

Productivity, Happiness and other Statistics ...

Earlier this week, I came across this very interesting article from the Harvard Business Review about Productivity and engagement at work : <https://hbr.org/2017/02/being-engaged-at-work-is-not-the-same-as-being-productive> (thanks @ReneCunningham for sharing).

In essence, it explains that being engaged at work is not the same as being productive. Very fair points, although I usually take survey results in the work space with a grain of salt. It however, don't ask me why, reminded an animated discussion years ago between a French and an Australian colleague about **productivity**: one arguing that France had one of the most productive workforce's in the world, the other arguing the opposite citing the usual 35Hrs working week law, lots of holidays, weekly strikes, long lunch breaks and other well-known clichés - that being said, in that case, being a cliché does not mean it is untrue.

Who was right? Well, if you measure productivity as GDP generated per hour worked (common measuring method from what I could gather), then my French colleague was indeed correct! As unbelievable as it sounds, in 2018 France was the 6th most productive country in the world with US\$ 59.24 generated per hour worked. Not bad for a country universally regarded as "lazy" (one of the common stereotypes about French people according to Wikipedia). Although I have to admit it brought me an gratifying moment of patriotic pride (especially as my other country, Australia, ranked 9th and both ranking higher than the UK 😊), it led me to look at other statistics, everything being 1 click away these days: Yes, I saw the rabbit hole coming and yet, I fell right into it ...

Before continuing, I can already hear some comments coming my way: "who are you to discuss these topics?"; "what legitimacy do you have?" ... No one and None, plain and simple! I just can read like most people and share thoughts. Is the approach scientific and rigorous? Not at all. Is it empirical? Not even close. But here it is nonetheless! And in the words of the great philosopher Taylor Swift "Haters gonna hate..."

Now that this is out of the way, let's get into it!

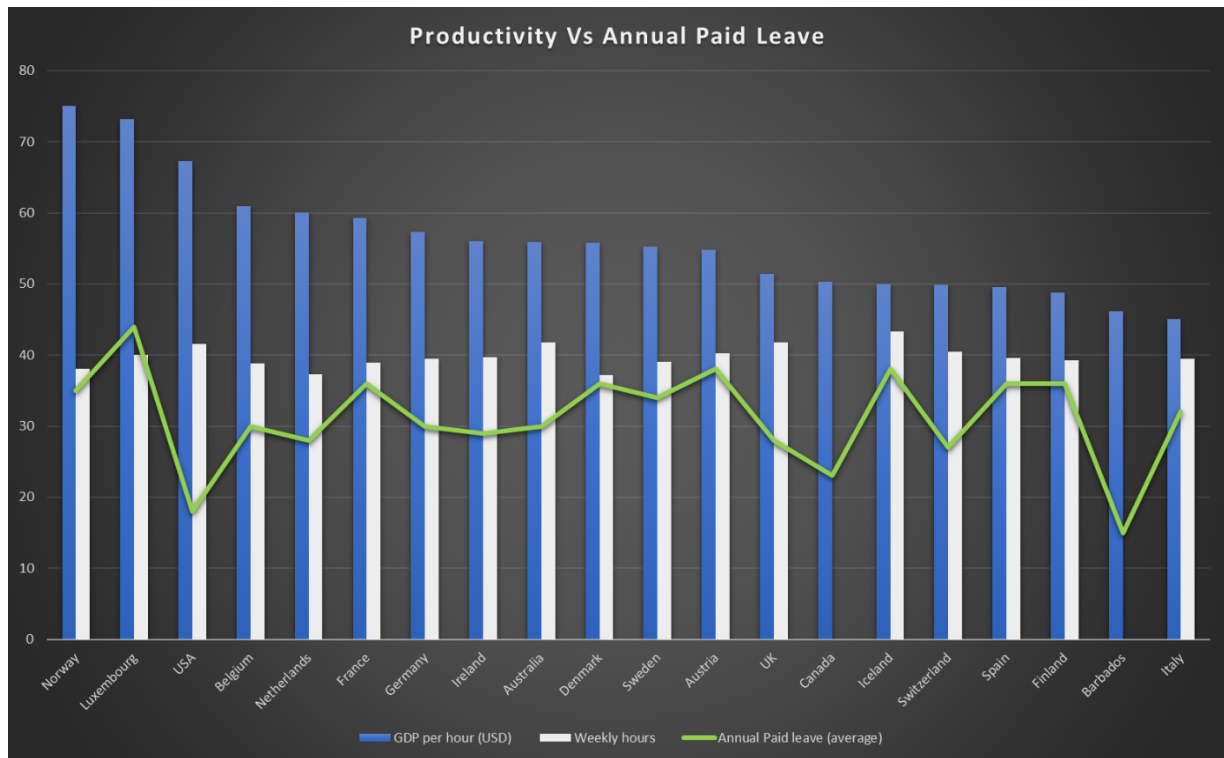
"Smart vacations lead to greater happiness and energy at work and, therefore, greater productivity, intelligence, and resilience." Sawn Achor

According to the below graph, the above citation is not quite true when it comes to the 20 most productive countries in the world that we will consider here:

- In the top 10, only 40% have more paid leave than the average
- From the 11th to the 20th place, 60% are above the average

Not a clear correlation between paid leave and productivity then... However, shorter weeks seems to be beneficial for Productivity:

- Top 10 working hours per week averages at 39.7
- From the 11th to the 20th place, we look at 40.22



But of course, it cannot be the only factor so let's look at others.

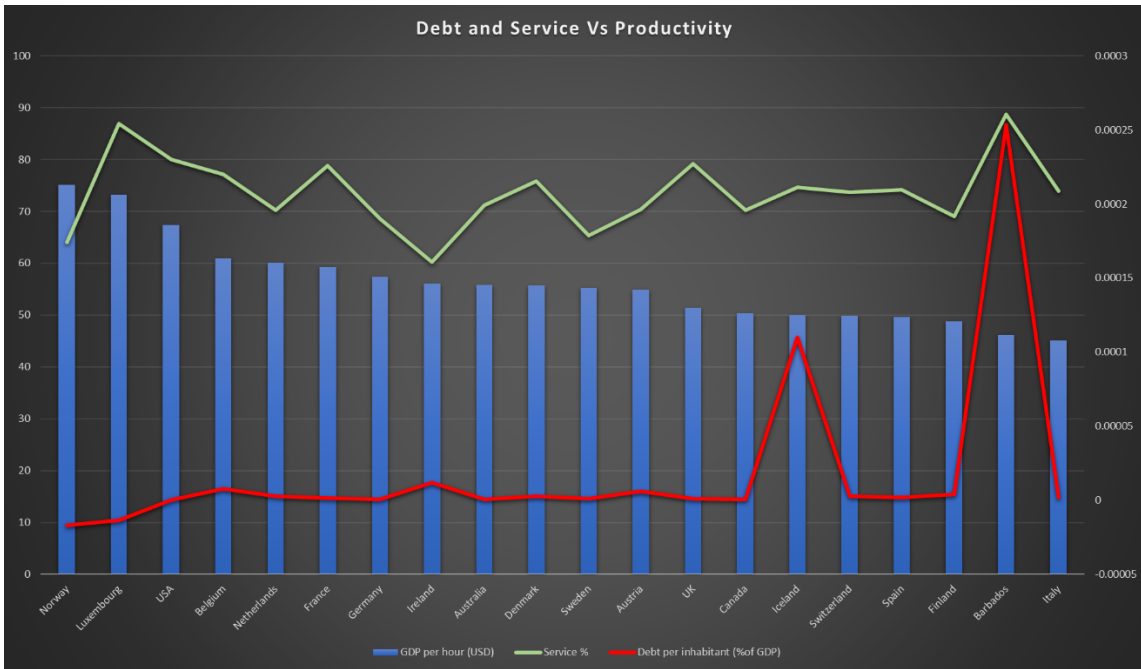
"Blessed are the young for they shall inherit the national debt." Herbert Hoover

Looking at public debt (per inhabitant in % of GDP) and the Services portion of the GDP, we observe:

- Lower debt is associated with higher productivity or maybe higher productivity fosters lower debt: the chicken and the egg
- Services wise, the range is between 60 and 90 % and there's no clear cut. Maybe a better spread between Agriculture, Manufacturing and Services is a factor, of resilience anyway, but I did not push this far...

Note1: only two countries on the list actually have a positive debt (Surplus), Norway and Luxembourg, respectively 1st and 2nd productivity wise; coincidence?

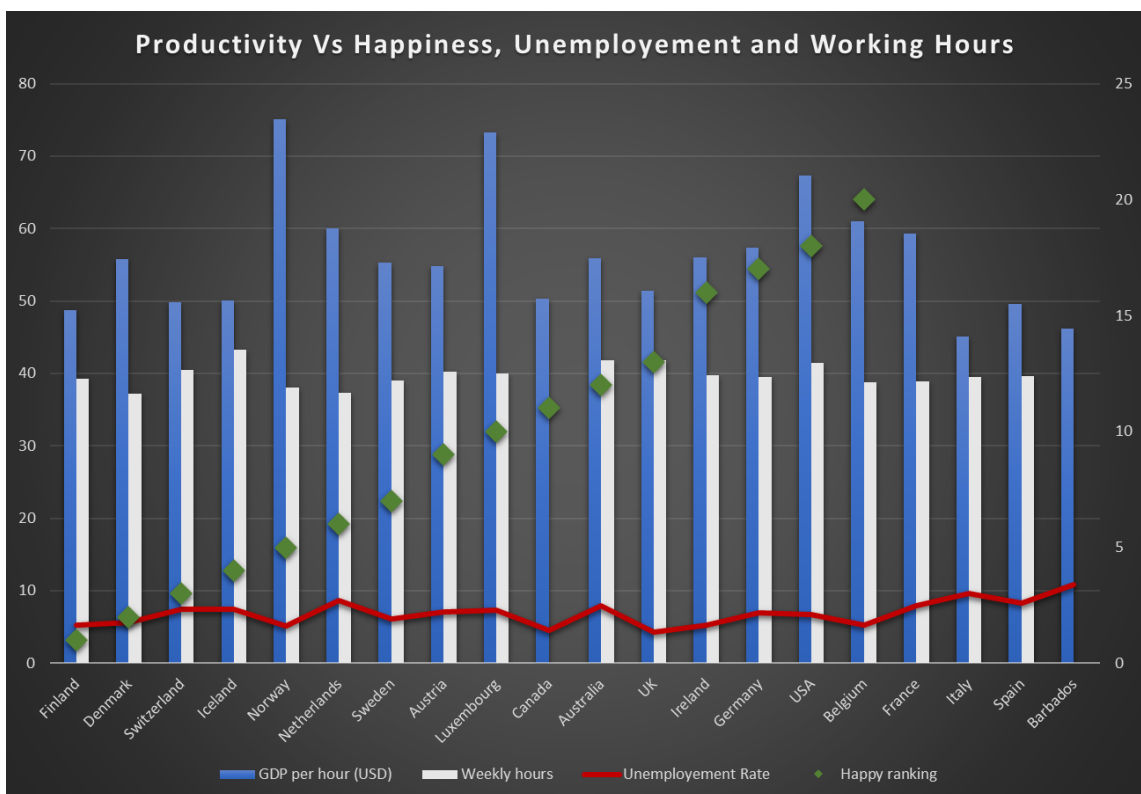
Note2: the rest of the countries all are in debt. How much of that debt is used to support local economy? Does it have a direct link to the productivity (taking the assumption that more local work = more GDP)? If so, is it sustainable?



“You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.” Albert Camus

Interesting quote about happiness from a guy famous for books with titles such as The Plague, The Fall, The Happy Death or Reflexions on the Guillotine... Very uplifting hey?

I will not even dare try answering the question of what happiness consists of, but could there be a link between happiness and productivity?



- Provided that out of the 20 most productive countries in the world, 16 made top 20 most “happy” countries in the world, the straight answer is yes, most likely.

Now, does happiness result in productivity, or does productivity boosts happiness? Hard to tell, so let’s say “it’s a bit of both”.

- We can also see a slight trend indicating that happiness level decreases as the employment rate rises... Sounds logical enough I suppose?
- However, no clear correlation between happiness and working hours and surprisingly (for me at least) more happiness in the countries with lower than average Annual Leave!

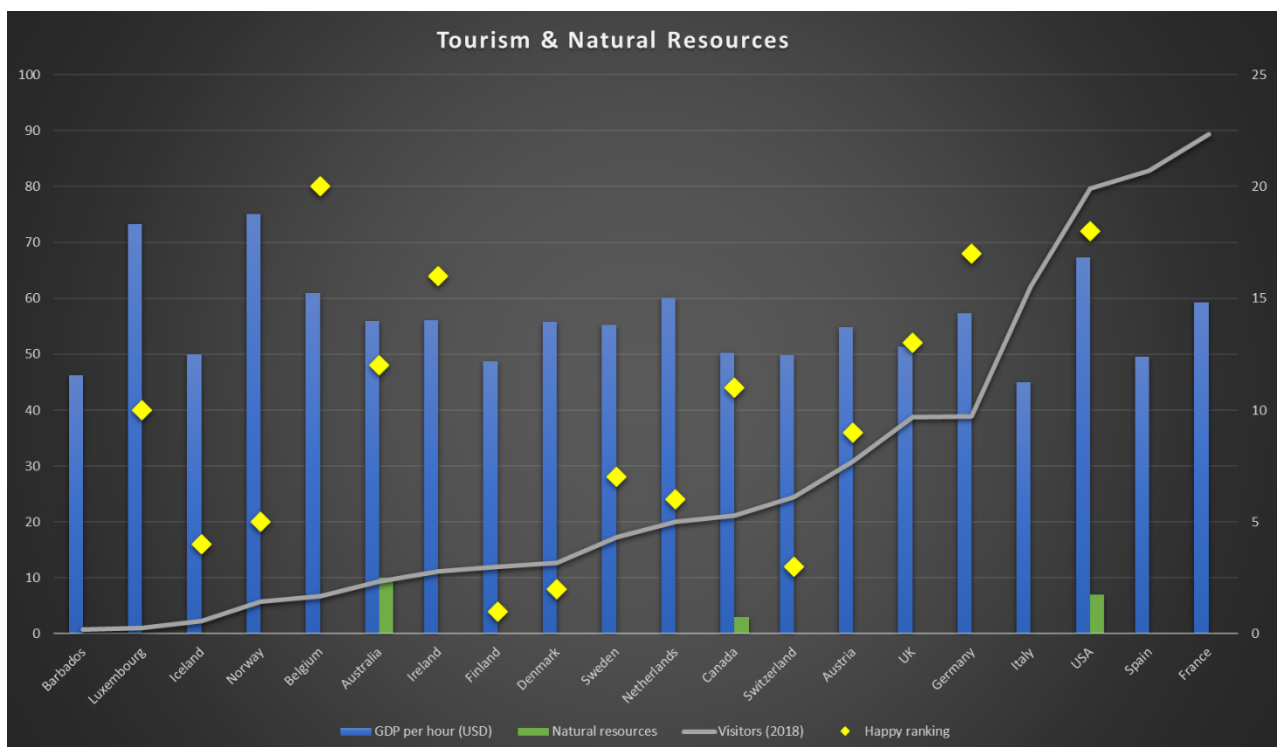
“Paris is always a good idea.” Audrey Hepburn

Is it really? Well, France has been the most visited country in the world year on year and Paris, of course, the most visited city. I will let aside my provincial (everyone in France that is not from Paris – yes, Parisians do have a single word to describe all the rest of France...) opinion, I lived in Paris for years, it is good indeed, even better since I only visit it! Parisians however... another story altogether...

More seriously, I thought I’d look at potential GDP contributors (or so I thought):

- Natural resources: it turns out that out of the 20 most productive countries, only three make the top ten of the countries with the most natural resources; Australia, USA and Canada, respectively 10th, 7th and 3rd. Not quite compelling
- Tourism: no clear correlation either, and after double checking, the tourism contribution to GDP is very low.

The truth must be elsewhere...



What is very interesting though, is that out of this list only four countries did not make the top 20 Happiest Countries list, and leaving the USA aside, three of these countries are the most visited in the world! France, Spain and Italy; respectively 1st, 2nd and 4th. And that, in itself, is very puzzling... Here are my top 3 theories:

- Having to eat the best food in the world, drink the best wines and leaving amongst some of the most beautiful places in the world on a daily basis is boring and depressing... (likelihood: 2%)
- These three countries see so many tourists year on year out that they simply can't take it anymore. After all, being so popular must be tough. (likelihood: 20%)
- France, Spain and Italy; the largest European "Latin" countries are simply countries full of natural born niggers and complainers. (likelihood: 80%). No offense to any of my French, Spanish or Italians friends, this is just a hypothesis 😊

Harsh? Maybe; True? I plead the 5th ...

"Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers." Voltaire

I really like this quote. Not only do I subscribe to the idea 100%, but it turns out to be, in that particular case, quite convenient for me.

What is the recipe for productivity? For happiness? ... I do not know. I'm sorry if you expected some answers when you started reading this piece: all I have is more questions...

But if I do not have the recipe, I believe Paul J. Meyer has nailed the ingredients:

"Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort." Paul J. Meyer

Last (but not least) bit of statistics before concluding:

- In the top three of the most productive countries, two are led by Women (66%)
- In the top 10, we have four countries led by Women (40%)
- In the top 20, we have 6 (30%)
- The worldwide number is however much less @ roughly 13%...
- And the four Happiest countries in the world are ALL led by Women!

"Women is the Future of Men". Louis Aragon

All that being said, most of these data are from 2018 or thereabouts: not too bad usually, but 2020 and the COVID-19 Pandemic might (and probably will) completely reshuffle the deck, rendering all of the above potentially obsolete. It would be interesting to have another look at all of this in 12 or 18 months...

What do you think?

Sources:

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Productivity, Happiness and other Statistics: Thoughts from a freelance analyst...

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<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/productivity-happiness-other-statistics-jean-capdevielle>