

A 4-DAY WORKING WEEK?

By Colin Stuart & Jessica Andrews

INTRODUCTION



In 1930, John Maynard Keynes wrote an essay titled “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren”. In this work, Keynes forecasted that in one hundred years hence, we would be working a 15-hour week. Keynes thought that given the history of our working habits, a reduction in the working week made logical, economic and technological sense – and he had a point. From the beginning of the agricultural age, humans laboured all day, every day, just to survive.

Then, a few thousand years ago we reached a transition point in our species history: we produced a surplus. From here on in we no longer had to toil day in, day out just to put food on the table. This led to the advent of religious holidays, most notably the weekly day of rest. This was followed by the industrial revolution which sparked a remarkable growth in productivity and economic output, which eventually led to further reductions in working hours. The 19th Century saw the push for an eight-hour working day, followed by the five-day working week in the early 20th century.

Keynes prophesied that we would continue on this path of economic growth and technological improvement, meaning that more jobs would be made redundant allowing us to reduce working hours and increase leisure time. He speculated that three-hour shifts or a 15-hour working a week would fulfil our enterprising nature, meaning the rest of our time would be left for pursuing leisure activities.¹

THE FACTS OF WORKING LIFE

Yet here we are. We revel in material opulence unimagined by the likes of Keynes, but we still persist with work as if our lives depend on it. In fact, in the 1980s something quite peculiar happened. We bucked the trend of history and started working more. When we had finally triumphed over scarcity, we put our shoulder back to the grindstone rather than allowing ourselves the day off. Why?

Arriving in the office at the crack of dawn and leaving late is perhaps more a signalling exercise of one's commitment, rather than being a productive use of time.² The concept of working five days a week with two-day weekends and a few weeks of annual holiday is just something people accept. For some reason, many companies consider this set up to be set in stone. Yet logistically, there is no reason this cannot change. In fact, it might just benefit everyone if it did.³

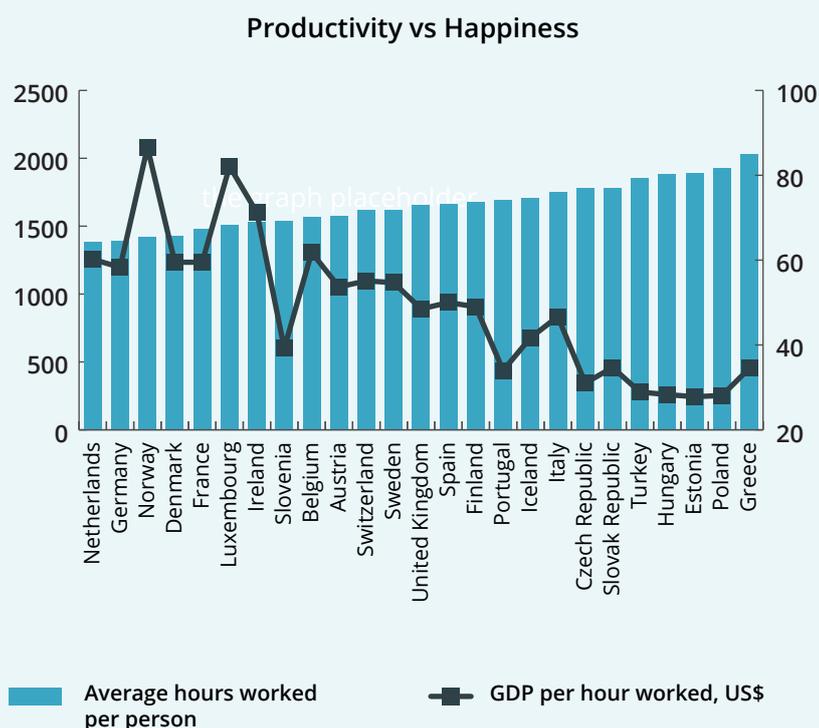
One of the most common proposals for alterations to traditional work schedules is the shortening of the workweek.⁴ Whilst we may not be ready to take the plunge into a 15-hour week, it could well be time to consider a four-day working week.⁵

There are two popular alternatives when scheduling a four-day week; businesses can do 8-hour days and 32-hour weeks – relying on increased productivity to make up the difference – or they can work longer hours on fewer days, keeping the traditional 40-hour workweek.⁶



INCREASES IN PRODUCTIVITY

Perhaps one of the most convincing arguments for the four-day working week is that it can actually make for a more productive workforce. When France and Sweden dabbled with a four-day working week, more often than not, output remained stable or increased. The increase in productivity is particularly observable in office workers who, unlike factory workers, do not necessarily produce more just by sitting at their desks for longer.⁷



Indeed, Jason Fried, CEO of the web-based project management and collaboration tool, Basecamp, reported that the 32-hour, four-day working week at his company has resulted in an increase in productivity. He stated that: "Better work gets done in four days than in five". Compressing the working week means workers are more likely to focus on what's important. It makes sense: when there's less time to work, there's less time to waste.⁸

Statistics also support the hypothesis that a shorter working week results in increased productivity. The graph overlaid shows that there is a general negative correlation between productivity and hours worked; countries with lower average hours spent at work tend to experience higher levels of productivity (as measured by GDP per hour worked).



ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF A FOUR DAY WORKWEEK

A shorter working week also has environmental benefits. It's a simple concept: when the lights are on for four days rather than five, and employees are commuting less, costs and carbon emissions are lowered. A recent report from the Centre for Economic Policy Research suggested a worldwide shift to a four-day week could reduce carbon emissions enough to halve expected levels of global warming between now and 2100. Indeed, in the US, the states that have tried implementing the four-day working week have seen carbon emissions cut by up to 14%.⁹

MEDICAL ARGUMENTS

There is also a medical argument for a four-day working week. One of Britain's leading doctors, Professor John Ashton, has called for the country to switch to a four-day week to combat high levels of work-related stress and let people spend more time exercising. A shorter workweek would also address conditions such as high blood pressure and the mental ill health associated with being over-worked. Ashton is quoted as saying:

// When you look at the way we lead our lives, the stress that people are under, the pressure on time and sickness absence, [work-related] mental health is clearly a major issue. We should be moving towards a four-day week because the problem we have in the world of work is you've got a proportion of the population who are working too hard and a proportion that haven't got jobs.¹⁰

Ashton makes an excellent point here. We are currently in an economic environment where many people are unemployed and the majority of the working population are over worked. The four-day working week could help to combat this inequality.

PERSONAL PREFERENCES

Yet another convincing argument for the four-day working week is simply that the workforce generally has a preference for it on a personal level. In Utah, over two thirds of the state's workforce were put on a four-day working week. Eight out of ten employees liked the change and wanted it to continue. Many said it made them more productive and even reduced conflict at home. Only 3% of workers said it made childcare harder. State-wide workplaces reported higher staff morale as well as lower absenteeism.¹¹ Employees have generally viewed adoption of such non-traditional work schedules as beneficial.¹² Research by Eric Raunch, a biologist and theoretical ecologist at MIT, has argued that while productivity has steadily increased in developed countries since 1950, workers' subjective sense of well-being has not seen a similar increase.¹³

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

One of the most common qualms of workers is how hard it is to achieve a work-life balance. A recent study revealed that nearly two-thirds of employees felt that a worklife balance is the most important factor in overall life satisfaction. A four-day working week makes it easier for parents to balance work, life and raising children.¹⁴

Additionally, upon having children many women decide to leave work altogether. Many have argued that the four-day work week is a way to retain talented female workers who might otherwise have quit work to have children.¹⁵ A four-day working week has already become common practice in certain fields, namely medicine. Indeed, 44% of female doctors now work four days a week or fewer. If employers are flexible, parents could choose to take alternative days off and this would drastically decrease costs of childcare, whilst increasing the time families with young children can spend together.¹⁶

REDUCE ATTRITION



A four-day working week could also reduce attrition. High rates of employee turnover can be difficult for businesses to handle; the loss of talented people combined with the time and money spent on identifying and training replacements can be a large burden. Retaining a talented workforce is vital for companies working on large scale, long-term projects.¹⁷ Keeping staff happy will make them less inclined to leave an organisation and as previously discussed, the general consensus is that people prefer a four-day working week. Additionally, for smaller companies with limited resources, a four-day week can be a key way to distinguish themselves from other employers and to give them an edge in attracting talented workers. The potential productivity gains also mean this is a fairly low-cost perk.¹⁸

One of the main issues with the current working schedule, (certainly in Britain), is that people work very long hours, often with involuntary unpaid overtime. The TUC (Trade Union Congress) has calculated that five million people gave the equivalent of a day's worth of free unpaid overtime to their employers each week. Yet at the same time, we also have high rates of unemployment meaning we have a divided country, burdened with related social costs.¹⁹ As Google's Larry Page and others have said, the amount of jobs available for people is going to decrease as technology advances.²⁰

The assumption that growth will mean new jobs is now flawed, with more and more researchers predicting that job creation will fall due to technology automating jobs that were once done by people. New innovations will drive industries forward, but they will also reduce our reliance on people power.²¹ Indeed, US data suggests that technology already destroys more jobs than it creates, as GDP has been able to grow faster than employment since 2000.²² A four-day week would work to counteract this problem; if we work less in line with the increase in technology, then jobs becoming redundant will be felt less in the economy.

CASE STUDY: GOOGLE

A big advocate for the four-day working week is Google. The company has a policy of giving employees in its engineering department free reign over 20% of their work week – one full day in five. The company claims that this makes for happier, more passionate workers, which results in a more creative company. The company believes that its creative employees will devote some of this time to projects that benefit the company. An even better bet is that employees will be working harder the other 80% of the time, investing their energy in a company that they feel respects them not only as employees, but also as people.

For companies curious – yet anxious – about becoming more Google-like, a first step might be to consider office culture. Do people seem relaxed and enthusiastic about their jobs? Do they spontaneously share ideas and collaborate informally when problems arise? Or is everybody hunched over their desk all day, every day? If the answer is the latter, then ask yourself this: is their presence at their desks for long periods of time, five days a week, actually translating into the kind of innovation and productivity your company aspires to? Chances are it isn't.



CONCLUSION

At Baker Stuart we are passionate about helping our clients to make a positive impact on their workers. We have found that adapting workplace culture and introducing flexible working in a personalised way, tailored to individual client needs, has proved time and time again to be popular with workers and employers alike, as well as being successful in increasing productivity. Human productivity isn't simply a numbers game; we don't produce more just because we're sat at our desks longer. We are not robots. Any job that isn't being done by a robot needs an employee with a sense of balance, not a slave mentality.²³

Agile working is the vector through which companies can start to move away from the traditional nine-to-five mentality, towards a more flexible working environment. The history of the human race has been one of incredible enterprise and ingenuity in overcoming the struggle for survival and subsistence. As Keynes pointed out, in this struggle we have been largely victorious. So don't you think we might deserve a day off?²⁴

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