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How many hours should employees work?

A question that reveals something about every boss

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ILLUSTRATION: PAUL BLOW

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NINE TO FIVE is still alive. Sort of. A new survey of labour-force data by Amory Gethin of the World Bank and Emmanuel Saez of the University of California, Berkeley finds that the world's employed adult population works an average of 42 hours a week. This number contains multitudes. Gender, age and levels of economic development affect how many hours people work. Many jobs are not neatly packaged into five eight-hour days. But the 40-hour week is still a norm.

How long people actually work is not the same as how long they ought to. Jobs, incomes and cultural norms vary so wildly that there is no right answer. But how you think about the optimal workweek does say something about the kind of manager you are.

You might choose to emphasise work-life balance. A recent research paper by Gregor Jarosch, Laura Pilossoph and Anthony Swaminathan of Duke University asked workers in three countries what pay cut (or rise) they would accept in order to adjust their workweek. In Germany and Britain, people would be happy to sacrifice some money in return for more leisure time: the optimal workweek in Germany, for example, would last 37 hours. Americans, in contrast, would like to work longer and get more money. This might either be a comment on the precariousness of Americans' finances or the fecklessness of Europeans.

You might focus on productivity. Mr Jarosch and his co-authors reckon that cutting the German wage bill and workweek would be to everyone's benefit as long as you make a crucial assumption: that fewer hours can also be good for employers. There is some evidence to support this. John Pencavel of Stanford University analysed the output of British munitions workers during the first world war. He found that beyond a threshold of 48 hours, output from each additional hour worked started to decline. Beyond 63 hours, clocking up extra time did

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Friday afternoons.)

You might look at things through the lens of cost. It can still make sense to increase the hours of existing workers as long as they are adding value. Employees come with fixed costs in the form of things like health-care benefits. Spreading these costs over longer hours may be better than taking on new, energetic staff with their attendant overheads.

You might stress safety. The risk of fatigue affecting performance can have very serious consequences. A study of paramedics in Mississippi conducted by Tanguy Brachet of Charles River Associates, a consultancy, and his co-authors found that their performance during emergencies declined at the end of long shifts, with fatal consequences.

You might prioritise quality. For some jobs, increased fatigue may be a price worth paying for more experience. A study by Marion Collewet of Leiden University and Jan Sauermann of the Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy looked at part-time call-centre agents in the Netherlands. The quantity of calls they handled did not rise in tandem with the number of extra hours. But the quality of their work appeared to improve slightly. A tired agent may have got more practised at handling calls about a specific problem affecting customers.

You might see long hours as a sign of a proper work ethic. All-nighters can be a necessity for startups. As they scramble to get their ventures off the ground, lots of work falls on few shoulders. But plenty of founders want to keep intensity levels up even as their firms grow. Earlier this year Sergey Brin reportedly told teams working on Google's AI products that a 60-hour week was the sweet spot for productivity. Narayana Murthy, founder of Infosys, reckons that prosperity in India can only be achieved by 70-hours-plus weeks.

In established companies, too, putting in extra hours is usually a good way to get ahead. Elon Musk once said that no one ever changed the world on a 40-hour workweek. They are less likely to be promoted, too.

There are other ways to approach this question. You might argue that the optimal

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policy makers, or maybe something about AI. But however you answer, you're not

just reflecting your industry and national culture. You're also sending a signal about your own priorities. ■

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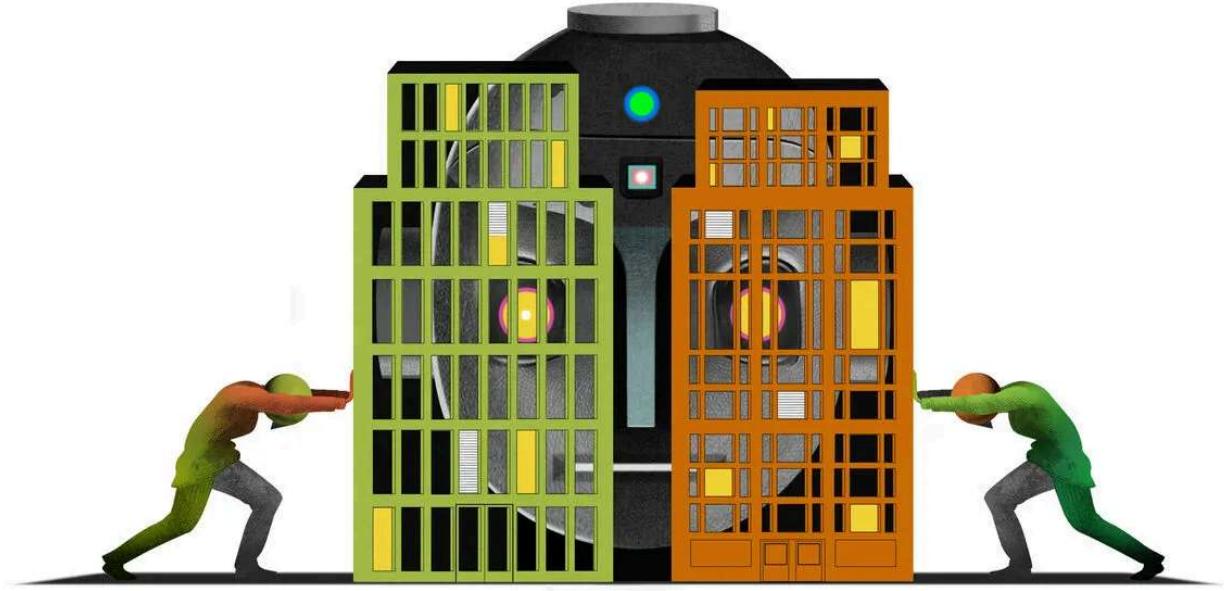
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