Can a 40-Hour Workweek Actually Improve Productivity?

As long hours become habitual, science tells us that productivity and employee engagement may actually take a nose-dive. Is it time to re-evaluate your stance on the standard workweek?

Angela checked the last item off this week’s to-do list and looked at her watch: 5 p.m. “Woo-hoo – I finished right on time and I got it all done!” Angela’s company has a strict 40-hour workweek policy. No overtime unless it’s absolutely necessary.
Angela is more focused and gets more done in 40 hours than she used to when she felt compelled to work longer hours. Plus, she’s not stressed about being late picking up the kids from day care, and most nights, she has time to get a healthy dinner on the table instead of the carryout habit she fell into.

No, you’re not reading about a fantasy company or a preview of the next episode of Undercover Boss. In today’s increasingly competitive environment, companies are taking a fresh look at how to balance employee engagement with the need to improve productivity.

The debate about productivity and hours worked isn’t new. In fact, economist John Maynard Keynes famously predicted a 15-hour workweek in the 1930s. The subject is now getting increased attention. Recent data shows that work hours can be shortened while maintaining or even improving output.

The history of the 40-hour workweek

When the federal government first started tracking work hours in the 1890s, it wasn’t unusual for manufacturing workers to log 100 hours a week.

The move to work a shorter workweek began in the 1860’s, but didn’t gain much traction until the 1900s, when two large printing firms in Chicago conceded to union demands for a 40-hour week.

Over the next several decades, more pressure from unions and federal laws culminated in the standardization of how many hours employees could work.

- **September 3, 1916:** Congress passed the Adamson Act, which established an eight-hour workday for interstate railroad workers.
- **September 25, 1926:** Ford Motor Companies adopted a five day, 40-hour workweek.
- **June 25, 1938:** Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) that limited the workweek to 44 hours.
- **June 26, 1940:** Congress amended the FLSA, limiting the workweek to 40 hours.

Source: Business Insider, Here’s How the 40-hour Workweek Became the Standard in America, Shana Lebowitz, October 24, 2015.

How much are we working?

A 2014 Gallup study found that U.S. full-time employees average **46.7 hours a week**. For full-time salaried employees only, the workweek is even longer: **49 hours on average – a full day longer than a 40-hour week**.
A new French law makes it illegal for companies to send emails to employees outside of regular work hours.
Food for thought?
Many people choose to work longer hours because they feel it’s the best way to get recognized and rewarded. Others do it because it’s part of the culture of the business or industry in which they work. Others are driven by earning more money. Science tells us that exhausted employees aren’t better employees. Fatigue leads to errors, accidents, health problems, and a lack of creativity. Certainly not all overtime can be eliminated. But when long hours become habitual, it can be detrimental to productivity and employee engagement.

ADP® can help you maximize the way your business works
Wondering if the cultural shift to a strict 40-hour workweek and changing the work hours at your company will make a difference? ADP can help you think through the impacts, navigate labor and benefits laws, and help you build competitive pay and benefit packages. Not only can this help you motivate your employees, it can also lead to increased productivity and engagement, as well as increased retention of key employees.

1 The Economist, Proof that you should get a life, C.W., December 9, 2014.
3 The Guardian, Efficiency up, turnover down: Swedish experiments with six-hour working day, David Crouch, September 17, 2015.
4 Ibid.