

Want to work four days a week instead of five? We too, but that's not the best idea

Hello, my name is Masha Dolgoplova. I'm an author and the host of a podcast about personal finances and emigration "Plan B" – you may remember me from [the letter](#) about picking a country for emigration.

The economist John Maynard Keynes stated, all the way back in 1930, that in hundred years humanity's wellbeing will increase so much that the work week would be 15-hour long – that is 3 hours of work per day. He [wrote](#) that, thanks to science and technology, there will be little work to do and you'll have to "spread it across the maximum number of people".

Almost a century has passed since, and the work week norm is still almost three times longer than Keynes's prediction. It maddens me – sometimes I feel like I spend all of my life working. I think more and more about if I can work less. What am I sacrificing by putting more of my time towards work? Am I prepared to earn less but relax more?

The introduction of a four day work week would solve most of my problems – my income level would stay the same and I'd have more time for personal activities. Perhaps that's what you also think – especially now, during the short work weeks of May.

In reality, the four day week isn't a panacea and isn't one-size-fits-all. To many people, it will even make their life worse. In this letter I'll explain how the four day work week can be bad and why we likely won't see it on a global scale – even though the modern media tells us otherwise.



Navigation

This letter has 16 thousand characters. Reading it will take about 15 minutes.

The text consists of four parts. **The first** is about how much people worked in the past and why they still want to work less. **The second** is about the latest results of introducing the four day work week. **The third** is about the negative sides of it and why it can make our lives worse. And finally, **the fourth** part will explain how the COVID pandemic killed the four day work week.

Part 1. Why do we even work five days a week?

The length of the work week in the whole world has been decreasing for the past 150 years. For example, in the Russian Empire until the end of the 19th century, the workers in

factories could work for up to 18 hours a day. In 1897, a six day work week was [established](#) at factories, during which men worked for 11.5 hours and women – for 10 hours.

The number of daily work hours has [decreased](#) to eight after the October Revolution of 1917. And not just in Russia, but also in [Europe](#) where a repeat of the Bolshevik revolution was feared and concessions were made to local communists and socialists.

Later, in 1960, the work day length in the USSR has [decreased further](#) down to 7 hours. The five day work week would be [introduced](#) to the country seven years after that, but the work week length wouldn't change as the work day would be increased up to 8.5 hours. The last time it would shrink down to the all-familiar 8 hours would be in 1991. Since then, the length hasn't been changed.

Similar changes still happen all around the world. In 2000, the work week in France was [shrunk](#) down to 35 hours – this is one of the latest noticeable changes. People in different countries also tend to [work](#) different amounts of hours per week. This way in 2022 the average amount of work hours per week varied from 33 hours in the Netherlands up to 41 hour in Greece. The average length across the EU was 37.5 hours.

Despite constant shrinking, people still want to work less. The right to reduce the work week length if needed is even enshrined in the [second article](#) of the European Social Charter – a document that protects the social rights of the people.

That's why it's unsurprising that every year there's more discussion about the four day work week. The ex-PM of Finland Sanna Marin regularly [turned](#) to this idea, but it was never put onto the official agenda of the local parliament. And in 2019 the Labour party of the UK [promised](#) to introduce the four day work week into the legislation if they won the elections – but they lost.

In Russia a new wave of interest to this concept was [raised](#) by Dmitry Medvedev in 2019, with him saying that soon everybody in the country would work less and that the four day work week is the future. He [instructed](#) the Ministry of Labor to research this question and even [proposed](#) to experiment with this in some regions. However, it all ended on promises.

The main argument for the four day work week, other than that everybody wants to relax more, is as follows: the efficiency of work is more [correctly](#) measured in the result, not in the hours. In this paradigm working longer hours means working worse. Back in 2009, British researchers [discovered](#) that people who worked 55 hours a week did their job worse, when compared to the people who worked for 40 hours. Longer work doesn't just influence people's efficiency, but also their health. To be exact, it [increases](#) the risk of stroke and other heart diseases.

It's unsurprising that companies and people around the world are trying out the four day work week. And the results of those experiments often look promising.

Part 2. Experiments with the four day work week are successful – why are they considered inconclusive?

Not a single state in the world has completely switched to the four day work week so far. But many companies [in over 20 countries](#) of the world did – from UAE to Canada. In one way or another, the four day work week also [exists](#) in 11 global megacorporations, for example *Amazon* and *Samsung*.

Along with that, the efficiency of the four day work week is still being researched. One of the largest experiments with this work scheduling was conducted in the UK in 2022. Almost three thousand workers from 61 companies spent 1.5 years [working](#) four days a week. The participants ranged from software development companies to charity funds and small fish-and-chips cafes.

The results of the experiments were summed up by the scientists from Oxford and Cambridge and their American colleagues from Boston. It turns out that the number of sick days among workers has decreased by 65%, while the number of layoffs decreased by 57%. The risk of burnout with this schedule went down by 71%, but most importantly – workers experienced 39% less stress. The business also [benefitted](#) from it: the revenue of companies increased by 1.4% on average.

From the 61 companies participating in the experiment, 56 [continued](#) to use the four day week after the research period. The five remaining companies found the transition to the four day work week unsuccessful – although two of them continued experimenting with reducing work hours.

Similar results were shown by [an experiment](#) in Valencia. The newly-formed day off on Mondays was spent by workers on sports and home cooking. Meanwhile people that smoked and drank alcohol started doing it more frequently.

Another, pretty obvious conclusion of the experiments, is that the less people work, the better is the air quality in the city. An economist from the Boston University Juliet Schor [calls](#) the improvement of the climate one of the main upsides of the four day work week. “When people are time-stressed, they tend to choose faster and more polluting modes of travel and daily life activities. In contrast, when people get time rather than money, they tend to have a lower carbon footprint”, Schor argues. In addition, the workers also drive less to their workplace, and thus decrease the amount of CO2 emissions.

The ecological impact was also [noticed](#) during a similar experiment in Japan. In 2019 a local Microsoft office gave all of their employees an extra day off on Friday. As a result, the company saved 23% on electricity costs and also on paper usage – their employees used 58% of it.

One way or another, **the majority of experiments on introducing the four day work week can be called successful. People become happier and the quality of their work doesn't decrease.** Although Anna Lukyanova, an economist and a senior researcher at the HSE Center for Labor Research, in a discussion with *Kit* notes that some participants of the experiment may be lying. For example, some companies move to a shorter week but on the condition that during peak workloads and by the end of deadlines the employees will again work five days a week. So, four days a week isn't always enough for them.

Also, the four day week may not be guaranteed, but be included as a bonus incentive for particularly effective employees. At the same time, if the results of their work become worse, they would return to a five day work week.

Along with this, Lukyanova adds that companies that participated in the experiments weren't picked randomly. The four day work week is initially attempted by those who see value and potential in it. The companies (likely a majority of them) who don't fit that work schedule in the first place simply decline participation. This is why, the economist believes, if reduction of work hours will be global, then the effect won't be as positive.

The introduction of the four day week is also [criticized](#) by a professor of the Business School of University of Technology Sydney, Anthony Veal. He draws attention to the fact that the experiments may have been influenced by the 'Hawthorne effect' – due to the interest, novelty and overall attention, the participating employees work better than usual. This leads to the distortion of results.

The economist Yevgeniya Cherchina, in a discussion with *Kit* says that there isn't actually a definitive answer to the question of whether the transition to a four-day work week results in an increase in productivity. Some results speak about its growth, some – about the lack of growth. Although this incredibly enticing concept also has many serious and not so obvious disadvantages.

Part 3. How the four day week exacerbates inequality

The leading – and most obvious – disadvantage of having three days off per week is in the amount of work that you have to do. The amount of work will remain the same, but you'll have less time to complete it.

The example of Belgium is quite indicative of that. In November 2022 a new work agreement [came](#) into effect. It allows employees to pick for themselves if they want to work four or five days a week. This initiative has a lot of restrictions: it's only available to private companies and the overall number of hours per week remains the same. Which implies a ten hour work day.

If the workers want to work eight hours for four days a week, they'll have a smaller salary. Accounting for all that, it was pretty obvious how a year after the law went into effect, only 0.8% of Belgian workers have [used](#) this option.

The decrease in time for work tasks [can](#) also lead to extra stress and burnout, the staff author of Vox Oshan Jarow [believes](#). In these conditions it can be hard to avoid overworking, which would in the end lead to breaking the divide between personal life and work. Even though the four day week initially was planned to strengthen this divide.

Even more than that, the transition to a four day work week may increase the control from the employers, an overview of 31 academic articles about the four day week [shows](#). Managers may fear that their subordinates will start to relax and will work less, thus will control them harsher. The pressure on employees may increase, and the work environment may become toxic.

Often, when it comes to arguments for the four day work week, theses like “We live to live, not live to work” are brought up. That's true: [according](#) to the professor of philosophy Nicholas Smith, for a human to be happier they must have the conditions where they can spend less time doing what they must do, and more time doing what they want to do.

Along with that, work isn't the only barrier in the way to a happy life. For example, if a person lives in a family, then they also have to frequently complete tasks they wouldn't want to do. Cooking, cleaning, looking after children, taking care of their elderly relatives and pets.

It is mostly women who do all of this. The American non-governmental *Pew Research Centre* [indicates](#) that among working and married Americans, men typically relax around 28 hours per week, and women – two hours less. And if the pair has small children – this gap widens even more: wives relax 4.5 hours less compared to men.

To note, half a century ago in USA there [wasn't](#) a gender gap in leisure time. Since then women started working way more, and the time they spend on unpaid home labor hasn't shrunk. In Russia, women even [spend](#) twice as much time on home errands compared to men.

The four day work week widens this gap *even more*. You could assume that, thanks to the four day week, men will have more free time and will spend it on home errands. The researcher at the *Social Market Foundation* Jack Shepherd [thinks](#) differently: men [won't](#) do home labor. In his words, changing the gender norms requires a way more powerful cultural swing than just increasing free time – so powerful, that it won't occur in the foreseeable future.

In addition, men [worry](#) that if they will work less, then will seem less competent and qualified. This is why not everybody would agree to decreasing their work hours. “Let's assume that the option of a four day

week is implemented on a legislative level. Many men will start working extra to earn more and to be more successful. At the same time many women (not all, of course, but first of all women with children) will work four days a week. Thus, the gender gap in salary will increase further”, -- says the economist Anna Lukyanova in a discussion with Kit.

In addition, the four day work week will increase the inequality between people of different professions. It's easy to imagine a designer or a programmer who can manage to do the same amount of work in four days as in five. But there is a real need to shrink the work time, for example, for [doctors](#) – due to the high level of burnout and staff turnover. Shrinking their work week will be much harder and, perhaps, completely impossible. Restructuring of the work schedule [requires](#) significant expense: you'll need to either pay doctors extra for overworking or hire more of them.

The difficulties with transitioning to a four day week may arise in many other professions, for example, teachers in schools, employees of government departments, retail and logistics companies.

This is why the four day work week is doomed to be a privilege and not the norm, [believe](#) the social researcher Jack Shepherd and the economist Aveek Bhattacharya. Although they do agree that there isn't anything bad about it: “If some workers benefit from the introduction of a four day week, then it's weird to disallow it”.

Part 4. Why you most likely won't work four days a week

The four day work week has its upsides and its downsides, but in any case, for the majority of the world it'll most likely stay as it is – nothing more than a beautiful idea.

The economist John Maynard Keynes, while predicting the 15-hour work week 100 years ago, said that it's only possible with the lack of large-scale wars and a significant growth of the population. And as you know, the exact inverse of that happened.

Back in 2008 *The Guardian* decided to [figure out](#) why Keynes' predictions didn't come true. First of all, he underestimated the amount of people that would be living below the poverty line. In 2022 a total of 648 million of people [lived](#) below it – almost every 10th person on the planet. The reduction of the work day is simply out of the question for them.

Second, Keynes constructed his predictions on the behavior of British nobles-landlords who could afford to work less while receiving the same income due to their assets growing in value. However, the majority of people in the modern world earn their money through time and force, not by trading assets. And, as is the rule, the less a person does – the less they receive. This way, *The Guardian* writes, Keynes' prediction could only be justifiable for

oil sheikhs from the countries of the Persian Gulf – they can actually have 15 hour work weeks nowadays.

Keynes also couldn't predict the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which, according to the economists that *Kit* interviewed, put an end to the idea of a four day week. Anna Lukyanova notes that before COVID the liberalization of work time was most often imagined in two models: remote work with a floating schedule or four days at the office. During the pandemic it became clear that the first model won.

This way, Lukyanova notes, **the four-day office week isn't beneficial to most employers when there is a good alternative**. "It can be an element of a unique offer in vacancies to some companies to attract more attention and then discuss the preferred work format with the new employee later down the line", -- Lukyanova emphasizes. However, it's doubtful that this could be a mass occurrence in the foreseeable future where the countries will explicitly amend their labor legislation for it.

Nevertheless, this situation could be shaken up by the sharp increase in work efficiency due to the usage of artificial intelligence (AI). Then people simply wouldn't have enough work to justify five full days of working. But this is also not a guarantee, since the previous technological revolutions – for example, the invention of automatic machine tools – didn't lower the demand for human labor.

Quite the inverse – the demand for new high-grade AI experts has [appeared](#). The work day around the world didn't shrink because of technology, but because of the growth of population, the level of education and the entry of women into the labor market.

Notwithstanding, the economist Annalisa Usardi believes that the development of AI [will](#) positively influence the global economy – especially in the countries where the amount of able-bodied working people is small. In the USA, according to *Tech.co*, 93% of companies that actively use AI or work automation have either already [implemented](#) the four day work week or are seriously considering it. In any case, this mostly applies to highly-paid workers like bank clerks and IT workers.

In the hypothetical future in which artificial intelligence will leave few work to the people, transitioning to a four day work week won't be as hard, notes Sergey Solntsev, Deputy Head of the HSE Labor Market Research Laboratory. Probably even easier than implementing unconditional basic income – another theoretical solution to the problems of the modern labor market.

*What would happen if you paid people money for nothing in return? Will they stop working?
[Read about it in Kit's letter about unconditional basic income.](#)*

But in any case, there are no talks in Russia about either of those solutions. Here, according to Sergey Solntsev, we have a labor [shortage](#), and the four day work week would only make it worse. Next to that, many Russians still live [poorly](#) – they probably aren't ready to lower their salary for an extra day off.

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Maybe we won't work four days a week, but not because of the conservatism of employers and states, but because neural networks will replace human labor. Imagine that all of your work is now done by the computer – what happens to your life?

But even if that doesn't happen, the demand for labor will decrease. Work will define the meaning of our life less and less, [believes](#) a columnist for *The Wired*, Marcus Wohlsen. Many people would have to rethink why they even exist in the first place. Hopefully, it turns out that it's not solely to work.

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Kit editorial

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