

# Time use across the life course

Author: Tay McNamara

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3542>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College, 2008

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0  
Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>).

# TIME USE ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Tay K. McNamara

---

## INTRODUCTION

It is important to understand how various activities fit together for both workers and non-workers throughout a typical day. Research on how older workers behave when not at work can provide valuable insights to employers and policy makers. Drawing on data from two major national surveys, this brief examines the way that work relates to other types of time use throughout the life course.

This Issue Brief utilizes time use data to outline the variation in the “typical” day over the life course, paying special attention to the role of work and job-related characteristics. Two related topics are specifically addressed:

- ▶ How do older workers differ from younger workers in their typical time use? Within those groups, how do men and women differ?
- ▶ How does time use change over the traditional retirement years, and what role do job characteristics play in those changes?

While time use information is relatively detailed, for the purpose of this Issue Brief, nine major types of time use are considered:

- personal—time used for self-care and maintenance;
- home—time used for house maintenance and cleaning;
- caregiving—time used caring for household and non-household members;
- work—time spent for paid work;
- education—time spent taking classes or studying;
- purchases and services—time used for consumer services and shopping;
- civic—time used for government obligations or volunteer work;
- leisure—time used for socializing, sports, or other social activities; and
- religious—time used for religious attendance or spiritual activities.

## HOW DO OLDER ADULTS DIFFER FROM YOUNGER ADULTS IN THEIR TIME USE?

Understanding how older adults differ from their younger counterparts can highlight continuity and change over the life course. A “typical day” in a person’s life can have different meaning at different ages. For instance, Figure 1 shows the activities in a typical day for employed men and women, at ages 25, 35, and 45. Among men and women of working age, leisure activities, personal activities, and work take up the largest proportions of time in the typical day.

At age 25, employed men spend 5.2 hours on work, 10.8 hours on personal activities, and 7.6 hours on leisure activities. These figures shift over time, but at all ages, employment, leisure, and personal time make up the majority of a typical person’s day.

All other types of activities — such as caregiving for parents or children, education, and buying goods and services — take up a third or less of a typical day.

### 1. Employment - time spent on activities related to paid work

The number of hours work per day reported reflects time focused on actual work activity only. Time in the workplace, for both the employed and self-employed spent on leisure, socializing, or other activities (such as travel) is allocated to those types of time use respectively.

Employed men reported spending five hours per day working, while employed women averaged only four hours per day. These averages did not differ substantially for 25-, 45-, and 65-year olds.

In contrast, as shown in Figure 2, non-employed men and women spent one hour or less on employment-related activities. These activities were often job search-related, but could also include paid work that respondents do not view as a “real” job due to its small time commitment. Overall, at age 25, non-employed men reported 1.1 hours a day spent on work activities, while non-employed women reported less than half an hour. This time commitment waned with age among the non-employed.

### 2. Leisure - time spent on all leisure-related activities, whether at home or at work

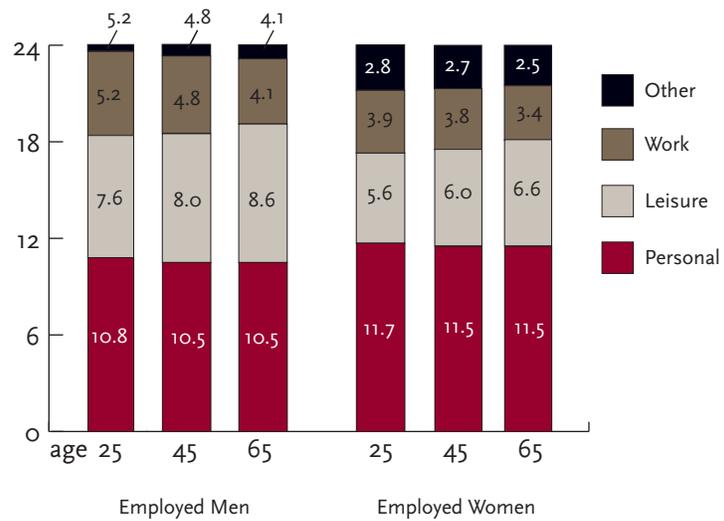
Leisure activities include sports, socializing, and hobbies not connected to work. Employed men and women reported spending slightly more time on leisure activities as they aged. However, it is interesting to note that non-employed men and women of all ages reported less time spent on leisure than their employed counterparts. For example, employed women averaged 6 hours of leisure/day at age 25, while non-employed women reported only 5. Because caregiving and other responsibilities are associated with lower rates of employment, those who are not working for pay may actually have less leisure time than those who are.

The majority of the analysis reported in this brief was developed at the Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, using two recent time use surveys: the American Time Use Survey (ATUS, a 2006 survey based on the Current Population Survey<sup>1</sup>), and the Consumption and Activities Mail Out Survey (CAMS, a 2001 through 2005 survey based on the Health and Retirement Study sample<sup>2</sup>). Figure 1 shows the structure of a typical time-use diary. In addition to start and end times, it includes the description of the activity.

figure 1. A typical time use diary

Start time	End time	Activity
12:00 AM	7:00 AM	Sleeping
7:00 AM	8:00 AM	Eating
8:00 AM	8:45 AM	Travel related to working
8:45 AM	5:00 PM	Working at main job
5:00 PM	5:30 PM	Travel related to working
5:30 PM	6:00 PM	Food and drink preparation
6:00 PM	6:30 PM	Eating

figure 2. Hours per day spent on various activities – Employed Adults



Source: Author's calculations based on the American Time Use Survey

### 3. Personal - time spent on sleep and self-care

Personal time includes the time spent on sleep and self-care activities, such as medical care, bathing, and dressing. The amount of personal time reported by employed and non-employed adults tends to be consistent, but younger adults report more time spent on sleep and self-care than older adults. For example, at age 25 employed men reported spending 11 hours/day on personal activities, compared to 10 hours per day by 65-year olds. While self-care related to medical needs may increase over time, these estimates indicate that older adults do not spend more time on personal activities overall.

## HOW DO WORKING WOMEN DIFFER FROM WORKING MEN IN THEIR TIME USE?

Although employed men and women used their time outside of work similarly, there were gender differences among part time workers. Women who worked part time were more likely to shift time toward caregiving, while men who worked part time were more likely to shift their time toward personal and civic activities.

### Women Working Part Time

Analysis shows that in an average week, women working part time worked 11 hours fewer than women working full time. For part-time female workers, some of the time was attributed to the following activities.

- They spent one more hour on religious activities.
- They spent two more hours on education.
- They spent one more hours on personal activities.
- They spent two more hours on caregiving.
- They spent two more hours on leisure.

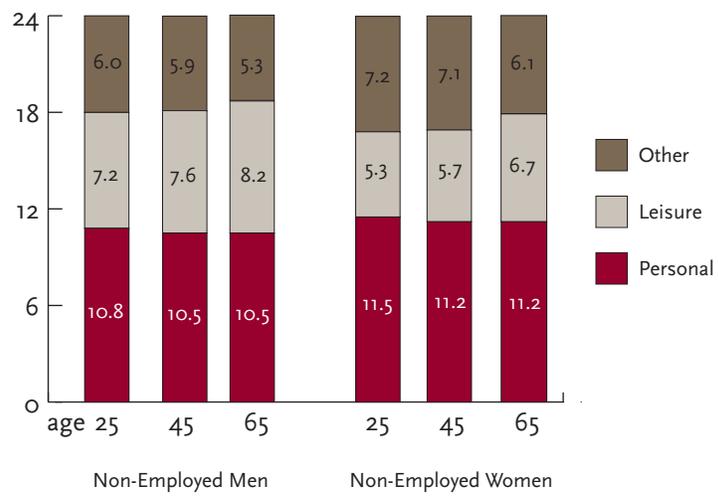
### Men Working Part Time

Men working part time worked 16 fewer hours a week than men working full time. Some examples of the typical differences in other types of time use for part-time male workers were:

- They spent four more hours on education.
- They spent three more hours on personal activities.
- They spent one more hour on civic activities.
- They spent five more hours on leisure.

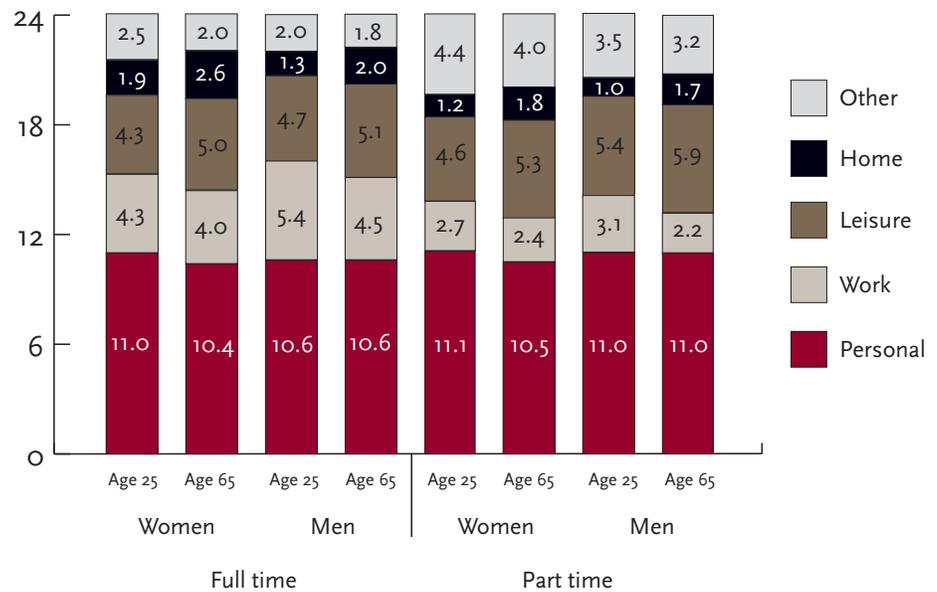
Part-time work and full-time work suggest different patterns of time use outside of the job. And while part-time work frees up more hours in the day, women and men spend those hours differently.

figure 3. Hours/day spent on various activities – Non-employed Adults



Source: Author's calculations based on the American Time Use Survey

figure 4. Hours/day spent on various activities – Part-time versus Full time workers



Source: Author's calculations based on the American Time Use Survey

## **UNDERSTANDING HOW TIME USE CHANGES DURING THE RETIREMENT YEARS**

Comparing older and younger adults indicates that time use changes over the life course, but says little about how specific changes in employment situations might be associated with time use changes for a given individual. For instance, how does time use change as older adults phase into new employment arrangements or retirement? Three questions were addressed:

- ▶ How does employment affect time use changes?
- ▶ How do the characteristics of the current job affect time use changes?
- ▶ How do recent shifts in job status affect time use changes?

### **1. The Effect on Employment**

Employment, referring to whether or not a person has a job at all, can affect their time use. Being employed predicted less caregiving time among adults who had not spent substantial amounts of time caregiving in the previous wave.

Figure 5 shows the relationship between hours of previous caregiving and hours of current caregiving. Among those with no previous caregiving experience, non-employed workers spent relatively little time caregiving, and that time waned with age. Employed workers on average spent no time caregiving. Thus, for workers who have not spent time on caregiving in the past, employment exerts a negative effect on their potential to start caregiving activities. For those with moderate caregiving commitments in the past (10 hours a week), the effect of employment was weak. For those with large caregiving commitments in the past (30 hours a week), employment predicts significantly higher levels of caregiving. A person who reported that they spent 30 hours a week caregiving in the past on average spent 12.4 hours caregiving if they were employed, but only 6.3 hours if they were not employed.

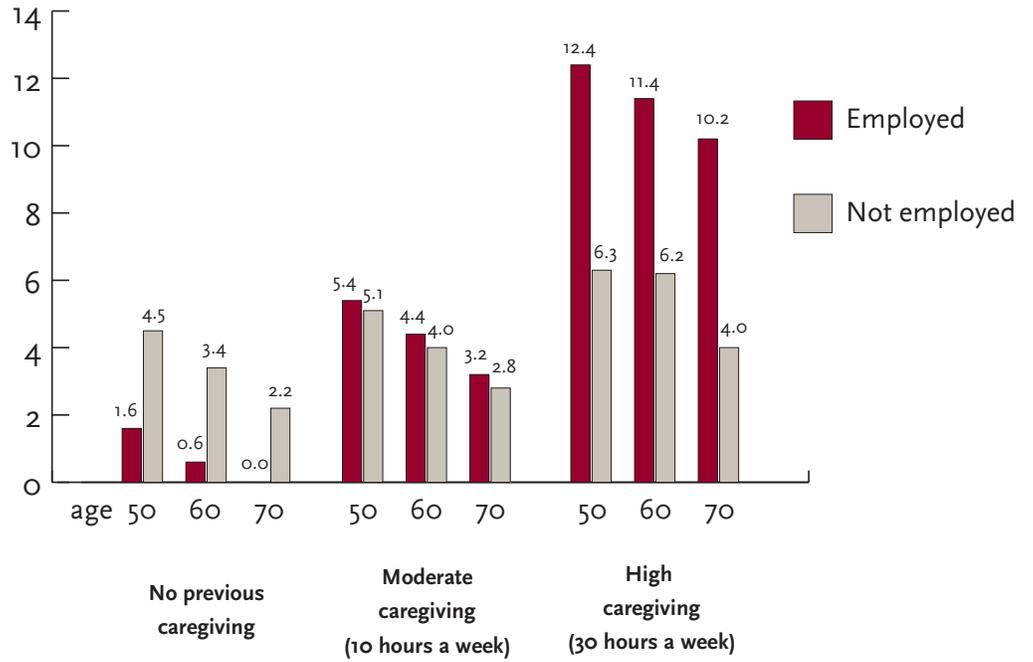
Leisure time exhibited a similar dynamic, indicating that while employment may cut into the time spent on other activities, this does not necessarily hold true for people who had devoted much time to these activities in the past. While employment plays a role in time spent on other activities, a person's past history with those activities is an important consideration.

Previous research suggests that past time use has an important effect on future time use; hence, the patterns of activities developed during the early retirement years may continue well beyond them. For instance, when a person begins caregiving, he or she establishes patterns of behavior and expectations that make it unlikely that caregivers with heavy commitments will stop altogether. Similarly, people interested in certain leisure activities build a set of competencies, resources, and networks related to their activity or hobby. These dynamics cause time use to persist over time.

### **2. The Effect of Employment Characteristics**

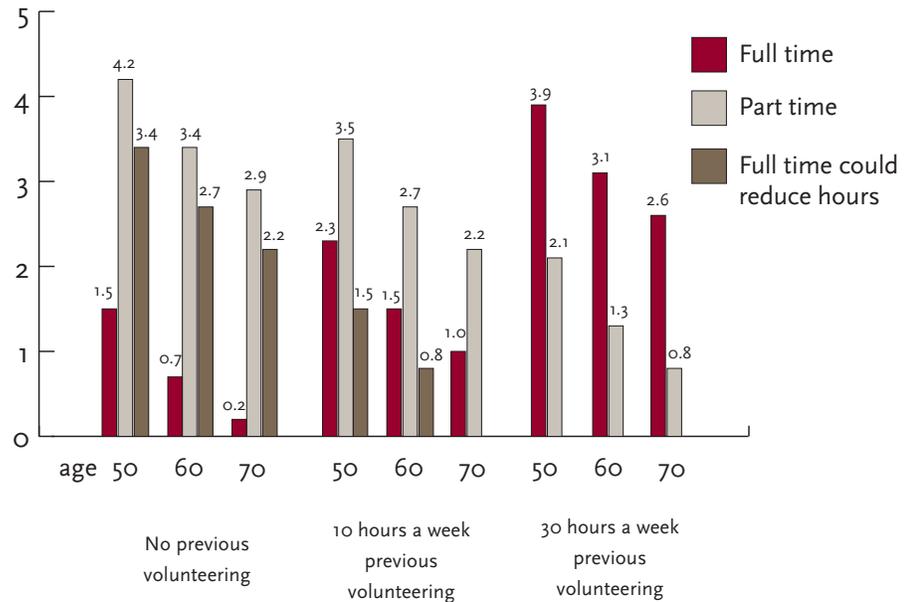
In addition to employment status, the characteristics of one's job affected time-use outside of work. Employment characteristics can include whether employed part time, whether an employee could reduce his or her hours if currently working full time, and whether a person is self-employed. If an employee anticipated the ability to reduce working hours to part time, this might affect time use choices.

Figure 5: Comparison of Hours Devoted to Caregiving by Employed/Not Employed Adults over time based on previous levels of caregiving



Source: Author's calculations based on the American Time Use Survey

Figure 6: Comparison of Hours Devoted to Volunteering by Full Time/Part Time/Full Time but could reduce hours adults over time based on previous levels of Volunteering



Source: Author's calculations based on the American Time Use Survey

For instance, Figure 5 outlines the relationship between volunteering and employment characteristics. At low levels of volunteering, working part time or having access to a part-time schedule usually was associated with more time spent volunteering. However, at high levels of volunteering, the effect diminishes. Full-time workers who were very involved with volunteering were just as likely (or in extreme cases, more likely) to remain involved in the future in comparison to part time workers

### 3. The Effect of Shifts in Work Status

Full-time career employees differ from the self-employed and those working part time differ from those working full time. Recent shifts between statuses can signal a reorganization of a person's schedule. For instance, a person who has recently switched to part-time employment may use his or her time differently than someone who has been working part-time for many years. To evaluate the effect of changes in work status, five different types of shifts were tested:

- Recent shift from self-employed to employee
- Recent shift from employee to self-employed
- Recent shift to different employer
- Recent shift to part-time work with same employer
- Recent return to the labor force

The results of the analysis indicated that for older adults (those ages 50 and older), any type of change in employment characteristic resulted in more time spent on home improvements. This suggests that older adults may place a substantial amount of emphasis on "fixing up" their home as they phase into retirement. Regardless of how they reorganize their work schedule, time use changes during the early retirement years can be accompanied by a range of home projects, such as home remodeling or maintenance.

More specifically, a recent shift to a different employer predicts significant decreases in the amount of personal time experienced by the worker among retirement-aged adults. While bridge job employment for older adults can result in fewer hours or fewer job demands, this may not always be the case. One possible reason for this change is that when workers switch to a new job, they typically do not have access to the same level of informal flexibility that develops from the relationship between coworkers and supervisors over time.

## *Conclusion: Summary and Implications*

The amount of time that people spend on paid work and other activities changes over the life course. Yet little attention has been paid to showing how these activities fit together in a “complete” day.

- ▶ **Predominant activities:** Throughout the life course, work, personal activities, and leisure take up the bulk of the average person’s day, although these trends differ by gender, age, and employment status.
- ▶ **Work “Spillover”:** While the time spent on work-related activities decreases with age, the characteristic of the job affects how older adults spend the rest of their days. This suggests that employers can have intentional or unintentional effects on time use outside of the workplace.
- ▶ **Time reorganization:** As older adults reorganize their time schedules, changes in employment status can have positive effects. For instance, self-employment can encourage volunteering. However, other changes—such as switching employers past age 50—may mean decreases in personal time as the worker establishes himself or herself at a new workplace.
- ▶ **Persistence over time:** One of the strongest predictors of time use is past time use. Employment situations that affect time use in one stage of life may have lasting effects.

## REFERENCES

- 1 The 2006 American Time Use Survey (ATUS) is a cross-sectional survey representative of the adult population in the United States. ATUS is part of the Current Population Survey and includes 12,943 adults ages 15 and up. Data drawn from the 2002 and 2004 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), along with the 2001, 2003, and 2005 Consumption and Activities Mail Survey (CAMS) data, is used to focus in on changes over time for the over 50 age group. Up to two observations were available for each respondent. Overall, 3,460 observations for 1,896 individuals were available. The time use of each respondent at time 1 was compared with their time use two years later (time 2).

---

Tay K. McNamara, Ph.D., is a senior research associate at the Boston College Center on Aging and Work. Her work focuses on work and retirement.

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College was founded in 2005 with a multi-million dollar grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The Center partners with workplace decision-makers in evidence-based research on employer and employee responses to the increasingly global multi-generational workforce. These collaborations focus on quality of employment with the aim to inform employers with research data to attract, engage and retain high quality industry talent. As of 2008, the Center has three research streams – the US National Initiatives, the State Initiatives and the Global Initiatives. Their collective mission is to gather information and collaborate with leaders in the public, non-profit and business sectors in an effort to leverage today's multi-generational workforce and globalization as competitive advantages in the 21st century economy.

---

For previous publications, visit our website at [www.bc.edu/agingandwork](http://www.bc.edu/agingandwork)

- Issue Brief 1: Older Workers: What Keeps Them Working?
- Issue Brief 2: Businesses: How Are They Preparing For the Aging Workforce?
- Issue Brief 3: Getting the Right Fit: Flexible Work Options and Older Workers
- Issue Brief 4: How Old Are Today's Older Workers?
- Issue Brief 5: One Size Doesn't Fit All: Workplace Flexibility
- Issue Brief 6: Down Shifting: The Role Of Bridge Jobs After Career Employment
- Issue Brief 7: Civic Engagement: Volunteering Dynamics and Flexible Work Options
- Issue Brief 8: Does Health Insurance Affect The Employment of Older Workers?
- Issue Brief 9: The 21st Century Multi-Generational Workplace
- Issue Brief 10: Today's Multi-Generational Workforce: A Proposition of Value
- Issue Brief 11: Responsive Workplaces for Older Workers: Job Quality, Flexibility and Employee Engagement
- Issue Brief 12: Generational Differences in Perceptions of Older Workers' Capabilities
- Issue Brief 13: Quality of Employment and Life Satisfaction: A Relationship that Matters for Older Workers
- Issue Brief 14: The Interlocking Careers of Older Workers and Their Adult Children
- Issue Brief 15: Self Employment As A Step in The Retirement Process
- Issue Brief 16: Older And Out Of Work: Trend in Older Worker Displacement
- Issue Brief 17: Older and Out of Work: Employer, Government and Nonprofit Assistance

- Research Highlight 1: Context Matters: Insights About Older Workers From the National Study of the Changing Workforce
- Research Highlight 2: The Diverse Employment Experiences of Older Men and Women in the Workforce
- Research Highlight 3: The Benchmark Study, Phase I of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development
- Research Highlight 4: The National Study, Phase II of The National Study of Business Strategy and Workforce Development