

Backward-Bending Labor Supply

by Anne Emerson – September 2, 2026

No, we are not talking about doing the limbo, or anything like that. “Backward-Bending Labor Supply” is a technical term in economics. What it means in plain English is that, if we are paid more, we don’t work as many hours.

That is the end of the discussion of backward-bending supply, except for one thing – SOME people work lots of hours, even though they don’t need to do that in order to live comfortably. I have met people who simply love their jobs. They get paid for what they enjoy doing. That’s probably okay in the grand scheme of things, unless their joy causes trouble for the people around them.



And now we are drifting into the main reason I decided to write this essay. Many people have foibles – little obsessions like collecting rare objects or solving puzzles or playing trivia games. The medical perspective on these is that they are fine unless they interfere with a person’s living a normal life. I will not address what a “normal life” is. Approximately speaking, we could argue that, if our foibles invade others’ space or cause others harm, then we need help to stop doing whatever-it-is.

So, now I will speak more plainly. Some behaviors are addictions. Some substances are addictive. It may not be mainstream to suggest that working too much is an addiction, and yet many of us have heard the term “Workaholic.” Where I am going with this is that there are doctors, nurses, psychologists, and therapists who work with addicts. One of the difficult things about addictions is that people who are addicts - people who put feeding their “need” ahead of their respect for others – have a tendency to relapse.

I will suggest that Workaholism has two characteristics that might be of societal concern, as well as of individual concern. One is that, if we work very hard at something, then we often get very good at it. We get appreciated and rewarded for that. That admiration perhaps feeds the emotions (related to neurotransmitters, or chemicals in the brain) associated with addiction in general. One of them is called dopamine. It is a “pleasure” molecule. When the brain is flooded with dopamine, we feel good.

The other concerning characteristic of working too hard is that our society may not always recognize a compulsion to do “good work” as an addiction. It looks, perhaps, noble and admirable. Many of us admire talent. We admire power; risk-taking; defying the odds. We admire a smoker; a drinker; an outlaw; a provocateur – as long as it doesn’t go too far. The drug dealer who brings money into an impoverished community is treated with ambivalence – the money is appreciated, and the beneficiaries try not to think too hard about where it came from.



I expect my readers (if there are any) can appreciate how the life of an addict moves forward – he or she thinks that social drinking/smoking/fast living is okay. But not everyone approves, so the person’s friends become the crowd that does that. Then they move to stronger drinks, harder

drugs, riskier parties. (Or they start to associate with more hard-driving executives, or more hawkish generals, or more power-hungry political leaders.) And so it goes. Climbing out of the abyss gets harder, the more of a groupthink and group loyalty that someone is in; and – in my opinion – the more the rest of society condemns them.

It is not for me (alone) to turn around what seems to be a large “addiction” situation in the USA today. Many people will need to do their share as regards changing the incentives that bring addictive behavior into the world. What I hope to do with this essay is call attention to the existence of socially-condoned addictions, such as Workaholism or Exploiting Talent, and the likelihood that “making a lot of money” is involved in these types of addictions.

I do not know whether this type of addiction may be found in lists of medical diagnoses. I am not a physician. I do not write this from a position of authority in that regard. I put it forward for your consideration, based on my personal experiences. There may be some professionals who can speak to what medical experts have to say about the addictive pursuit of wealth.

I believe that people who have seen how addiction works in their own families are in a position to think about this for themselves. I think that, if you agree with me that we might want to explore this (addiction to money) as a society, then we should be having a conversation that includes many types of experts, rather than taking action ourselves if we know relatively little about complex human behaviors.

The particular expertise that I offer has to do with how money does or does not “get things done,” and does or does not meet society’s larger goals. The reason that I also know something about addictive behavior is two-fold – one, I live among many people who enjoy money and wealth and societal approval, sometimes to the detriment of their families and their own health; and two, my attempts to write the book on such people’s (unintended) role in the development of terrorist organizations and behaviors have met with extreme disapproval, to the point where I have been ostracized and villainized into the company of society’s “fringe” elements myself.

In sum, I think we should be asking ourselves, as human beings and as members of society, how we have produced a culture that admires power, money, and bucking the system to the point where our nation’s financial dominance is actively trying to spread this culture around the world. Perhaps, even now, many of us here in the USA are okay with that. I am not at all sure that the rest of the world is on board. For example, in some places ordinary citizens decline to do business with people (or countries?) whose behavior seems to be putting undue pressure on them. It’s called “freedom.”

