

Maureen Conway (00:08)

Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Maureen Conway, Vice President at The Aspen Institute and Executive Director of the Economic Opportunities Program. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to today's Book Talk: A New Year's Resolution to Reject Over Work. A Book Talk with Brigid Schulte. Brigid Schulte is the author of this book *Over Work: Transforming the Daily Grind in the Quest for a Better Life*. It's a great book, I highly recommend it. And this conversation is part of our Opportunity in America series in which we examine the changing economic landscape that workers face and how we can create an economy that works for everyone.

So I'm super excited to start the year, our year of conversations with this book because when we say that an economy that works for everyone, that means for ourselves too. I think that many people I've spoken to as they think about the year ahead, one of the ideas they're thinking about as they finished out last year and are trying to think about this year is sort of how to pace themselves a little bit more, how to focus on the things that they can make a change in and how to work hard, but also to remember to rest. And so this book is just a terrific book to inspire reflection on how to avoid succumbing to overwork ourselves as well as how we can contribute to building systems that don't lead to overwork, but rather to productive, healthy, sustainable, meaningful, rewarding work.

So I'm super excited to jump in, thrilled to welcome Brigid and talk about this. But of course first, we do a quick review of our technology for all of you. So just a reminder, all attendees are muted. Please do use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to submit in a book questions. We love to try to get to your questions. You can also share your perspective, ideas, examples, things you're working on in the chat. We encourage folks to do that. We also encourage you to post about this conversation on the social media platform of your choice. Our hashtag is #talkopportunity.

If you have any technical issues during the webinar, please message us in the chat or send an email to EOP.program@AspenInstitute.org, that's EOP.program@AspenInstitute.org. The event is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on our website. Closed captions are available. Please click the CC button at the bottom of your screen to avail yourself of those. So great. So now let me introduce Brigid. Brigid Schulte is an award-winning journalist formerly for The Washington Post where she was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize, and she's

currently the director of the Better Life Lab at New America. The Better Life Lab focuses on work, family, justice, and gender equity issues.

And I think I first met you, Brigid, in 2014 when you were working on your first book, maybe, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has Time*. Also recommend. And the things I've always appreciated about your work is just how you very much insist that good work and a good life go hand in hand. And this question of do you live to work or work to live, this is not the right question, right? Work is an important and fundamental part of our life, but things outside of work are also important and work is just a foundational part for a good life. So of course, how people define good work, they have their different ways of doing it, but you're also in this book reminding us even when your work is great, there can be just too much of it and how do we manage that?

So I'm super excited to dig in and talk about *Over Work* with you. And just to start, let's start with the regular question, which is why this book, why now? And I'm curious if there's something in particular that happened that you were like, "Oh, I finally have to write this book." And also if the book, when you started, this is the book I have to write, if the book that you ended up writing ended up different than you expected in some ways?

Brigid Schulte (04:25)

Well first of all, thank you so much for having me. I'm really so grateful to be here and the work that you do and that The Aspen Institute does around these issues is so important. So it's really great to be in conversation with you. And when I think about why I did write this book and why now, I've actually been working on this, I started this book the minute I finished the first book. That really was looking at time pressure and

really through the lens of gender and trying to understand why is it so difficult to combine work and care, particularly in the United States, particularly for women, for any worker with care responsibilities?

Why does it feel like an either-or choice? Either you have good work or you have a life. Why can't we have a both-and kind of choice? How can we have good work and a good life? And so I finished that first book that was looking at work and gender and leisure time and why leisure is sort of a dirty word in the United States, why we think it's stupid and silly. And I was so convinced after doing all of the research for that book that so much of the source of overwhelm, so much of the source of what drives feeling like we have to work all the time really comes from our overwork culture. There are two things going on.

We don't have the guardrails in policy or workplace practice that would really prioritize having good work and time for life. That what we have instead is sort of a no holds barred, free-for-all when it comes to work. And we've come to really value not just good work, not just hard work, but overwork. And I was really struck by so much of the research that shows how we reward workers. Academics, we'll call the ideal worker is someone who will put work before everything else. Come in early, stay late, or if you're in a digital setting, log on early, send emails in the middle of the night.

If you are in an hourly setting or a service worker setting, that you're on call, always available or the expectation is that you will drop everything or that you're sort of a widget, you have no life. You're just ready to be available to go to work. And so I really wanted to understand, well, how did we get here? What is it costing us? What are the consequences? Is this what's really required? I encountered this very strong belief that, well, we're a powerful economy. We're a big country. This is just the way it is. This is just

what you have to do in order to be productive or in order to be creative or you'll have a lot of our cultural messages.

Think about Elon Musk. No one's ever changed the world in 40 hours a week. In the tech world, lots of CEOs brag about 90 hours a week and loving it or falling asleep under the desk at night. Finance industry, same thing, working through the night. And that these long hours are seen as sort of a badge of honor and that's what we reward, that's what we consider good. And I just thought, well, A, is that true? And B, if that's the case, then it will be difficult for workers with care responsibilities to ever be able to compete fairly, to ever have any kind of equal opportunity at work for anyone really to have a good quality of life.

And I have to say that what really drives me is how do we create opportunities for a good life for all people, an equitable life? And I'm very focused on gender equality and care. How do we make sure that that happens for women who still shoulder the bulk of care responsibilities and for really any worker with care responsibilities, which you ask, which sort of surprised me? One of the things that surprised me, there's again this cultural narrative that it's mainly women who would be affected. I found a Harvard Business School survey that shows that more than three fourths of all workers have some form of care responsibility. And let's not forget that we all have to care for ourselves.

So the reason I wanted to write the book is really to interrogate, do we need to work this way? Is this the best way to work? And I can tell you the short answer is no. We don't need to work this way. B, this is not the best way to work. And it's really costing us a lot in our health, in our quality of life, in our relationships, and this is our precious one and only life and work is one of the three great arenas of what you need for a good life. Work, love and connection and care and time for play and joy and leisure. And so for us to

be able to have a good life with that kind of richness and fullness in all of those areas, we really need to get work right. And so that's why I wanted to write it.

And I went and what surprised me is that I went in search of people that change agents, people who are really trying to make not just individual change, but systemic change. I guess the last thing I'll say, I could go on forever. I know I've just written a book so I'll stop. But so much of the way that we look at why or how we could change work tends to be very individualistic. Whether you're a policymaker or you look at a lot of the business literature, it's like, well, if you're burned out, then you need to rest more or you need to be better about setting boundaries. And that all of that is true, but that is not the only reason why people are burned out.

And there are systems and systemic reasons and there are systems changes that we need to be thinking about. So I like to think about focusing on personal transformation and systems, systems change, systems evolution.

Maureen Conway (10:45)

Great. So before we go too much further, I wanted to kind of define a couple of terms just quickly. So when you refer to work because I think you have this nice way of saying this, what counts as work? What is included? And then when you think about that, what then defines overwork?

Brigid Schulte (11:08)

So I tell you since so much of my orientation is really on gender equality and care, and the first book dealt a lot with the, I don't want to use the word burden of unpaid care because unpaid care work is also incredibly valuable and meaningful, but it is unrecognized and unsupported and so it becomes a burden. So maybe that's a better

way of saying it. I was really wrestling with this. And so I like to think about work. It's not just what we do for pay, but it's also all of the unpaid work that we do for care and home, the volunteering that we do in our communities, the contributions that we make. And I came across this wonderful book by a Dutch historian, Jan Lucassen, and he wrote the story of work going back to the prehistoric era, and I loved it. And he said in his definition, "Anything, any activity that is not leisure is work." And so that's how I like to think about work. There's work and then there's leisure. And then when you ask about, well, what is good work? Again, I was very influenced by Jan Lucassen and he said that throughout human history, good work has been defined by three principles, meaning, fairness and cooperation. And so when I think about that, whether you're in a knowledge work position, whether you're in an hourly position.

If you have those three things, if you feel that there's fairness, that your effort is being fairly rewarded, which we know is not the case in so many jobs. If there's a sense of cooperation, no person is an island, that we do, we work best, we succeed on individual organizational and even national and international levels when we work together, when we cooperate. And is there a sense of meaning? Do you find fulfillment and joy in what you do? And so I think that those are really important things to keep in mind as we think about what is work, how do we define it, how do we make it good?

Maureen Conway (13:10)

Great. And then just a little scene setting. You tell stories of a variety of people in the book, and I'm just wondering, is there a particular story that stood out for you, one that keeps coming back to you or that you just think really is a good example of the way overwork shows up for a person and demonstrates kind of why this is such a challenge?

Brigid Schulte (13:37)

That's such a great question and it's a really hard one because I spent a lot of time... The book is really... My training is as a journalist. And so the book is really a book of journalism. It's a lot of stories, a lot of storytelling. And I spent a lot of time with a lot of people and so many stories really resonate with me. And I guess what I could do is tell you one that resonates with me because it's so tragic, and then stories that give me hope and the story that just sits with me a lot. There was a woman that I met, she lives in Georgia, Chiara Koshiels. She is a solo parent, four children and really struggled.

Grew up in poverty, worked her way through college, was working as a hospice nurse, and then Covid hits and all of the child cares and schools shut down. And so she's living kind of out in the country. She has no network, no family nearby, there's no one to care for her children, so she can't go to work. So she's caring for her children, she loses her job, and then once you lose your job, you can't pay your rent. And then she got evicted and it just sent her and her family on this downward spiral and that she's still struggling. I talk with her fairly regularly. And so that's a story that has just really stuck with me.

How so many of the common narratives are like, "Oh, people live in poverty, they just need to work harder." And boy, what she tried to do to make enough money to work, to be able to pay her bills, she catered, she drove DoorDash with a baby in the backseat in the car seat. She tried so many different things to try to make it work with the schedule that she needed to care for her kids. And so I think that that's a really powerful story about how so many of our narratives that then drive our policies are really based on false assumptions. So that's a story that sticks with me on this is why we need to fix work and the care side.

And then on the hopeful side, we figured out how to do it. I did spend some time in Iceland and I went there because I was very interested in learning more about the short work hours' movement. And when I first started reporting, I became... I'm going to be really honest, I tend to have workaholic tendencies. So there was a part of me which is like, "I don't believe it. Show me the money. Can you really do the same amount of work at the same quality in a shorter amount of time?" So I was kind of skeptical. And also as I was looking for places to report, most of the places that I found were in knowledge situations, office workers, more privileged workers.

And I got really worried that if the short work hours' movement was really all about, let's face it, tech bros working shorter hours so that they could go surfing on Fridays or whatever. I'm sorry, I'm being a little facetious. But I became very worried, what would that mean when you think about women? If I'm interested in gender equality, so many women are in low-wage work. Well, where's their shorter work hour? How would that work for them? And so I became very worried that the shorter work hours movement could be another marker of inequality, of privilege and the inability to access that around gender and around class.

And so a friend of mine said, "Well, you should go to Iceland because they made short work hours available to 85% of the workforce." And that's everybody. That's people who work for the prime minister who I interviewed, and that's also people who are pool attendants and shift workers. And I think what's important is that it's a shorter work week at the same level of pay. So it's not a shorter work week and less pay. And I think what was so exciting about that is again, for women, the whole goal for them was both well-being and also gender equality. And I talked to one of the architects of their short work hours plan, and she was really worried.

She said, "We wanted men to take the time that they had when they weren't at paid work and we wanted them to be more involved in their unpaid work." And she said, "We were really worried that they would go surfing or that they would go to the gym." But that's not what happened. So what they're finding over time is that men are more involved with care at home and that women who had been working what had been considered a part-time schedule just because of their care responsibilities, now that sort of the structure has changed. They're now working full-time hours. And so then that means they'll have more economic stability over their lifetime.

Their pensions will be bigger. They're considered full-time workers now. So that was really exciting in a bigger sense. And then in terms of the stories that I found, I talked to a police officer. People think how could a police officer work at a shorter work week? And it was so interesting how the changes that they made, how they work together as teams to try to figure out how to get the work done, but do it in a more effective and shorter way. And he just said, "And now I know what size my kids' clothes are. I'll take them to their..." I mean, how many guys will say, "My wife does all of that, or my partner does all of that." He not only takes them to different events, he signs them up for them.

So he does a lot of that logistical and mental labor that so many women still are expected to do. So that was a really exciting story. And I opened the chapter with a man, he's a solo dad, he's got three kids and he calls his shorter work day, his sacred day because he spends it with his children. And so I got to spend a sacred day with him and his children, and that was really lovely to see. That there's benefits not only for their health and gender equality, but also in the relationship he has with his children and what they're experiencing as they grow up.

Maureen Conway (19:46)

That's great. That's perfect. And my next question sort of builds on that and also builds on a question from the audience about different cultures and perspectives on work-life balance. And your first chapter is called, and I may mispronounce this, American karoshi, is that...

Brigid Schulte (20:03)

Yeah.

Maureen Conway (20:03)

My Japanese is not great. And then in a later chapter you go into more detail about what karoshi culture looks like in Japan. So I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what karoshi is and what it looks like in the US versus Japan, those cultural manifestations.

Brigid Schulte (20:24)

So when I first thought of tackling this book as a reporter, I knew that I wanted to be looking for solutions, but I also was really looking for understanding. And one of the things that when you look at just overworked literature, Japan, also South Korea and China, they have these not only till you drop but work till you die cultures. And so in Japan, there actually is a word for working until you die. It's called karoshi—death from overwork. There's a similar term gwarosa in South Korea and another term in China. And I was really curious about this phenomenon. We hear in the West about some spectacularly horrific, in particular karoshi death.

So it'll come up on the radar every few years because there are these pretty spectacular and horrific deaths. But I wanted to understand what it was like, what drove that and what was that like to live in a day-to-day reality of that? And so that was one of the first things that I knew I wanted to do was to go to Japan. I lived in Japan right out of college. And so thankfully I had friends and contacts that I was able to understand more before I started going to help me understand what's going on and how this affects me. And what's interesting is we tend to think of overwork as maybe the finance industry in New York, and that's a lot of what we hear about in Japan. But do you know some of the most overworked people who have the most mental health issues, depression, suicide, and death, are teachers in Japan or truck drivers in Japan? Sort of the more invisible story. So I went to try to understand more, and again, in the West we also tend to think, well, maybe it's just something unique about Japanese culture that they would do this. Or maybe there's something unique about being in that Asian world, there's a samurai culture. I mean, I've read academic literature, people sort of blame it on samurai culture. And when I went there, that's just not the case at all. What I found, what drove overwork in Japan is the same thing that drives overwork here in the United States in particular.

And the other thing that I found too is that we also have karoshi here in the United States. If you look at a lot of the work stress and health data, Jeff Pfeffer and his colleagues several years ago did a meta-analysis of more than 200 work stress and health studies. And just from looking at what they call 10 psychosocial stressors, they found that the way we work is the fifth leading cause of death in the United States. And that's invisible. We don't talk about that. And so a lot of the drivers are the same, which is that we think we need to work endless long hours in order to be productive without really looking at the data and evidence that shows that that's not the case. Workers tend to be very exploited.

There's horrific inequality sort of favoring stakeholders and CEOs with outsized salaries and paying workers very little. So a lot of the conditions are very much the same. And I think what's troubling is that in Japan, there are policies that are trying to attack it, and yet you have a corporate culture that is so wedded to this belief that working till you drop is the best way to work. And so the culture and the leadership mindset makes it very difficult to change. And I also found the same here in the United States, the power of what leaders believe, whether there's evidence to back it up or not. And when it comes to overwork, there is no evidence to back it up.

Maureen Conway (24:19)

I really appreciate it, and there's a lot of stories in the book that I think really bring home this cost of overwork for people's health, for their family health, for their communities, and just the heavy personal toll of overwork. But you also looked at the business costs. I mean, to that point, you also looked at the business cost of overwork. And as we now have an incoming administration apparently focused on efficiency, I thought it would be helpful to share what you learned about the economic cost of overwork in terms of things like productivity, waste and all of those kinds of business metrics.

Brigid Schulte (24:58)

Well, I think, to me, one of the most powerful data points about why overwork doesn't work is that if you look internationally at international statistics that compare GDP per hours worked, so your productivity. The longer the work hours, the lower the productivity by hour. So Japan registers among the longest hours. It has among the lowest productivity of any advanced economy. When you look at the United States, the United States is productive, no doubt about it. We have a very profound work ethic

here in the United States, and some of that is very good. That we do believe in the power of hard work. I do too. I want to be clear, but not overwork. But when you look at our GDP per hour worked, we're about in the same line as places like Denmark or France.

And I think that that just would blow people's minds because a lot of people love to make fun of countries that have long vacations or would encourage workers to take their lunch breaks, and yet our productivity is about the same. So those are really important data points to look at.

Maureen Conway (26:20)

I'm going to ask this question again from our audience because I think it relates a little bit to this overwork versus what work accomplishes. They're asking, "Can you say a little bit more about the intersection between overwork and meaning of work and how do you make sense of David Graeber's theory of bullshit jobs—that so much work is pointless—alongside overwork culture?"

Brigid Schulte (26:44)

And I love David Graeber. I certainly read that. I don't tend to agree completely with the whole idea of bullshit jobs because all you have to do is go back to Studs Terkel and his very famous study of people's work *Working*. A lot of people find meaning in what they do. He found people who were telephone operators who had the same sense of meaning as a CEO. So I think that meaning is also something that's very personal to people, and I don't think that we should denigrate any particular profession because people's relationship to it, if it's fair, if it's treating you well, if it's enabling you to live the life that you want, then we need to be able to honor that kind of work.

But what I will say and where I agree with a lot of what David Graeber wrote, one of the things that I found, and this is why this is one of the big points of the book, is that overwork cultures drive what I call stupid work. So it may not be that it's a bullshit job, but there's a lot of bullshit work or bullshit tasks that end up happening because if you know the boss or the corporate leader is going to reward you, and the studies show that they will, for being a presence, for being there, for being always ready, for simply putting in long hours, kind of looking at the input measuring by input versus your output or your performance or your impact.

As long as you have those input cultures, you're going to reward longer hours, like it's a factory model that we're still using to judge work. So then what are you going to do? You're going to be there late, you're going to come to every single meeting whether you need to be there or not, you're going to send emails late at night.

And a lot of that... When I was looking at the short work hours movement, and going back to that, my skepticism, how do you really do this? What so struck me—and it's so tied to *karoshi* and overwork—is that what they had to do is basically stop, kind of questioning their status quo. A lot of places that I talked to, when you ask them, "Why do you do it this way?" they've never thought about it. It's like, "Well, we've always done it this way. We've always had this meeting at this time," whether it's useful or not. So there's a lot of status quo, just bias in what we do.

And so to really make a work redesign or an experiment or shorter work hours, what I found is that everybody kind of had to stop and almost step away from the day-to-day and really ask themselves, "What is our work? What are we trying to do? What's the most value?" And then they went step by step backward, "What do we need to do every single day to be focused on that outcome?"

For instance, I spent time at a childcare center in Iceland that went to a shorter work hour, shorter work week, and the director said, "I turned it over to my team. I don't know how to do it, but you do. So you figure it out." That's what I found is that leaders devolved power to people closest to the work, and then they had to get really clear on what is the work and then redesign the processes to make sure that they focused on that.

And what I came to start thinking about is that there's the real work. I started thinking about work in concentric circles. There's the real work that has the most value, that will give you that sense of meaning and fulfillment. And then there's the next ring that I call the work around the work, and that's the emails and the meetings and the Slacks and the logistics and the planning that should ladder up to support that work. But often it's a merry-go-round. That's where we get stuck, where you can spend all your day just running around and answering emails.

I was working on a project with Ideas42, which is a wonderful behavioral science design firm, and we wanted to try to understand what was driving overwork in nonprofit organizations. And what was so interesting is that you talked to people and almost everybody said, "Well, I was so busy today, I was working and then it got to be five o'clock, and I realized I hadn't even started the most important thing." And then when you said... Well, we asked, "What did you do all day?" And it was running around in meetings and answering emails and sort of again, getting stuck on that merry-go-round.

And so then they would take work home or they'd do it on the weekends and then they would get angry and resentful and tired and they would feel like, "Well, there's no other opportunity to do this." But they never looked at how I could restructure my day to actually do that most important thing before I need to go home?

And so then the last circle that I tend to think about with the real work, the work around the work, I think of it as the performance of work. Some people call it live action role-playing your job. That's where if you have a culture that values overwork, you're going to pretend that you are. And so you're giving your own time back to your company.

And one of the stories that I often tell about this is when I spent a lot of time at The Washington Post. There was one editor who made it very clear that he thought that the best workers were there all hours. Now, I did not have that same view because I had kids and I wanted to be home for story time. And also as a reporter, you don't want to be in the office; you want to be out talking to people. So I had a very different orientation.

So a friend of mine was there very late at night working on a project, and he said the editor came out and said, "I know all the best people because they're still here." And then my friend looked around and half the people were playing solitaire. They weren't working, they weren't doing the important critical work. They were looking like they worked because they knew that's what the editor or the leader valued, so that they're robbing themselves of their time not doing productive work. They'll be more tired the next day. Maybe they won't have a creative idea, maybe they won't do their job that well the next day.

So we miss a lot when we're so focused on looking like we're working all the time where it's sort of like everybody's busy, nobody's productive.

Maureen Conway (33:04)

No, actually that's great. And honestly, I think that's the part of the bullshit jobs that our questioner was asking about because David Graeber talks about that a lot, is sort of the jobs that are basically performance work, but they aren't really adding any value to anything. And the interesting dichotomy—and we see this in our society—is that the work that gets rewarded. But the work that actually is, as you've talked about so many times, the work of care, is so poorly paid or unpaid and is so vital to our societies, and there's just this kind of mismatch in terms of the work that is valued economically in the work and socially often.

So anyway, and I did want to just touch on... I know we want to get to solutions, but I wanted to touch on one other thing because it gets to starting with yourself a little bit. And because you do have this chapter on workaholics and workaholism, and I really appreciated the way you sort of described meeting somebody and talking about Workaholics Anonymous and then being like, "Well, wait, do I belong here? Is this me?" And I think a lot of us, if we're honest, might relate to that a little bit. So I'm just wondering how you describe that issue of what it means to be a workaholic? And I'm just wondering how a start with yourself kind of thing ... I'm wondering how you think about that at this point.

Brigid Schulte (34:49)

Yes. No, it's a great question. They say that you write the books that you need to read maybe, and I do. I do. I mean, I struggle with working too much. My husband will tell you that you work too much. I know, I know. So I wanted to try to understand that, what was driving that in myself.

And you're right, I was actually doing something, I was doing a podcast episode, and I thought... I came to work and how work can change and how work sort of shapes our lives and for good or for ill and how we could change. It was sort of a precursor that helped me think about this book. And I did. I found Workaholics Anonymous, and I thought, "Well, I've never heard of this."

So I went to a Workaholics Anonymous meeting and I very much was like, "Oh my gosh, maybe this is me." And I am still friends with the people that I met, and one of them became sort of an unofficial mentor or sponsor, if you will, and has been a wonderful, wonderful friend and resource for me.

And I guess what I would say is I learned through trying to understand and look at the research that there's two drivers of... I wouldn't say I'm a workaholic, but I would say I have workaholic tendencies. And I think what drives me is more internal. I'm curious; there's so much I want to do. Life is so short. Oh my God, I want to know about this. It's hard for me to say no. It's like, "Oh, that's so cool. I want to do that too."

And there's just not enough hours in a day. And then if you get tired, as we all know, it takes you longer and longer to do things. So I think part of me is sort of being unrealistic in terms of what I can actually do as a human being. But there are other negative drivers that I found of overwork, that some people are driven to work to avoid other things out of fear or lack.

And if that's the case, then that does require Workaholics Anonymous. They can be very helpful. They've been very helpful for me as well, even though I don't feel like I'm driven by fear or that I'm avoiding other things. If you have a problem unplugging from work or if you don't like going on vacation, if you work because you don't want to do

anything else because you don't want to think about things, then that indicates there's something deeper that you might want to look at.

So for me, I think work sometimes is like a sponge. It takes up too much of my life and I need to work—it's a continual process with me—how can I make it meaningful but one part of my life, and not all about my identity and meaning? But I've always had relationships. I've had a family. I love vacation; I love traveling. I have other things that I love to make life rich. But if you don't, and if work is everything to you, that's really when it's time to take a look at is it therapy that you might want to be looking at? Do you want to dial into a Workaholics Anonymous meeting? Because if it's robbing you of having that richer, fuller life, then that is something that I would really encourage people to tend to.

Maureen Conway (38:19)

Thank you for that. And so let's move to what do we do? And I appreciate that because there is this hope that we set boundaries and stuff, and there are ways we can sort of be our own change agents, but as you noted in the beginning, we need the systems to be working with us rather than working against us.

In the appendix, you have this nice summary of a whole number of lessons for individuals, for managers and business leaders, and for policymakers. And I like that sort of dividing it up into those three. So I'm wondering if you have just sort of in a nutshell version of what you see as sort of the roles that we need for making the kind of change we need to have healthier work and not overwork

Brigid Schulte (39:07)

So again, as I began reporting this, I became very frustrated that the way we looked at overwork was sort of an individual problem that an individual then had the responsibility

solely to resolve. And so everybody's always looking for tips and tricks. Everybody wants to be like, "What's the one thing? What's the pill I can take? What's the magic button I can push to make things better for me?"

And I think that there are... So what I wanted to do is say, yes, there are absolutely strategies that you can work on that can be helpful. But one of the most important things, first of all, is awareness. And be aware that we're living in a society that would make these changes very difficult, that we might be working for organizations that would see any kind of effort to have a more balanced or integrated life as sort of like, "Oh, you're slacking off or you're not committed."

So I want people to be aware of the water that we're swimming in and then honestly to recognize that we can make change at the individual level. You can make change as certainly you have power as an organizational leader, as a business leader, as a team leader, as a manager. But even on your team, if you don't have responsibilities, you can work with others. You can find like-minded peers and then try experiments and then have goodness burble out from there.

And then we need to be thinking about cultural norms, policy leaders, policymakers. As you know, Maureen, and we've talked about this a lot, the United States is literally the only advanced economy that still does not have paid maternity leave or one of a handful that doesn't have paid parental leave. We don't have paid family leave, even though more and more of us have elder care, disability care responsibilities. We get sick ourselves. We are literally one of the few that doesn't have paid sick days. We do not have a policy regime that recognizes that work is important, but it is one part of our lives, and that we also have care, and that we need to find a way to harmonize those.

That we can't just expect complete and utter devotion to work or we will not have the next generation. You need work and you need care. So that's why I like to think about change on those three levels. And oftentimes what I'll say is the individual tips and tricks, think about them as putting on an oxygen mask to give you time and space and bandwidth to help you begin to work within your organization to see what kind of changes you can bring about. And then can you work within your community, within an advocacy organization, to really work for some of those changes on a larger scale, to be part of those larger conversations.

So in terms of what you can do, if you want some of my favorite ones for the individual. I think one of the things that behavioral scientists shared with me—and I have used it, I think it was life-changing for me—is to think about your calendar, your day-to-day calendar, the way you schedule yourself. Again, if we live in this overwork kind of culture and we value, "Oh my God, look how busy I am," we oftentimes will cram our calendars as if it were a busy pantry, just shove it full of stuff and back-to-back meetings and go, go, go, go. And then you get exhausted. And by the end of the day... There've been so many days that I'd be like, "I know I was busy. I don't know what the heck I did today."

And so this behavioral scientist said, "Think about your time and your calendar less like that pantry that you need to cram full of stuff and more like an art gallery." So take the time to really think about what is your work, what is the most important thing that's central core? Where do you create the most value? Where do you derive the most value? What kind of part of your job makes your heart sing? And then organize your time around that and then make sure that when you've got something, schedule it in your calendar.

It's amazing, again, how many people that I've spoken to, they're like, "I have this big thing to do," and they never put time in their calendar. It just assumes it's going to happen, and it doesn't. And that's often what can lead to overwork as well. So put that most important thing in your calendar, schedule it, and then make sure that there's white space before it so that you can prepare. And then there's white space afterward so that you can digest, so that you can synthesize, so that there are next steps that you can take right then. And then very carefully, mindfully choose the next thing to go to.

So I think that's for an individual; to me that's been a very powerful pushback against overwork. And then if anybody ever questions like, "Well, why aren't you running around?" it's like, "Look at all of the things that I have done. Look at what I've been able to accomplish or look at my output."

And I guess that's what I would say for managers in the business side is to begin to shift from valuing input—long hours, presence—and shift to valuing output. What's the result, the performance, the actual impact of what you're doing? Because that's going to create more value regardless of what your job is.

And then in the larger cultural sense, we all need to work together to create better policies and better norms that enable us to live those good high-quality lives where there's fair work, fair wages, fair hours, reasonable schedule control. All the suite of stuff that you work on at Aspen and that we work on at the Better Life Lab: paid family and medical leave, affordable care infrastructure, all of that. That's going to require all of us to understand the story about why that's important, the narrative about why that's important, and work together to make that happen on the state and local and national levels.

Maureen Conway (45:28)

Great. Wonderful. We are getting into our audience questions now, and we have a couple coming in. So one is, are four-day work weeks with 10 to 13-hour days followed by three-day weekends a good idea or irresponsible? And then I have another one here, but I'm curious if you have a quick response to what you think about longer days, three-day weekend kind of thing?

Brigid Schulte (45:56)

What's interesting is the federal government, interestingly as a result of [inaudible] and other, frankly women, Mary Rose O'Carroll. They decided to make the federal workforce sort of a model workforce. So they were experimenting with flexible work and different ways of working long before corporate America began doing it. And so in the federal government, you could work sort of those longer days and then have a day off and a three-day weekend.

And honestly, there is no one best way or one right way. It's very individual and it can actually change over time. If you've got care responsibilities, it really depends. Four really long days might be difficult; then maybe you wouldn't see your kids in the evening, or you wouldn't have enough time with them, or you wouldn't be able to help with their homework. Or maybe you have a partner where they would take over those four days and then you would have a whole extra day that would be totally devoted to your kids. It's so individual.

It really just depends on how you work and what your priorities are, your care duties, the way you want to live your life. Maybe you want to go to school; maybe there's something else that you want to do outside of work. So in terms of is there a magic way of working for productivity and creativity, I think the most important thing is you've got

to listen to your own bio rhythms, look at your own personal situation as it changes, and find something that works for you.

But know that if you're interested in creativity or productivity, working all out all the time is the fastest road to mediocrity. That if you really want to be truly creative and if you really want to be truly productive, you need to be well-rested and you actually need to have a richer life outside of work because then you're going to be able to see connections and maybe you'll have people that you talk to, you'll get ideas from, and then you can bring that back into work.

So I am not saying have rest so that you're going to work better. I think we need to have rest because we need rest—not as a human right. But I also think that when you do create that time and space and prioritize that, your work by default gets better.

Maureen Conway (48:17)

That's great. The next question is, would volunteerism and charitable efforts slash work increase if we fixed work at home and the workplace? Would that create a better society?

Brigid Schulte (48:29)

Yes. Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that question because when you look at why do people not vote or why do they not volunteer or why do they not know their neighbors? If you look at surveys, most people say, "I'm too busy." And they're too busy because of working, their work demands are too much, it's too many hours. Or the other thing that we have to think about is that work takes up a lot of brain space. So maybe you're out, you're not actually physically at work, but you're thinking about it, you're worrying about

it. If you're a knowledge worker, you're like, are you going to be laid off in the next round? Or if you're an hourly worker, it's like, "Do I have enough hours this week? Does my schedule allow me to go to the parent-teacher conference?"

So work takes up an awful lot of brain space as well. And so if we can transform work so that it's effective as well as meaningful, it creates more space for you to get to know your neighbors, for you to volunteer in your community, for you to become active in your local government or in national politics, or to have a voice and a say in our civic life. We see all these stories about loneliness and isolation and nobody bowls together anymore. We need that. We need time to build and rebuild our social fabric. And that's why it's so important that work is, yes, it's important, but it's not the only thing in life.

Maureen Conway (50:02)

Great. I want to return to Iceland a little bit just to close because... So I actually went to Iceland with my husband for our 25th wedding anniversary, which was lovely. And as one does, I started reading about labor law in Iceland and looking at work hours contracts and was totally blown away by all of the things that they just make sure work for work. And you talked about some of the innovations that they did to make shorter work weeks and family policy happen. And I know we're not going to be Iceland, we are not Iceland, but you also described in the book some of the ways that they tackled cultural issues and sort of really tried to address them.

And so I guess I have two questions, one of which is going to kind of pull in one of the audience questions that I didn't really get to yet. So talk a little bit, because there is this intersection of our culture and expectations, and I think that they had to tackle some gender norms and things like that in their culture to be able to make the changes actually stick. You can pass a law, you can whatever, but if people aren't going to

follow it, then they're not going to follow it. I'm wondering if you could talk about what they did but also what you see as some of the lingering social issues that we have to tackle.

And here I'm particularly thinking about, you've talked some about our issues around gender. We also have the issues around gender, but we also have significant issues around race, around how we think about immigrant workers and others and stuff. And so I'm wondering if you can just talk a little bit about how this intersection of addressing the cultural factors and the policy barriers in Iceland, but then think about what is the bigger hurdle that we have here in the United States?

Brigid Schulte (51:55)

Such a good question, such an important one. And I guess one of the things that strikes me most when you ask that question. Iceland, it was interesting. We tend to think of the Nordic countries as so progressive and Iceland was sort of late to the game of all of that. They didn't have a 40-hour work week until the 1970s. They come from herring fishery, again, a really long-hour kind of culture, also very masculinized. And so it's interesting that they're not... Right now, they top all the gender equality lists, but it wasn't like that until fairly recently. And one of the things that I was really struck by when I was trying to understand how you go from not even having a 40-hour work week until the 1970s to really leading on shorter work hours and prioritizing well-being and equity.

And what was really interesting is, if you remember during the 2008 and we had the great global banking meltdown, and so many people lost their homes here, subprime mortgages, it was a disaster. Well, Iceland went bankrupt. People completely lost faith in the system. And what was so interesting out of that, they lost faith in their leaders,

political leaders, in their business leaders. And the whole idea that GDP and growth was the way to measure what's good in a society. And what was so interesting is that out of that catastrophe from the ashes of that, they used it as an opportunity to begin thinking, what do we really value as a nation? How do we define our health and wealth?

What is our success? And began these long conversations and a lot of soul-searching. And then they became sort of an inaugural member of what this sort of growing but nascent movement of well-being economy governments, where instead of looking at only GDP as a way of measuring progress or wealth, they're looking at things like child poverty and loneliness and do you have access to parks? Do you know your neighbors? Really thinking about what are the things that make a life a good life? And how can they as a nation think about policy as a way of making that good quality of life happen? So that meant making sure that wages are fair.

That meant shortening work hours because people were feeling stressed. That meant making sure that families had time for their care responsibilities and work. And so I think that's what really struck me. I know I even write in the book, it's like, I know we're not Iceland. I mean the population of many cities in the United States is bigger than Iceland and we're dynamic and we're diverse. We're so much... There's a lot of homogeneity in many Nordic countries, and I think we just need to acknowledge that. But the process that they went through is something anybody can do. The process of really thinking about what is the health and wealth of a nation?

How do we measure it? And could we bring that thinking about well-being here in the United States? And in the very last chapter of the book, I argued that yes, especially when you think of the future of work and everybody's talking about AI and are we

going to have fewer jobs and less work. How much more important is it now? More important than ever, as work is changing rapidly and potentially radically to begin to think about work as the contributions that we make, the unpaid care work that we do, the civic work that we do. If work is no longer going to give us our daily bread and there's going to be some other structure, it's time for a radical rethinking, not just of work but meaning and what health and wealth means for a nation.

And I would argue that it's really thinking about quality of life and finding the measures and the policies that enable that to happen.

Maureen Conway (56:29)

Thank you so much. I think we are just about out of time here. This has been just a fantastic conversation, Brigid. Thank you so much. Really, really appreciate you joining us today. I want to remind everybody, this is the book. It's a little blurry here maybe, but *Over Work*. There it is. Go get it. Go read it. It's really inspirational and it's great. You can get the audio version and listen to it while you're walking around too. That's something I frequently like to do. So however you get it, I highly recommend it. Stay tuned, please, for our next event on February 26 at 2:00 P.M. Eastern, "Re-entry and Good Jobs: Building the Second Chances We All Believe In".

This is the second discussion in our series on *Work Behind and Beyond Bars*, improving job quality during and after incarceration. I want to thank my amazing team at the Economic Opportunities Program for pulling together today's event, including my colleagues, Frances Almodvar, Tony Mastria, Nora Heffernan, Matt Helmer, and our great colleagues at Architects for supporting our technical work and everything. And please join us again. We'll see you next time. Thank you.

