



## Four day workweek: An idea whose time has come?

Prabhakar Deshpande

**Abstract:** Technology has permitted vast increase in productivity internationally and especially in OECD nations. While that has led to enormous increase in production and consumption, it has not adequately translated into more leisure. Why should productivity always mean greater production and never more leisure? Five day work week is 100 year old concept and it is high time that humanity harnesses greater productivity to enable more leisure by legislating a four day work week.

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### I. Introduction

Humans have never in history worked all five days a week. Religions have almost mandated one day off. For Christians it was Sunday; for Muslims it was Friday and for Jews it was Saturday.

But it was with the advent of 20<sup>th</sup> century that the movement towards five day week began. Initially it began as half day on Saturday in Christian nations where Sunday was a holiday.

Then slowly between 1910 and 1930 many companies began to institute 40 hour 5 day work week. It was experienced that lesser number of working hours resulted in greater productivity and production. In fact in 1938, US government legislated 5 day work week. And since 1950s the developed world has had 5 day work week almost universally.

The transition to 5 day work week was not surprising. But what is shocking is hesitancy in moving to a 4 day work week in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The last 30 years have seen monumental developments in information technology and telecommunications.

Yet humanity is stuck at 5 day work week, even as everybody complains of stress. Why is 4 day work week not being experimented on widely and hugely? What does humanity have to lose in moving to 4 day work week? This paper attempts to unsettle the inertia that has set it in inexplicably continuing with 5 day work week.

#### **Countries experimenting with 4 day work week**

Firstly nations do not seem to be adopting 4 day work across board. Some companies are embracing 4 day work week and that is about it. So 4 day work week is being experimented upon as a trial – mind you only as a trial in few companies.

These are the countries that are experimenting with 4 day work week.

Portugal is a country experimenting with 4 day work week under 100:80:100 model which means 100 percent pay for 80 percent time for 100 percent work. Some 39 companies experimented with this.[1]

Similarly UK has experimented with 4 day work week in about 61 companies for 6 months and trial was organised by researchers from Oxford and Cambridge.

Spain is another country where 4 day work is being tried due to pressure from left leaning political parties.[2]

In Japan, Microsoft experimented with 3 day weekends for a month.

However in Sweden even left wing organisations felt experimenting with 4 day work week could be very expensive to implement on large scale.

Iceland, Finland are also experimenting with 4 day work week.

There is good demand for 4 day work week in Germany, USA and Canada.

Other countries experimenting with 4 day work are South Africa, Belgium and Iceland.

In South Africa 28 companies experimented with 4 day work week on 100-80-100 model which means 100 percent of pay for 80 percent of time for 100 percent work.[3]

Belgium government also experimented with 4 day work week in 2022.

But it is obvious from all above examples that 4 day work week is still an experiment in a very microscopic section of the working sectors. No nation has adopted 4 day work completely or even experimented with 4 day work week on a large significant scale. Thus even as we speak in 2023, 4 day work is an adventure that few

companies in few nations are willing to just experiment upon for short period of time. It is in this backdrop that we discuss 4 day work week.

### Results of experiments of 4 day work week

There have been several experiments with 4 day work week. We will discuss a few here.

In June 2022 some 3300 employees of 73 companies experimented with 4 day work week. It was found that only 5% said productivity had reduced, whereas 46% said it had remained same and 15% said productivity had improved considerably and 34% said productivity had improved slightly. While 46% of employees had been sleep deprived earlier in 5 day work week, sleep deprivation was reported by only 14% employees in 4 day work week.[4,5]

### Results of Survey by Author in India

Author of this paper commissioned a survey among corporate professionals on various issues. On the issue of 4 day work week almost 100% of professionals wanted to go for 4 day work week. However the same survey produced diametrically opposite results when conducted among industry leaders. Almost 100% of industry leaders thought that 4 day work week was a bad idea.

### Resistance to Change

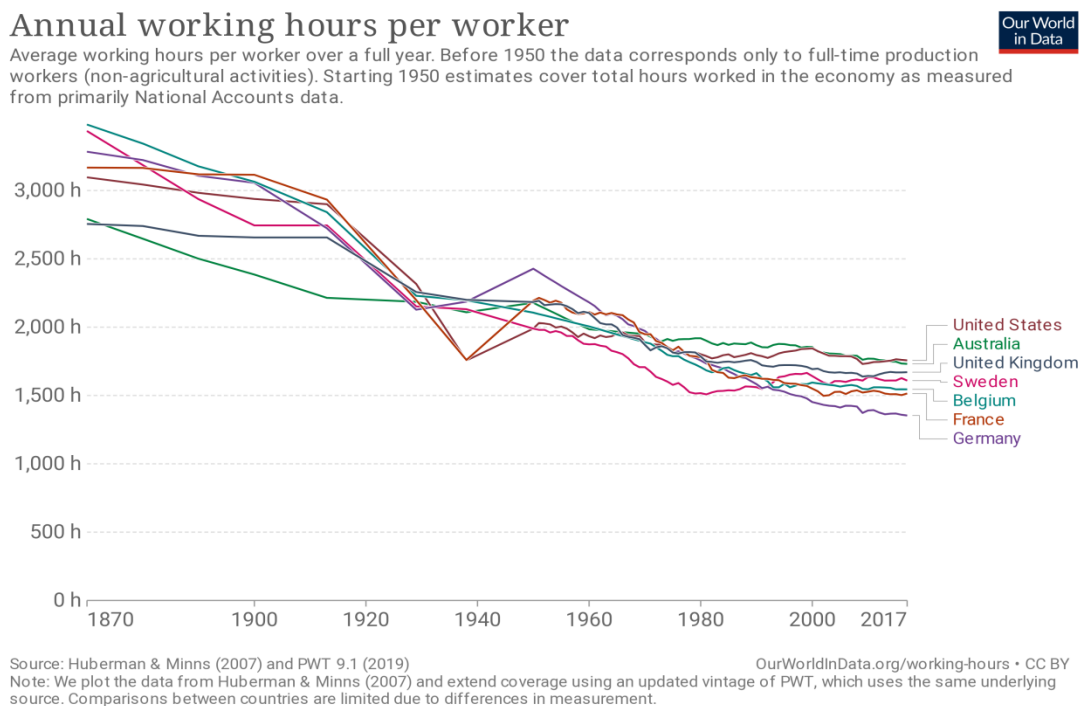
Clearly while the idea of 4 day work week is as at least 50 years old, somehow there is strong resistance to change. One cannot gauge the reason why. A similar resistance to change is observed in regard to Work From Home. While during Covid 19 peak in 2020-21 work from home was prevalent widely, some how despite functioning adequately well companies in India have all but abandoned work from home after normalcy returned from the pandemic.

It is not so much the question of productivity as much it is the matter of security and familiarity. People are familiar with 5 day work week and feel secure. Perhaps they anticipate that switching to 4 day work week might impair productivity. Perhaps companies fear losing to competition.

### Working Hours have reduced since past 150 years

Humans have always worked harder in past. It is only the productivity gains brought about by technology that have enabled reduction in number of working hours in past 150 years.

Take a look at figure below



Source: Hubermanns and Minns(2007)

As the figure above show workig hours per year have reduced almost by 50% from 1870 to 2020, in most of OECD nations such as United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany Belgium, Sweden, Australia

etc. Working hours per year have in effect reduced from almost 3000 hours a year to just about 1500 hours a year.

And the number of working hours within a time period also varies considerably. For instance take this data from 2019 for working hours of various nations.

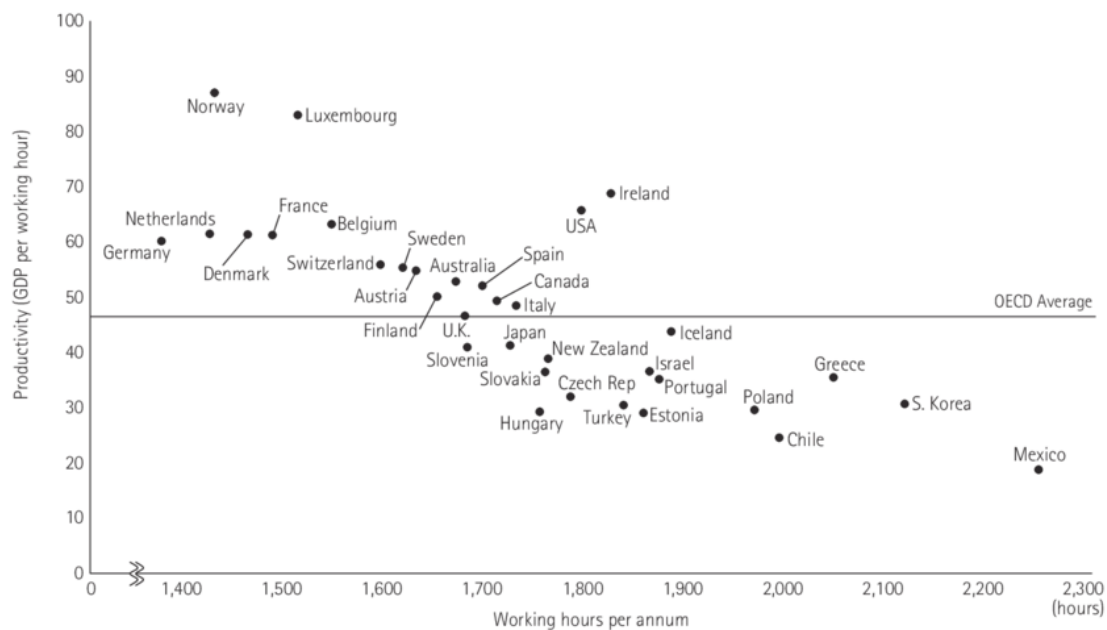
**Number of Working Hours/year-Nationwide**

Nation	Number of Working Hours/year
Germany	1332
Britain	1367
France	1400
Japan	1600
USA	1780
Italy	1600
South Korea	1900
Mexico	2150

Source: Instream

Clearly the numbers of working hours vary between developed nations from as much as 1800 hours in USA and South Korea to 1600 hours in Japan to as less as 1400 hours in Germany and France. If Germany and France can manage to achieve comparable living standard as USA and South Korea with 33% less number of working hours, then it is safe to say that reducing number of working hours by 20% by switching to 4 day work week may not necessarily reduce production and if anything enhance productivity.

If you see below the correlation between working hours and productivity is inverse which means that as number of working hours per year increases productivity per hour reduces.[7]



Source: Hirosho Ono

Here productivity of Norway is almost twice as Japan though both the nations are developed nations. Indeed productivity in France and Germany are at least 20% more than productivity of Spain and Italy and UK where people work at least 20% more.

So there seems to be an inverse correlation between working hours and productivity.

Hence this lends credence to the theoretical argument for 4 day work week that reducing the number of hours of work will not reduce production because productivity will increase with lesser number of working hours.

**Smart works means Hardly Work; Hard work requires Stupid Work**

Honestly one resistance to 4 day work week is that it will reduce the number of working hours. But honestly if one works smart one does not have to work as hard.

For instance in the book titled ‘Seven Day Weekend’, Ricardo Semler points the obvious that it is possible to get more work done in less time. Another book of similar genre is ‘Four Hour Work Week’ by Timothy Ferriss.

The idea is 80% of value added comes from 20% of work. Most people waste time doing the unproductive things at work and hence no wonder they have to work a lot to get little done. If one focuses on the really important things, then one can get a lot done with lot less work.

There is the Parkinson law which states that ‘ Work expands to occupy time available’. Look at any office or factory. For a significant amount of time, significant number of employees are just pretending to work.

As a person with 30 years’ experience the author without having to resort to time and motion studies and work flow analysis of industrial engineering and operations management can safely say that reducing working hours per week will only reduce the slack time or the wasted time in a week and not impact the useful working time in a week.

### **Survey on 4 day work week**

According to Monster survey a majority 61% of worker say they’d rather have a four day work week than the traditional five and 33% say they’d quit their job to one for a shortened work week.

Half of those surveyed said that they would be more productive with 4 day work week and 10% were willing to take a pay cut.

According to DriveResearch these are the findings on 4 day work week

56% of employees would rather work 40 hour 4 day work week instead of 5 day work week

58% of employees would chose 4 day work week over a pay rise

77% of employees reported higher productivity when working a 4 day work week

64% of business leaders believe that 4 day work week will become a norm

66% of employees consider 4 day work week an attractive perk while considering job offer

78% of employees believe a shorter week end would improve their work life balance

Employees with 4 day work week reported lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction

However on the flip side 40% of employees thought their work would not be manageable with 4 day work week

44% of HR professionals were apprehensive about feasibility of 4 day work week

62% of businesses believed that implementing 4 day work week would require reducing employee salaries.

So there are pros and cons of 4 day work week. But then nothing ventured and nothing gained.

### **Four Day Work Week can be enforced through political Will**

Let us now go back to what made 5 day work week possible. At least in USA it was President Roosevelt who enacted Fair Labour Standard Act in 1938 by initially limiting working hours to 44 hours a week and then to 40 hours a week. In fact it is safe to say that without this piece of courageous legislation 4 day work week would not have been possible. Thus it was political initiative that made 5 day work week possible. And perhaps it is political will that will enable 4 day work week.

And politicians have nothing to lose. Surveys after surveys indicate that vast majority of workers in Europe and America would prefer 4 day work to 5 day work week. So what is holding the transition to 4 day work week if that is what workers prefer? Especially when studies have demonstrated that 4 day work week does not reduce production.

The biggest road block in transition to 4 day work week is the fear of change and competition from top management. It is similar to the COVID story. After COVID, organisations have refrained from making work from home the new norm, because they are afraid that competition will outpace them.

Hence corporates cannot take the leap from 5 day work week to 4 day work week. Corporates are too scared of competition to permit courage, even when there is nothing to lose. Hence the initiative must necessarily come from government concerned about worker welfare more than competition.

### **Worker’s Unions must strike Light**

Now that we have agreed that it is political will that will drive the change to 4 day work week, we must find what is required for political will. In a democracy people’s opinions decide political action. Hence leaders must be informed of popular will of workers.

Only workers unions can be conduit to channel workers opinion to political class. Hence workers unions can conduct surveys to inform the political leadership of the day the opinions of workers and the results of studies conducted on 4 day work week.

Most political parties have worker wings. These wings can take the initiative and find opinions of workers on 4 day work week. The change must come from political parties themselves.

### **Universities must conduct studies**

We live in knowledge economies and universities are harbingers of knowledge. New knowledge gets developed in universities. Hence universities must take action to commission studies on efficacy and efficiency of 4 day work week as also on preference and predilection of 4 day work week among workers.

Once 100s of studies are done on 4 day work week, then it will be possible to demonstrate to governments of nations of world that 4 day work week is feasible and optimal and leads to better wellbeing of citizens without reducing production of the nation.

Till date very little studies have been done on 4 day work week. Universities must take initiative in this regard and commission 4 day work week and publish results for all to see.

### **Corporates must show some Courage**

4 day work week has to become a fashion. And in fashion some body has to set a trend. After all the person experimenting with new hair style or new type of trouser did push the envelope and step out of the line.

Some corporates must take the courage and start 4 day work week. After all, production is unlikely to suffer. If anything 4 day work week can be great way to attract talent in a world where there is as much competition for talent as much as there is for products.

So corporates could use 4 day work week to attract best talent and thus outpace competition. Thus 4 day work week could be a competition tool.

## **II. Conclusion**

Four day work week is long overdue. But there has been very little action for at least past 20 to 30 years on this. Change requires multidimensional approach. For 4 day work week to become reality a multi-dimensional approach is needed. Worker Unions must pressurize governments and corporates to enact 4 day work week. Governments must muster political will to enact laws that mandate 4 day work week. Corporates must take initiative and use 4 day work week as a competition tool to attract best talent. Finally universities must commission and publish studies on efficacy and efficiency of 4 day work week. Four day work week has been overdue for at least past 20 to 30 years. And 4 day work week should not take more than 20 to 30 years to become universally practiced at least in OECD countries to start with.

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