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Doesn't anybody around here want to work any more?

Friday, April 13, 2007

In [Rome](#), the saying goes that if you feel like working, take a seat and wait until the urge disappears. Is it an accident that Turkey's growth rate is 6 percent while the Italian economy has been sputtering?

Dennis Redmont

It is one o'clock on the dot. The bread store owner at my neighborhood is getting ready to pull down his steel [shutters](#) to go home for his "pisolino" (siesta.) I rush to his doorstep breathless, happy that I got there before he closes down. ``Che fortunato!--how lucky" I say , as my guests are waiting at the luncheon table for me to bring bread which we forgot to buy in the morning. ``Ciao amico mio, ho bisogno di pane per favore,--hi my friend, I need bread please" I cry. He stares at my face as if I have come from Mars. ``Non vedi, chiuso--don't you See? Closed" he says. No, he must be joking, I tell myself, as I watch him pull the shutters and walk away.

Then I think of my Turkish experience, when it is only a one call away to get the bread, newspapers and whatever else needed delivered at home from your grocery by a smiling faced teenager with his [ipod](#) lodged in his ear. Even on Sunday. Or I remember my neighborhood barber who waits for me at 8 p.m. Saturday to give me a fresh shave before my dinner appointment when I call him from

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the airport to tell him to wait for me after my plane lands.

Long lunches, long holidays:

It is a difficult adjustment back to the Italian way of life when you get spoiled in Turkey with good and friendly service. In Rome, the saying goes that if you feel like working, take a seat and wait until the urge disappears.

It is not part of the Italian mentality to work very hard: long lunches, long holidays, late for appointments and rarely in a hurry; protected industries with people not inclined to try harder than absolutely necessary. Indeed, the "vita" is "dolce."

A key problem is the lack of competitive spirit, both within the workplace and within the wider world in general. According to a World Economic Forum report last December, [Italy](#) now falls below all other European Union members save Poland in competitiveness. The economy is highly regulated and regulations can defy logic: until the latest liberalisation package comes into force, for example, hairdressers could not open on a Monday.

The rigid, old-fashioned labor market, means a tendency to get stuck in one job (unless you are one of the new wave of "temporary" contract workers). It is nearly impossible to fire anybody without getting sued, which also reduces renewal in the work place. Promotion is often based on age or seniority of service rather than on performance. Political and personal ties seem to be worth more than qualifications: nepotism (by the way an Italian word, coming from "nephew") is so prevalent that it is sometimes hard to view Italy as a meritocracy.

One of the main reasons is Italy's large amount of small and medium sized companies.

Excessively inefficient bureaucracy:

An excessively inefficient bureaucracy and an abundance of red tape do not help either: it is so difficult to get anything done that people frequently just give up. It currently takes 35 days to set up a business in Italy, according to an EU study, compared to just seven in the UK.

Cultural reasons also explain why others are reluctant to work. Women are traditionally wives and mothers and only about 40% of Italian women work in professional jobs, one of the lowest figures in Europe. The idea of *mammismo* - attachment to the mother - often runs deep in the Italian psyche, making young people unwilling to leave parental protection, especially mamma's cooking.

The suffering economy means that there is less money, as well as fewer stable jobs around, and employees are made to feel that they should be content to accept small salaries or new "flexible" contracts. To the country's [credit](#) has been the sharp drop in unemployment, now at 6,8 percent, one of the few achievements of the previous Silvio Berlusconi center-right coalition.

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As well as salaries on the low side, the median [tax](#) burden is 47.7%, so net earnings are diminished. This means that "Tax freedom day", calculated by *CorriereEconomia* to denote the end of the prop of the year that one works for the state, is this year set for June 24, three days later than 2006. In comparison, in the UK the average rate of [income tax](#) is 18.2%. The state does not attract enough respect for high rates of taxes to be accepted and tax avoidance and evasion remains a national [Surveys](#) show Italians see politicians as corrupt and overpaid; the average lawmaker receives 11 euros gross per month, more than five times the median wage.

Italy and Turkey:

There has been only slight economic growth (2% for 2006 in figures released this month by the Statistics body, Istat). Faith in the police is spotty, the education system is nothing to boast about, state medical care is lacking compared to that in other countries with high taxation, justice is notoriously slow, [infrastructure](#), particularly in the South, is often inadequate or nonexistent. In Italy, despite having 75 percent of the world's art treasure, finished in 33rd position in a recent survey on national tourism by the World [Economic](#) Forum and Booz Allen Hamilton, for showing poor service, transport and reliability. Why would someone feel inclined to work himself to the bone for many hours to find he is still struggling to support his family while the Senate is spending 2.1 million Euros a month on luxury toilet paper and [soap](#)?

Some of my readers may be thinking there still are so many similarities between Italy and Turkey. But Turkey's growth rate is 6 percent while the Italian economy has been sputtering (1 percent a year for the past four years). So, could someone please tell me how Turkey maintains such a vibrant economy? It must be the determination of the people to work long hours, three shifts, four different jobs, the tireless entrepreneurial spirit of business people whose imaginations do not meet limits, the enthusiasm of the whole society "to make it."

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Dennis Redmont, former head of The Associated Press for Italy and the Mediterranean, is an executive at the Council for the US and Italy. He divides his time between Turkey and Italy.

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