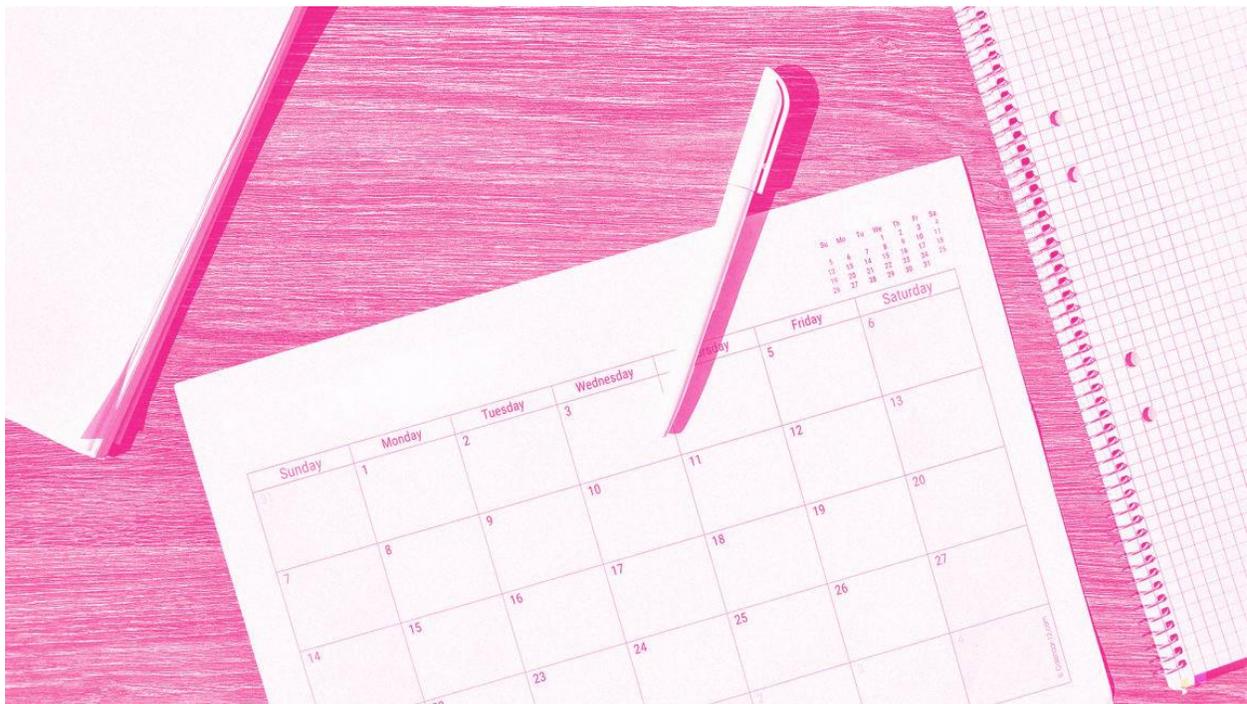


Why Remote Work May Render the 5-Day Workweek Obsolete

FAST COMPANY | BY SCOTT DUST | 01-22-21

During the conventional 5-day week, most workers' productivity levels gradually drop off as they move closer to the weekend, signaling the format may be outdated.



[Photo: Anastasiia Yanishevska/iStock]

A little over one hundred years ago, a New England mill instituted the five-day workweek to accommodate Jewish and Christian day of rest observances. The masses followed suit. This five days on, two days off cadence still exists, but to put it simply, it is inefficient.

Employees run out of steam working eight or more hours a day for five days straight. My colleagues at Miami University and I recently conducted research illustrating this exact point. Across two different samples, we found that employee motivation and performance steadily decline across the five-day workweek. We are conditioned to work hard at the beginning of the week, but we lose focus as the weekend approaches.

Another problem is that thanks to technology, the eight-hour, "9-to-5" workday is a mirage. We think it exists, but it doesn't. We are constantly checking in and refreshing our inboxes. And this

extra time spent on work work hours either go unnoticed by employers or go unregulated by employees.

It's time to get realistic about how people work in the 21st century. To the degree that we can acknowledge what is actually happening—and what is actually effective—we can begin to experiment with work hours in ways that simultaneously increase productivity and well-being.

THE EXPERIMENTAL 4-DAY WORKWEEK

In an attempt to optimize employees' work hours, organizations have experimented with a four-day workweek. Research suggests that these condensed work schedules can decrease overall productivity. The human body isn't built for talking to people, staring at screens, or operating machinery for ten hours at a time. Further, workplace engagement is already a problem when working the accepted eight hours a day.

Condensed work schedules are common in health services and manufacturing, but professional service employers are also giving it a try. The consensus is professional employees see little value in four-day workweeks. It sounds nice in theory, but it doesn't work in practice. Clients and colleagues demand quick responses, so we end up working five days or more.

BENEFITS OF SPREADING OUT WORK

A mere 300 years ago, before the industrial revolution, there was no such thing as grinding it out for five days in order to run to a Saturday date night or a day of leisure on Sunday. From the start of when Homo erectus first began roaming the earth, working and living were one and the same. Every day we did our chores. Every day we enjoyed the company of our tribe. The five-day workweek is a sociocultural artifact, not evidence-based framework for maximizing productivity and well-being.

I know several people that enjoy working on weekends (myself included). On weekends there is no steady stream of emails and calls during the day and no scheduled meetings, so all of the time can be allocated to deep-thought tasks, a luxury employees long for but never have the time to get to.

I've also interviewed several workers that admit they are already sprinkling their work across all of their waking hours. By working on-and-off throughout the day, they are challenging the norm that work must be a continuous, concentrated process. Many workers are arriving at this realization while working remotely for the first time, due to the pandemic.

Spreading work hours across one's day or week can also increase worker well-being. For each given day that you put in fewer hours, you have more time to complete non-work tasks, pursue hobbies, and spend time with family and friends. Research shows that these post-work recovery activities are associated with better next-day performance.

OBSTACLES OF WORKING WHENEVER YOU WANT

There are several obstacles when adopting a "log your hours when you can" approach. For instance, many organizations and society overall have institutionalized the weekday/weekend

dichotomy. Organizations can adjust business hours or expectations on employee availability, but institutions like schools and universities are unlikely to adjust their schedules anytime soon, nor should they. Thus, families with school-aged children have less flexibility.

Another issue is that organizations are built for efficiency, and such flexibility may not align with current and effective processes. Along those lines, there is also a potential political cost to going against the grain. Superiors or colleagues may not understand or support your approach. Similarly problematic, not everyone has the self-discipline to stick to the new rules. Some might have a hard time shutting down when a late-night request arrives in their inbox. Others might struggle to re-engage during time periods when they are accustomed to relaxing.

And a more obvious concern is that working on weekends may limit time with family. If you spread your work, you will spend some time working while your family is at-home on the weekend. But keep in mind that for some people having shorter but more consistent family time across the entire week, such as evening dinners, might be more fulfilling than cramming family time into the two days of the weekend.

Many of us have even learned during the pandemic, no matter how much we love each other, we all need a break from those we care about.

FLEXIBILITY WINS

What organizations tend to forget is that their greatest resource—people—is fundamentally different than other elements of the workplace.

Namely, each employee is unique. Everyone has different needs, motivations, values, work-home situations, and more. You can't structure an organization around a narrow approach to work hours without annoying a subset of your talent pool. Therefore, it should not be a surprise the only consistently effective approach is to be flexible, by allowing employees an assortment of options.

For me, I think the idea of a five-day workweek and "working for the weekend" will eventually be outdated. Perhaps everyone should get their work done whenever they can. This way, workers are not just living life some days, but every day.