The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Post-covid, the 4-day workweek could help employers as much as workers

History shows that happier, better-rested workers are more productive.

By Julia Hobsbawm

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April 8, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

As many offices begin to reopen after two years, white collar workers are reluctant to return full time. People want more flexible work times and office rules — and they are switching jobs to find these accommodations. Polling indicates that over half of employees favor companies that offer flexibility about when and where they work.

Political leaders are listening. Rep. Mark Takano (D-Calif.) introduced a bill last summer that would enshrine a four-day working week "as the new norm." New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) even mused, "There may never be a five-day week again."

This desire to work differently has distinct echoes from the past that call to mind W.K. Kellogg bringing the six-hour day to workers in 1930. Kellogg's experiment offers useful insights to business and political leaders today who seek a new way forward after the pandemic upended office schedules and the work-life balance of millions of professionals.

Concerns about too much work — and not enough rest and leisure — hampering productivity date to the beginnings of industrialization, when some observers began to notice a tie between excess work hours and exhausted employees and a decline in productivity. The 18th-century Welsh textile manufacturer and philanthropist Robert Owen called for "eight hours' labour, eight hours' recreation, eight hours' rest." By 1886, this slogan had crossed the Atlantic to the Knights of Labor Assemblies, and by 1890, the international trade union movement had placed the number of hours people worked each day at the center of its push for worker rights.

At the same time, enlightened industrialists began to notice the link between fair hours and productivity. In 1918, Lord Leverhulme began advocating a six-hour work day in Britain. Leverhulme noted that “a proper apportionment of the time is the one that will yield the best results and is the problem most pressing for solution.”

The shorter-hours movement received a huge boost from Henry Ford, who pioneered the five-day workweek in the 1920s. But it was cereal magnate Kellogg who, in the teeth of the Great Depression, adopted Leverhulme’s idea — albeit it for a different reason. Instead of having three eight-hour shifts per day at his plant in Battle Creek, Mich., Kellogg instituted four six-hour shifts.

Economics drove Kellogg. With so many people out of work, he wanted to create more jobs for people, in the process winning support from President Herbert Hoover’s 1931 Emergency Organization Committee for Employment.

Kellogg’s experiment had unexpected — positive — consequences. There was the rise of “Kelloggs couples,” who had time for their families and each other. The new shorter shifts also yielded *greater* productivity, lending credence to Leverhulme’s theories. Worker well-being and absenteeism improved, and there were fewer industrial accidents. The move seemed a win-win for Kellogg and his employees.

Adopting shorter workweeks and hours to boost productivity and well-being was dubbed “Liberation Capitalism,” and other companies soon followed Kellogg’s lead.

Brands such as Remington maintained not only shorter hours, but weekly wage levels, so that working fewer hours did not hurt employees’ bottom line. Employers seemed to have grasped that healthier, happier workers were more productive.

Yet, World War II created a patriotic fervor and an economic need that was at odds with a desire for increased leisure and working close to home.

By the 1950s, consumerism and the rise of suburbia took hold, diminishing the shorter-hours culture. There was plenty of work to go around and longer hours meant more pay and more purchasing power — highly desirable in the new consumer culture.

The 41,000 miles of interstate highways ushered in by the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act also made longer commutes possible. A new era in long distance travel to work began, and work-life balance fell from the agenda.

By 1960, the six-hour day was waning even at Kellogg’s company, and by the 1970s, Herbert Freudenberger’s famous term “burnout” became widely understood.

As bosses demanded that workers put in more time, employees increasingly called for flexible working arrangements. In 1974, the historian Studs Terkel published “Working,” in which he interviewed hundreds of working people across the United States. He observed that work was “about a search for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”

Terkel was prescient in giving voice to the ennui and lack of purpose felt by most workers, which only grew more during the 1980s. Throughout the decade, working time — which had shortened steadily for a century — began to climb, and employers began to prize presenteeism. Increased globalization also drove them to seek efficiencies and cost-cutting at the expense of worker well-being. In 1985, the last six-hour work day ended at Kellogg’s corporation.

Although employees — especially professional knowledge workers — never stopped wanting better life balance and flexibility, for decades the marketplace left them no room to demand those accommodations. Between 1979 and 1990, the number of employed men working more than 48 hours a week rose from 15.4 to 23.3 percent. By 1997 the International Labor Organization noted that Americans clocked 2,000 hours per annum per capita, more than their counterparts globally.

At the same time, digital technology changed the picture, making it possible for employees to work from outside the office. Companies responded by granting more "flexibility." But far from being benevolent, this move simply ushered in the "always on" era, in which the promise of flexibility masked the reality that technology had enabled work at all hours of the day and night.

But although flexibility wasn't always a good thing, the advent of the Internet and the smartphone also triggered a backlash against presenteeism, in particular. In 2007, Tim Ferris's "Four Hour workweek" topped the bestseller list, the same year that Apple unveiled the iPhone and Airbnb was born, quickly followed in 2010 by the creation of WeWork. Mobility became less about a commute from home to work and more about working from anywhere.

In the decade before the coronavirus pandemic closed the world's offices, new tensions were emerging between the long-hours culture of elder generations and the emphasis millennials and Generation Z placed on well-being, purpose and mental health. When Elon Musk famously remarked in 2018 that "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week," he was going against the cultural grain. The following year, the World Health Organization formally included "burnout" as "an occupational phenomenon."

The pandemic caused the issue to explode, with workers' hunger for better balance between work and home becoming clear. It also proved to be the biggest unintended experiment in working time since 1930. Now technology means that the knowledge worker's "factory floor" can be at home, which demands a greater need for delineation, boundaries and capping of time.

This is why the global campaign for the four-day week is gaining traction: It symbolizes the need to shorten working time and get the balance right on paid work, no matter where it happens. The latest Microsoft Trend Survey focuses not on place — accepting largely that hybrid work is here to stay — but time, and notes a 252 percent increase in weekly time spent by Teams users in meetings.

Although many companies remain focused on place-based presenteeism, with inducements such as all-you-can-eat buffets and increased pay to lure workers back to offices, employers might be better off focusing on reducing the length of work days and nurturing — not stifling — the new hybrid habits that have been built up.

History shows that when workers have more control over their time, and the balance between their home and work lives improves, companies' bottom lines also benefit. Workers' time, and how it is spent, will be the driver of change, and history shows it always has been.