

Why More Businesses Are Considering Ending The 40-Hour Work Week

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With the shift in working arrangements during the pandemic, businesses are taking a closer look at their schedules.



[Photo: Meghan Hessler/Unsplash]

Ever wonder why we work eight hours a day, five days a week? Or why we clock in from 9 to 5? It started with the shift from agriculture to manufacturing during the industrial revolution. Originally, factory workers clocked in long hours six days a week. A 70-hour workweek wasn't uncommon.

In the 1920s, Henry Ford implemented an eight-hour workday with three shifts to run his factories around the clock. Then, during the Great Depression, government used a 40-hour workweek as a tool for addressing unemployment. It stuck and has been standard practice for more than 80 years. Its relevance in today's workplace, however, is being questioned.

"The 40-hour workweek was based on one person—male—performing labor for pay that he brings home to his family," says Stephanie Bolster McCannon, organizational psychologist and wellness coach. "That is an archaic system. Most of today's households have dual income

earners. You have both people out of the home for eight hours or more. Then they come home and work again, taking care of the house and family. It's no longer an eight-hour workday, especially for females in our society, who are often take on a larger portion of the household and family responsibilities."

With the shift in working arrangements during the pandemic, businesses are taking a closer look at their rules and practices, and the work week is one of them. Governments are looking, too. A new bill in the California State Assembly that would make the official workweek 32 hours for companies with 500 or more employees.

THE TWO MAIN REASONS TO REDUCE WORKING HOURS

During the pandemic, burnout became a major problem, as work and life started to blur together for remote workers. Instead of having boundaries around where work stops and home life begins, people are tackling email and projects at all hours of the day and night.

"We have extended past what science says was good for the human body at 40 hours for physical work," says Bolster McCannon. "Mental work is another whole ballgame. Thinking is very taxing and requires a lot of energy. Neuroscience tells us that whenever the synapses are firing and we're thinking hard, we use a lot of glucose."

Another reason companies are reconsidering the 40-hour workweek is for recruiting. "The war for talent is so competitive," says Brian Kropp, chief of research for Gartner's HR division. "Companies are tired of paying people 20% more money to come to their company only to go someplace else six months later for 20% more. They're rethinking the 40-hour workweek and saying, 'We're not going to pay you more, but you're going to work less.' It's a way to attract and retain talent."

WHAT A SHORTER WEEK LOOKS LIKE

Kropp says companies have options when it comes to designing a shorter workweek. For example, it could be a four-day workweek or every other Friday off. Their question, however, is this: If people are working 20% fewer hours, does that mean that they're 20% less productive?

Kropp says the answer is unclear. "Some studies show that when people work less, they actually do produce less output, but it's about 3% or 4% less," he says. "The decrease in time is not equal to the decrease in output that emerges as organizations are experimenting with these sorts of different approaches. And some of the same studies also show that they're also less likely to quit."

SHOULD YOU GO ALL IN?

Kropp says a big concern is rolling it out and then finding out the productivity isn't there to sustain it.

"How do you undo it once you've done it?" asks Kropp. "If you've said you're going to go to a 32-hour work week and keep the same pay, and then come back and say, 'Well, that didn't work, and you're going back to working 40 hours,' the reaction from employees will be to say, 'That's fine. But then you need to increase my salary by 25%, because I'm going from 32 hours to 40 hours.'"

Before going all in, Kropp recommends running a pilot to see what the impact to your organization in terms of performance and productivity will be. It's a critical step to figure out if it could work at your company. And now is the perfect time to experiment.

"Summer is right around the corner," he says. "Give every third Friday off across the summer or some version of that. If it's limited to the summer, it gives you the ability to end it at the end of the summer if it's not working. If it's working really well, then just keep doing it."

ANOTHER WAY TO STRUCTURE THE WORK WEEK

Instead of measuring work by hours, Bolster McCannon says, it's better to measure it by output. "We all have unique energy cycles when you are most productive doing certain tasks," she says. "Science tells us we can't just keep pushing and grinding out. That's how you destroy human capital. But if we switch that and pay by output, it allows people to maximize those energy cycles and not burn out."

Kropp says basing work on output is conceptually a good idea, but the workplace isn't quite ready for it yet. "In a remote hybrid world, managers have less visibility into what employees are actually doing and the contributions that employees are making," he says. "In an in-person world, managers can see what's going on. One of the big challenges about letting people work as much or as little as they need to get things done and holding them accountable to their outputs is that it's harder to see the outputs."

We're a couple of years away from having technology that can figure out the measures of performance productivity and output, says Kropp. "Right now, most organizations don't have the managerial capabilities to measure it and do it well," he says. "That's the hard part about shifting into an output space world."

As more companies test new working hours, Kropp advises that everyone stay patient. "This is going to be a new world, and it's going to take three to five years to figure out what companies need to do it right. It's going to take a willingness to experiment, but also the courage and competence to say something's not working."

The generation coming into the workforce may be the driver for sticking with it, says Bolster McCannon. "They're saying, 'This 40-hour workweek doesn't feel right to me,'" she says. "Everybody's talking about self-care. This is where it starts, with our organizations and our country. How much money is being wasted on stress-related health issues because of workplace stress? There's not enough downtime. If other countries can do it, we certainly can."