

# The Pandemic Could Finally Usher In The 4-Day Workweek

The U.S. has long resisted a more flexible work culture. But some companies are now testing out a shorter workweek.

By Clio Chang • June 29, 2020

Government employees of the small municipality of Guysborough, Nova Scotia, have worked half the week in the office and half the week at home for the last few months in order to reduce contact with each other and limit the spread of the coronavirus. Now, as the municipality plans to fully reopen its offices to the public, it's decided to try something new: a four-day workweek.

Employees were given the choice of staying on the old five-day schedule if they wanted to. But no one did. "People are more refreshed," Barry Carroll, the chief administrative officer of Guysborough, told *HuffPost*.

The town will try it out for nine months and see how it goes. "They're working the same number of hours [per week] but look forward to that additional day off to spend more time with families," Carroll said.

Guysborough employees will still work full time over the four days, but the move is a modest step toward an alternative work structure in the wake of a shutdown that upended ideas about work for millions of people.

The pandemic has forced into the open certain fallacies about the way work life is structured. Companies that previously required their employees to come into the office have now revealed how easy it is to let them work from home, freeing them from extended commutes, often by car, in climate-harming rush-hour traffic.

Workers in industries such as grocery and delivery services, who have long been essential, are only now being recognized — and temporarily compensated — as such. And the argument that providing universal paid sick leave would hurt the economy has fallen flat as those without it feel forced to work while ill, risking further spread of the disease and reduced productivity.

The current crisis is reshaping our beliefs and orthodoxies around work and may open up the conversation to another policy that has fallen by the wayside in America: a shorter, four-day, 32-hour workweek.

It's an idea that saw wider support in Europe. In the late 1990s, in an effort to lower the unemployment rate, France introduced a permanent 35-hour workweek and legislated that minimum-wage earners still make the same amount as they did when working 39 hours. (That work week is still in effect, although in reality, many French workers put in longer hours.)

Last year, the British Labour Party included a four-day workweek proposal in its 2019 election platform. "We should work to live, not live to work," then-shadow chancellor John McDonnell said. Labour was defeated by Boris Johnson's Conservative Party, but the idea has been revived again as a possible solution to help the country recover from COVID-19.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made headlines recently with her suggestion to institute a four-day workweek, as the country eases into post-lockdown life, as a way to boost the domestic tourism economy by giving people more time to travel within the country.

The United States has long resisted a more flexible work culture. But in response to the pandemic, companies such as TripAdvisor and publisher Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, as well as cities such as Strongsville, Ohio, have switched to four-day weeks with pay reductions (in addition to furloughs or layoffs in some cases).

For most workers — especially those with low incomes or struggling to afford the basics — clocking fewer hours for less pay is not a feasible option. That’s why some climate and labor activists advocate a post-pandemic path that reduces the workweek while providing a just, livable wage.

The struggle for shorter working hours has been a core part of the history of the labor movement.

The carpenter’s union in Philadelphia organized the first citywide general strike in the United States in 1835, aimed at winning a 10-hour workday instead of sunup-to-sundown work. During the Great Depression, workers and unions helped put pressure on Congress to pass the Fair Labor Standards Act, which instituted the eight-hour workday.

Over time, labor activists fought to give workers more flexibility and agency over how and when they work. Twenty years ago, there was more of a sentiment that overwork was a problem and that working hours should be shortened, Juliet Schor, a sociology professor at Boston College who has long advocated for shorter workweeks, told *HuffPost*.

But as wages stagnated over the last 40 years and more people involuntarily worked part time in the wake of the Great Recession, a “scarcity mentality” — that there wasn’t enough work and wealth to go around — took hold.

In response, politicians across the spectrum doubled down on job creation rather than considering allowing people to work less and share available work, Schor said. The emergence of the gig economy boosted a hustle-to-death attitude as the superrich profited and amassed great wealth.

But last year, the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the United States, took a step to challenge that dynamic. It proposed a four-day workweek, among other policies, and made the case for “limiting the excessive hours worked by some people, thereby making more work hours available to those who want to work more, and giving all workers control over our time.” The proposal has been slow to gain traction with lawmakers and businesses. But the pandemic might open a door to revisit this age-old labor ideal.

Working smarter, not longer, appeals to everyone from overworked professionals to parents trying to carve out more time for their children. Add the overwhelming anxieties and compounding responsibilities we’re now all experiencing as the coronavirus upends our lives, and the case for a four-day workweek is stronger than ever.

This is why those who support a shorter workweek often point to its many benefits, such as less time spent commuting and better quality of life for workers. In return, people get to spend more time with family and friends doing things they enjoy, making them more refreshed for the next workweek.

In response to the current crisis, more companies are taking up work-sharing policies that allow employees to cut their work hours while qualifying for government unemployment insurance to pad out their lost wages, Schor said. Germany implemented just such a policy to give employers flexibility beyond keeping employees on full time or firing them.

If the U.S. does start to transition to a shorter workweek, any policy would have to ensure that work-sharing was extended across all jobs and sectors, while also ensuring that everyone was guaranteed a job with a living wage

“The pandemic gives us an opening to talk about what kind of work is really needed,” Schor said.

Many experts point out that working less doesn't necessarily lead to less productivity. Microsoft, for example, tested a four-day workweek last August in Japan, and the results showed not only happier employees but also a 40% increase in productivity.

But that might not always be the case. Many blue-collar industries such as manufacturing already operate with high efficiency and would find it difficult to increase productivity. Proponents of shorter working hours argue that ramming the same amount of work into fewer hours shouldn't be a precondition.

Instead, advocates hope the pandemic will force us to question why we continue to prioritize productivity in our economy in the first place. Rather, they say, we should reshape the economy around the priorities that matter, such as curbing carbon emissions.

“Reducing hours could have enormous benefits for the climate, drastically cutting the energy needed to light, heat, and cool offices — and power computers,” Kate Aronoff wrote in *The New Republic*. “Furthermore, eliminating one round-trip commute week after week for millions of Americans could radically reduce nationwide transportation emissions — the biggest source of carbon dioxide pollution in the U.S.”

Microsoft found that a shorter workweek can result in immediate environmental benefits. Electricity use in its office dropped 23%, and nearly 60% fewer pages of paper were printed during the monthlong experiment compared with the same period the year before.

“We're a very wealthy country whose population isn't growing very much,” Schor said. Now is an ideal time to shift toward practices that decrease production and carbon use and boost sustainability, she added.

Working less isn't a simplistic argument for increasing leisure time; It's about fundamentally rethinking what we value and why.

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