

## Leading Issues Journal July 2010

### 21 hours: a new norm for the working week?



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Imagine a new 'standard' working week of 21 hours. Not 35 hours, or a four-day week, but 21 hours or its equivalent spread across the calendar year.

How would it feel to wake up on a chilly February morning? More time in bed, more time with the kids, more time to read, see your mum, hang out with friends, repair the guttering, make music, fix lunch, walk in the park. Whatever you need or want to do.

Outlandish? Well, it's less radical than the vision of John Maynard Keynes (see: <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>). He imagined a 15-hour week by the beginning of the 21st century, because he thought we'd no longer have to work long hours to satisfy our material needs.

His forecast was wrong, not least because our definition of material needs has grossly expanded. In fact, the 'normal' working week lengthened in the last decades of the 20th century, with two-adult households adding six hours a week to their combined paid workload. Many of us work longer and harder to earn enough to buy what we need (or think we need), to keep or improve our place in the world, or simply to make ends meet. Meanwhile, others have too little employment, or none at all.

But Keynes was right to envisage a need to think differently about how we use and value time. In the 21st century, moving towards much shorter hours of paid employment could be a critical factor in heading off environmental, social and economic catastrophe. In the developed world, most of us are consuming well beyond our economic means, well beyond the limits of the natural world and in ways that ultimately fail to satisfy us.

Economic growth has depended on a volatile mix of depressed wages and escalating material consumption. So workers have borrowed to consume what they cannot afford and now the credit bubble has burst. Politicians are urging us all to shop harder to help the economy recover and grow. Yet natural resources are critically depleted by high-rolling consumerism and the climate clock is ticking. While some of

us accumulate more and more material goods, others have less and less of life's essentials.

We have even managed in our increasingly unequal society to divvy up time as an unequal commodity. Under-employment as well as unemployment is prevalent in low-income groups. Nearly 2.5 million are currently unemployed. Nearly one million worked part-time in the third quarter of 2009, because they could not find a full-time job, a rise of 30,000 over the previous quarter and up 30 per cent since the 2008.

A more equal distribution of working time would have clear environmental benefits. Leading economists are turning their attention to how we can manage with little or no economic growth

(<http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/2010/publications/growth-isnt-possible>), on the ground that continuing growth in the developed world cannot be 'decoupled' from carbon emissions sufficiently or in time to avoid disastrous climate change. Tim Jackson

(<http://www.earthscan.co.uk/index.aspx?aspxerrorpath=/ProsperityWithoutGrowth/tabid/102098/Default.aspx>), Peter Victor

([http://www.pvictor.com/MWG/About\\_the\\_Book.html](http://www.pvictor.com/MWG/About_the_Book.html)) and others have identified shorter working hours as one way to reduce labour and output overall without intensifying hardship or widening inequalities: share out the total of paid work more evenly across the population.

A 21-hour working week is a long way from today's standard of 40 hours or more, but not so far-fetched when you consider the infinitely varied ways in which we actually spend our time. On average, people of working age spend 19.6 hours a week in paid employment and 20.4 hours in unpaid housework and childcare. Of course these averages mask huge inequalities, both between women and men and between income groups – not only in how they use their time, but also in how far they can control it. Bringing the standard nearer to the average could help to iron out these differences.

Moving towards a standard of 21 hours could help to redistribute unpaid as well as paid time – for example by making more jobs available for the unemployed and giving men more time to look after their children.

There's nothing natural or inevitable about our nine-to-five, five-day week. It's just a relic of the industrial revolution. It can be changed. When the state of Utah in the US introduced a four-day week for state employees (without reduced hours, but giving everyone a three-day weekend), more than half said they were more productive and three-quarters said they preferred the new arrangements. The State saved \$4.1 million through reduced absenteeism and overtime and \$1.4 million through reduced travel in state-owned vehicles; it reduced carbon emissions by 4,546 metric tons, other greenhouse gases by 8,000 tons and petrol consumption by 744,000 gallons. 82 per cent of employees said they wanted the one-year experiment to continue.

We could get off the consumer treadmill and leave a smaller footprint on the earth. We could spend less on energy-intensive 'convenience' items designed to save us time – from processed foods and household gadgets to cars and airline tickets. We'd have more time to care for friends and family, and to look after our own health. We could leave employment and claim our pensions later, with a much gentler transition to retirement. We'd have more time to keep learning and take part in local activities. We might begin to reassess how we value different kinds of work, regardless of whether or how it is paid. We might give a higher rating to relationships, pastimes and places that absorb less of our money and more of our time.

There could be benefits for business too, with more women in paid employment, more men leading rounded, balanced lives, less workplace stress and greater productivity hour for hour. The driving force towards a prosperous economy would no longer be credit-fuelled consumerism, which has proved so destructive, but financial stability and good work distributed fairly across the population.

None of this will be easy to achieve. A lot of people will have to adjust to earning a lot less, but this has to be seen as part of a bigger transition, over a decade or more, that will involve a radical shift in values and expectations. . Everything depends on having the right measures in place to ensure that work is fairly distributed, that everyone has enough to live on, that employers are encouraged to take on more staff, and that public attitudes change to support less materialist lifestyles and a revaluation of paid and unpaid time. These are explored in more detail in

Social norms that seem to be firmly fixed can sometimes change quite suddenly. Take, for example, attitudes towards slavery and votes for women, wearing seatbelts and crash helmets, not smoking in bars and restaurants. The weight of public opinion can swing from antipathy to routine acceptance, usually when there's a combination of new evidence, changing conditions, a sense of crisis and a strong campaign. This proposal for a 21-hour working week is intended as a provocation, to stimulate debate and ideas. It also reflects an urgent need to build a sustainable future. We already have strong supporting evidence, changing conditions that demand a fresh approach and a profound sense of crisis. The campaign starts here.

*21 hours: Why a shorter working week can help us all to flourish in the 21st century by Anna Coote, Andrew Simms and Jane Franklin was published on Saturday 13 February 2010 at [neweconomics.org](http://neweconomics.org).*