

Re-opening America with a Four Day Work Week

Labor rights advocate Robert Owen argued for an 8-hour workday in the early 1800's without much success¹, but the idea began to take hold in the United States after the Civil War. In 1869, President Grant issued a proclamation assuring government workers an eight-hour workday with no decrease in pay.² Reform came more slowly in the private sector—it was not until 1898 that the United Mine Workers successfully negotiated an 8 hour day and soon afterward the reform became standard practice in the printing industry.³ Congress passed the Adamson Act in 1916, mandating an 8 hour workday for interstate railroad workers.⁴

Nevertheless, Henry Ford is often credited with establishing the 8 hour day and 40 hour work week with no decrease in wages in 1926.⁵ Ford made the move not for safety, productivity or under the pressure of labor negotiations but rather because he believed that business—particularly the automobile business— was dependent on consumer demand. And consumer demand for automobiles would increase dramatically if workers had sufficient leisure time to enjoy the freedom to travel that an automobile provides.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States, government required shelter-in-place directives have encouraged public and private employers and schools to enable workers and students to work and study remotely. Many of us have appreciated and become tired of increasingly longer meetings, classes and transactions in front of our desktops, laptops and smartphones, as our dogs barked, children ran, laughed, cried and climbed on us, and spouses repeatedly directed us to lower our voices and volumes. Some of us are working more than 5 days and 40 hours, others about the same, and some putting in less time than if we were going into our physical workplace.

What is certainly true for almost everyone who is “zooming in” to work is that we are spending much less time commuting to work...time that is mostly wasted on crowded roads, on buses or in subway or rail cars. Not only has the spread of disease been slowed, tons of carbon have not been released into the atmosphere, and we have more time with our families. If it weren't for the virus our stress levels would be lower and our productivity most likely higher. As we begin to reopen the economy, why not use the time between now and the mass distribution of a proven vaccine to modernize our work patterns, benefitting the planet, ourselves and our economy?

Does it really make sense for so many people to work 9 to 5, Monday through Friday (or the 50 or 60 hours that may not be mandated but is often expected/required). Let's use the federal three stage re-opening process to establish a “new normal.” Leave the 40 hour standard for now but reorganize

it to the benefit of all stakeholders. In the early 20th century, the work week dropped from 6 days to 5 days even before 8-hour days and 40-hour weeks became the standard.⁶

Starting now, make the four day, 10 hour day the norm and stagger our workforce in four cohorts, 7am- 5pm, 8am-6pm, 9am-7pm and 10am-8pm. And stop thinking about the weekend as Saturday and Sunday. Everyone should get three days off, but there should be flexibility to meet the needs of

workers, employers and customers. In a world in which we expect all goods and services to be available 24/7, it is in everyone's interest to have a flexible four-day work week.

For those who can, also establish one day a week working remotely. In those cases, 10 commutes a week drops to 6 and for those not remoting, 10 drops to 8. Combined with staggered start times, workplaces can be staffed for longer hours and the same or even more days, congestion on mass transit and roads can be reduced, and the amount of carbon released into the air will drop significantly.

This new work schedule will help many families with childcare responsibilities. We should also reimagine the school day, week and year so that families can spend more time together throughout the year, using technology (a laptop provided for every child) and better coordination between school and work schedules. It should help the economy as well, as Henry Ford predicted a century ago—more free time leads to higher consumer spending.

Finland's new prime minister has indicated she would support a shorter work week in a country that in 1996 permitted most employees to move their workday up to three hours earlier or later than the typical employer norm.⁷ Sweden has piloted a six-hour work- day. Politicians in the UK and Russia have endorsed the four- day workweek and companies such as Shake Shack in the United States and Perpetual Guardian in New Zealand have tried it with some success.⁸

In recent days, we have heard some say we should use this crisis to get things done that would not be possible in our normal partisan policy debate. A new, more productive and family-friendly four-day work week can be accomplished without trillions of dollars, years of implementation or partisan debate. Let's reopen our economy with a four day work week for all.

Dr. William B. Eimicke is Professor of Practice and Director of the Picker Center for Executive Education at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. He retired from the FDNY as Deputy Commissioner for Strategic Planning and Performance Management and served as New York State Housing "czar" under Governor Mario M. Cuomo. He is also the co-author of *Management Fundamentals* (2020) and *Social Value Investing* (2018), both published by Columbia University Press.

¹ G. Claeys, ed., **A New View of Society and Other Writings** (New York: Penquin Books, 1991).

² University Libraries, “The Eight Hour Day,” University of Maryland, accessed at www.lib.umd.edu/unions/labor/eight-hour-day

³ Ohio History Central, “United Mine Workers of America”, accessed at https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/United_Mine_Workers_of_America

⁴ US House of Representatives Office of the Historian, “President Woodrow Wilson Addresses a Joint Session of Congress to Avert a National Railroad Strike,” accessed at <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1901-1950/President-Woodrow-Wilson-s-Joint-Session-message-appealing-for-the-avoidance-of-a-national-railroad-strike/>

⁵ Richard Snow, **I Invented the Modern Age: The Rise of Henry Ford** New York: Scribner, 2013).

⁶ Philip Sopher, “Where the Five-Day Workweek Came From,” **The Atlantic**, August 21, 2014 accessed at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/where-the-five-day-workweek-came-from/378870/>

⁷ Jack Kelly, “Finland Prime Minister’s Aspirational Goal of A Six-Hour, Four-Day Workweek: Will It Ever Happen?” **Forbes**, January 8, 2020 accessed at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/01/08/finlands-prime-ministers-aspirational-goal-of-a-six-hour-four-day-workweek-will-this-ever-happen/amp/>

⁸ Lisa Eadicco, “Companies from Microsoft to Shake Shack have experimented with a shorter, 4-day workweek—and most of the time, it’s had incredible results,” **Business Insider**, November 10, 2019, accessed at <https://www.businessinsider.com/microsoft-shake-shack-4-day-work-week-productivity-life-balance-2019-11?amp>