Working for the clampdown

Following its successful trial in the university system during the past three years, time-management reporting is now to be extended to all citizens of the European Union (EU). The university trial concerned the apportionment of working time between different activities and was required by EU legislation to implement the so-called 'full-cost model' to all externally funded research in the academic sector. In essence, this enabled university finance departments to guarantee that external funding was correctly used for specified projects, and not for more general tasks such as thinking, deleting spam e-mails or the online submission and verification of time-management data.

The new system, as outlined in the EU's Non-Working Time Directive, will track citizens' use of their time outside the workplace. Its aim is to ensure that public funds are properly used for the purposes intended. For example, if $x\%$ of the state budget is being spent on dental services, and this represents a fraction y of total national spending on dentistry, including the production, marketing and sale of toothpaste, then citizens should be spending $(x/y)\%$ of their non-working time visiting the dentist, brushing and flossing their teeth or managing their dentures.

Citizens will be required to submit a weekly online report of their activities outside the working environment, broken down into 15-minute time blocks. To simplify this procedure, such reporting will not, at least initially, require full details of each activity, merely its assignment to one

of 53 activity categories and the allocation of a one-letter code to indicate under which ministry's auspices the activity falls.

An example of such an entry is provided here (Table 1), and the process is fully explained in an online tutorial when the system is first accessed. The online help function also lists the numerical codes that refer to each activity category and the letters that designate the relevant ministry. The system does not allow activities to be split between different ministerial areas of responsibility. In cases where an activity is judged to relate to two or more different ministries, each citizen must make a reasonable assessment of the proportion due to each, and then apportion successive 15-minute time slots accordingly.

A few activities are considered to be unrelated to any government ministry and are thus judged to be personally funded or supported entirely by private resources (letter code P); for example, conjugal activities, house cleaning (as long as it is not related to home improvements subsidized by grants from the Ministry of Housing) and sleeping. These may be assigned the activity category code 52 (general activities) or 53 (other activities), but on the whole these codes should not be used for any activity related to public funding. Time spent in or travelling to the workplace is excluded and should be recorded simply as activity category 0, letter code W. However, those who work from home should be careful to apportion their time slots accurately. Time spent describing one's activity or location through a social networking website is also considered to be activity category 0.

Every adult citizen must also enter his or her data personally and should not delegate the task to a partner, relative or professional time-management consultant. Owing to the continuing need to restrain state expenditure, there will be no specific financial support for citizens to comply with these new requirements. Those in financial hardship, for example, who are unable to purchase a home computer or internet connection, can use public online facilities in libraries or post offices. Note, however, that any waiting time needed to access or travel to such facilities should be entered as code 53P, and not as an activity related to the Ministries of Telecommunications or Transportation.

It is important to stress that there is no intention, at present, to impose sanctions on citizens whose use of time deviates from the anticipated norm, although fiscal penalties will be applied where data is not supplied in a timely fashion, or where entries are systematically nonsensical (for example, if a citizen claims to be sleeping for 24 hours each day), based on experience with the university trial. The system will be used purely to ensure that public funding is properly apportioned in a more global sense. However, it will also provide a useful guide to citizens as to whether they are making proper use of public services. It might also, in future, create a framework for targeted fiscal policies in order to encourage citizens to maximize their overall social utility.

As in so many areas of life, the universities have proven to be pioneers of innovation and a vanguard for cultural development. Far less workplace time is now wasted on useless activities such as endless discussions that lead nowhere, or idle musings on how to solve inherently insoluble problems. Instead, academics have become much more accountable, and the reform has actually created many new jobs in administration and professional counselling.

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Table 1 | An extract from a weekly non-working activity report

Week: 2	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
06:00–06:15	53P	53P	53P	0W	53P	52P	52P
06:15–06:30	24H	16A	24H	0W	16X	53P	52P
06:30–06:45	0W	0W	0W	0W	0W	53P	52P

Codes: 0, none; 16, eating; 24, personal hygiene (non-dental); 52, general; 53, other; A, Ministry of Agriculture; H, Ministry of Health and Social Services; P, personal; W, work-related; X, Ministry of Infrastructure and Economic Affairs.