

Resolve to stop punching the clock: Why you might be able to change when and how long you work

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The U.S. workweek hasn't always been 40 hours long, so maybe something else is possible.

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About 1 in 3 Americans make at least one New Year's resolution, according to Pew Research. While most of these vows focus on weight loss, fitness and other health-related goals, many fall into a distinct category: work.

Work-related New Year's resolutions tend to focus on someone's current job and career, whether to find a new job or, if the timing and conditions are right, whether to embark on a new career path.

We're an organizational psychologist and a philosopher who have teamed up to study why people work – and what they give up for it. We believe that there is good reason to consider concerns that apply to many if not most professionals: how much work to do and when to get it done, as well as how to make sure your work doesn't harm your physical and mental health – while attaining some semblance of work-life balance.

How we got here

Most Americans consider the 40-hour workweek, which calls for employees being on the job from nine to five, to be a standard schedule.

This ubiquitous notion is the basis of a hit Dolly Parton song and 1980 comedy film, “9 to 5,” in which the country music star had a starring role. Microsoft Outlook calendars by default shade those hours with a different color than the rest of the day.

This schedule didn’t always reign supreme.

Prior to the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929-1941, 6-day workweeks were the norm. In most industries, U.S. workers got Sundays off so they could go to church. Eventually, it became customary for employees to get half of Saturday off too.

Legislation that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law as part of his sweeping New Deal reforms helped establish the 40-hour workweek as we know it today. Labor unions had long advocated for this abridged schedule, and their activism helped crystallize it across diverse occupations.

Despite many changes in technology as well as when and how work gets done, these hours have had a surprising amount of staying power.

Americans work longer hours

In general, workers in richer countries tend to work fewer hours. However, in the U.S. today, people work more on average than in most other wealthy countries.

For many Americans, this is not so much a choice as it is part of an entrenched working culture.

There are many factors that can interfere with thriving at work, including boredom, an abusive boss or an absence of meaning and purpose. In any of those cases, it’s worth asking whether the time spent at work is worth it. Only 1 in 3 employed Americans say that they are thriving.

What’s more, employee engagement is at a 10-year low. For both engaged and disengaged employees, burnout increased as the number of work hours rose. People who were working more than 45 hours per week were at greatest risk for burnout, according to Gallup.

However, the average number of hours Americans spend working has declined from 44 hours and 6 minutes in 2019 to just under 43 hours per week in 2024. The reduction is sharper for younger employees.

We think this could be a sign that younger Americans are pushing back after years of being pressured to embrace a “hustle culture” in which people brag about working 80 and even 100 hours per week.

Fight against a pervasive notion

Anne-Marie Slaughter, a lawyer and political scientist who wears many hats, coined the term “time macho” more than a decade ago to convey the notion that someone who puts in longer hours at the office automatically will outperform their colleagues.

Another term, “face time,” describes the time that we are seen by others doing our work. In some workplaces, the quantity of an employee’s face time is treated as a measure of whether they are dependable – or uncommitted.

It can be easy to jump to the conclusion that putting in more hours at the office automatically boosts an employee’s performance. However, researchers have found that productivity decreases with the number of hours worked due to fatigue.

Even those with the luxury to choose how much time they devote to work sometimes presume that they need to clock as many hours as possible to demonstrate their commitment to their jobs.

To be sure, for a significant amount of the workforce, there is no choice about how much to work because that time is dictated, whether by employers, the needs of the job or the growing necessity to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

4-day workweek experiments

One way to shave hours off the workweek is to get more days off.

A multinational working group has examined experiments with a four-day workweek: an arrangement in which people work 80% of the time – 32 hours over four days – while getting paid the same as when they worked a standard 40-hour week. Following an initial pilot in the U.S. and Ireland in 2022, the working group has expanded to six continents. The researchers consistently found that employers and employees alike thrive in this setup and that their work didn’t suffer.

Most of those employees, who ranged from government workers to technology professionals, got Friday off. Shifting to having a three-day weekend meant that employees had more time to take care of themselves and their families.

Productivity and performance metrics remained high.



Some studies examining four-day workweek experiments have had promising results.

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Waiting for technology to take a load off

Many employment experts wonder whether advances in artificial intelligence will reduce the number of hours that Americans work.

Might AI relieve us all of the tasks we dread doing, leaving us only with the work we want to do – and which, presumably, would be worth spending time on? That does sound great to both of us.

But there's no guarantee that this will be the case.

We think the likeliest scenario is one in which the advantages of AI are unevenly distributed among people who work for a living. Economist John Maynard Keynes predicted almost a century ago that “technological unemployment” would lead to 15-hour workweeks by 2030. As that year approaches, it's become clear that he got that wrong.

Researchers have found that for every working hour that technology saves us, it increases our work intensity. That means work becomes more stressful and expectations regarding productivity rise.

Deciding when and how much time to work

Many adults spend so much time working that they have few waking hours left for fitness, relationships, new hobbies or anything else.

If you have a choice in the matter of when and how much you work, should you choose differently?

Even questioning whether you should stick to the 40-hour workweek is a luxury, but it's well worth considering changing your work routines as a new year gets underway if that's a possibility for you. To get buy-in from employers, consider demonstrating how you will still deliver your core work within your desired time frame.

And, if you are fortunate enough to be able to choose to work less or work differently, perhaps you can pass it on: You probably have the power and privilege to influence the working hours of others you employ or supervise.

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