

[Weekly edition](#) [The world in brief](#) [World Ahead 2026](#) [War in Ukraine](#) [United States](#) [Middle I](#)**Business** | Bartleby

# How many hours should employees work?

A question that reveals something about every boss

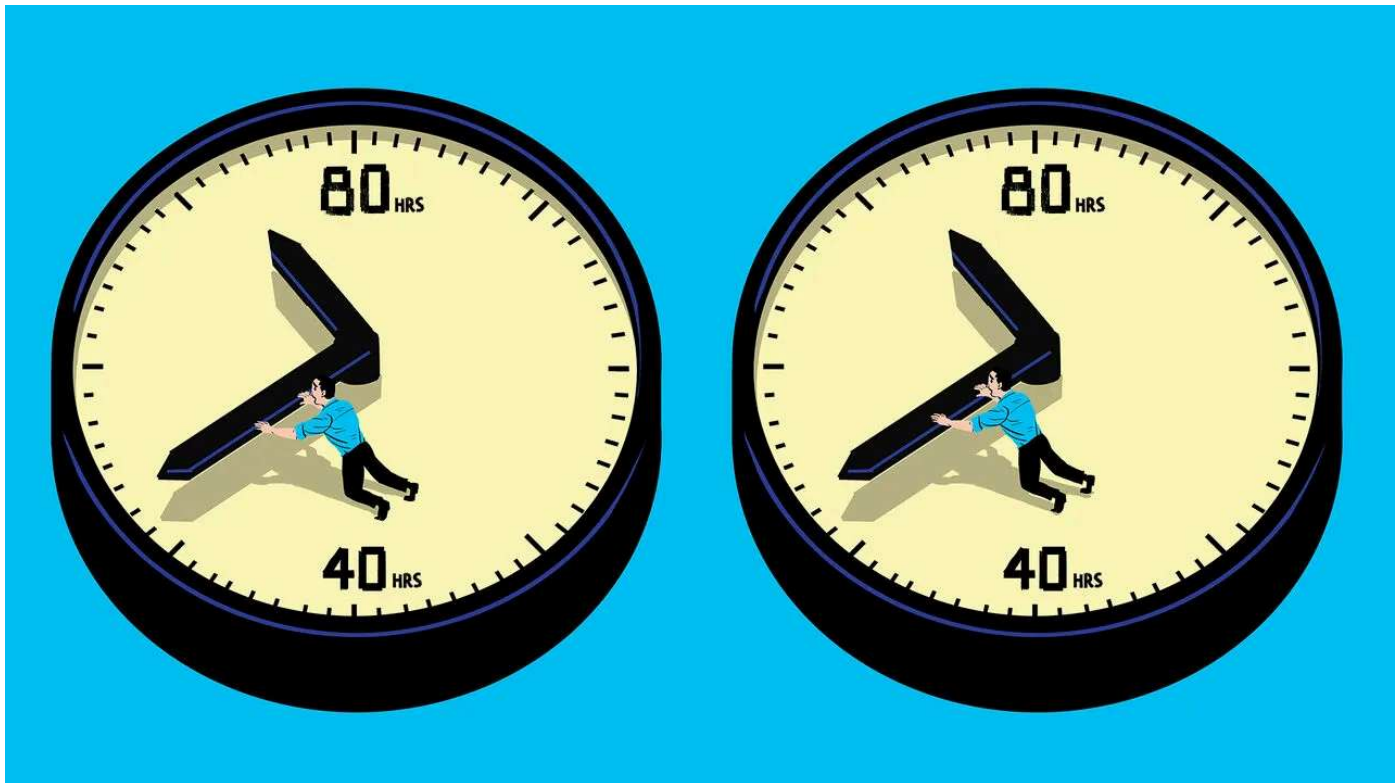
[Share](#)

ILLUSTRATION: PAUL BLOW

Dec. 4th 2025 | 4 min read

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)

**Listen to this story**

0:00 / 0:00

**N**INE 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

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)

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

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* Start free trial

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. ■

*Subscribers to The Economist can sign up to our [Opinion newsletter](#), which brings together the best of our leaders, columns, guest essays and reader correspondence.*  
Explore more

[Opinion](#)[Columns](#)[Bartleby](#)[Business](#)[Management](#)

This article appeared in the Business section of the print edition under the headline "Clock wise"



## From the December 6th 2025 edition

Discover stories from this section and more in the list of contents

[➔ Explore the edition](#)

[Share](#)[Reuse this content](#)

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)



THE ECONOMIST TODAY

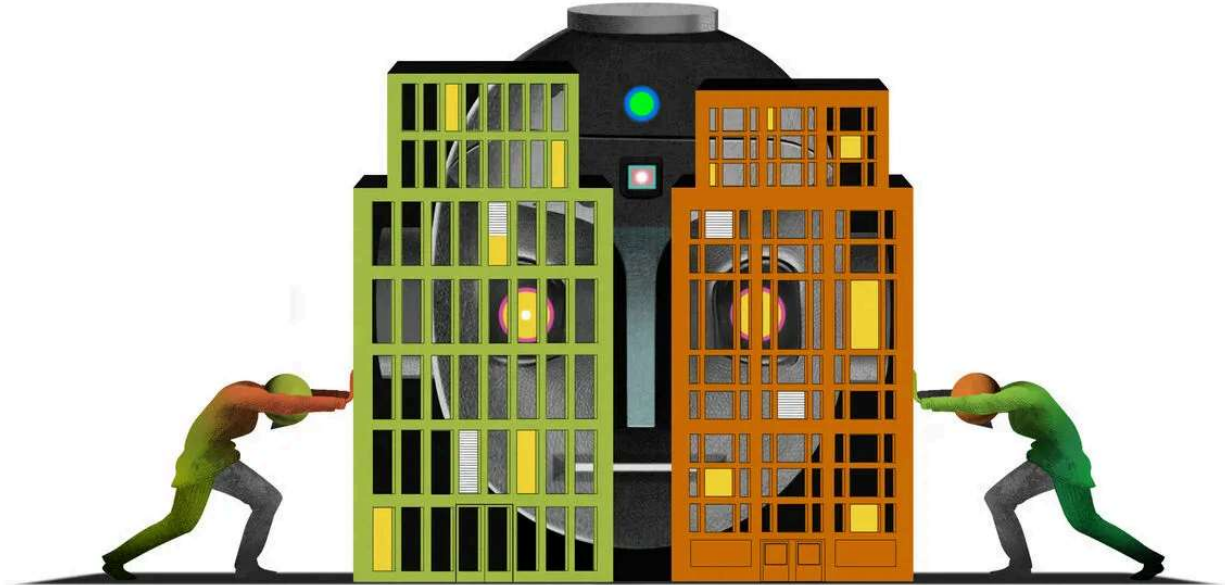
## Handpicked stories, in your inbox

A daily newsletter with the best of our journalism

[Sign up](#)

- ☐ Yes, I agree to receive exclusive content, offers and updates to products and services from The Economist Group. I can change these preferences at any time.

### More from Business

**Schumpeter**

## Will the mega-merger wave destroy value for shareholders?

It's a coin toss

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)

## To halt their decline, VW and others are turning Chinese

Foreign carmakers are localising their operations in the country



## Even Europe's penmakers are under threat

But one quirky Italian brand is thriving



## China's unlikely new entertainment capital

Zhengzhou is emerging as the Hollywood of micro-dramas

## Patrick Drahi has bested his lenders yet again

The world's messiest debt restructuring just got even uglier

## From micro-dramas to video games, Chinese entertainment is booming

But how much slack will the Communist Party give creators?



Get *The Economist* app on iOS or Android

### THE ECONOMIST

About

Reuse our content

Subscribe

The Economist Pro

SecureDrop

### THE ECONOMIST GROUP

The Economist Group

Economist Intelligence

Economist Impact

Economist Impact Events

Economist Education Courses

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)

- Help and support

Working here
- Advertise

Executive Jobs
- Press centre
- Affiliate programme

To enhance your experience and ensure our website runs smoothly, we use cookies and similar technologies.

Manage cookies

Terms of use

Privacy

Cookie Policy

Accessibility

Modern Slavery Statement

Sitemap

 × Your Privacy Choices

Cancel subscription

Registered in England and Wales. No. 236383 | Registered office: The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6HT | VAT Reg No: GB 340 436 876

© The Economist Newspaper Limited 2025

You've been given access to this story by a subscriber to *The Economist* [Start free trial](#)