

Can shorter working hours help avoid burnout and boost productivity?

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Flexible working

A new book shows how a four day week is good for companies and their staff



Alex Soojung-Kim Pang says a four-day week is 'simply a good business' © Anna Gordon/FT

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In 2016, Blue Street Capital decided to cut the length of its working day to five hours. Over the first year, sales increased 30 per cent. Over three years, the California-based financing company almost doubled its workforce to 17 employees.

Despite reducing the amount of work time by almost 38 per cent, increasing staff and keeping full-time wages, some people were unhappy and decided to quit.

This is one discovery Alex Soojung-Kim Pang made in his book *Shorter: How Working Less Will Revolutionise the Way Your Company Gets Things Done*. No matter what carrots you dangle, some employees like the bragging rights of long hours, and deem it a proxy for success. Or, he says, “they think that the work required to redesign their workdays doesn’t feel worth it to them”.

Because cutting hours requires effort: recalibrating incentives, redesigning jobs, management structures and measuring performance. Meetings have to be dealt with ruthlessly, and so do tools of distraction such as social media. It also demands trial and error — should hours be spread over five days, or four? Does everyone have the same work patterns?

Getting working hours right might provide a solution, says Mr Pang, to gender inequality and burnout, while for the companies it may boost productivity, profits and innovation. When only a proportion of employees have part-time roles, typically they lose out on work opportunities and promotions.

The issue of shorter working hours is a hot topic. Andrew Barnes, the founder of Perpetual Guardian, a New Zealand financial services company, has a new book out, *The 4-day Week*, about his own experiences moving his 250 employees from five to four days.

He recommends testing the switch with a pilot as well as giving employees time to plan the change in work hours and how this might change according to seasonal demands. In the UK, the Labour party proposed a four-day week ahead of last year's general election.

Mr Pang says that he was “impressed with how effectively the Conservatives were able to paint [Labour's proposal for a] four-day week as this crazy socialist Venezuelan money tree hatched in some Soviet institute for economic disinformation”.

His own view is that the four-day week is not “a particularly leftwing idea despite the fact that trade unions all over the world have championed it, nor is it a particularly rightwing idea. I think it's simply good business.”

In his book, Mr Pang researches how companies — in Europe, Asia, the US and Australia — go about reducing their working weeks. He had expected such a practice to be only available in tech and design companies — “places where there is a lot of flexibility already and where being distinctive in how you work can be part of your brand”. But to his surprise, nursing homes and call centres were also implementing shorter weeks.

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The second shock was the clients' reaction. “Having worked as a consultant myself, I'm very familiar with the idea that you've always got to pick up the phone when the client calls.”

Yet in the companies that he researched, clients were generally relaxed. In fact, they were curious about how they might solve “problems with retention and work-life balance”. Those companies that had billable hours moved to payment per project instead.

Resistance to shorter hours, he says, typically boils down to special pleading. “There is no way this could work,” he is told. Either because “my company is special” or “our work is special”.

Smaller organisations will find it easier to implement and may have a greater incentive to try. “A company with 10 people in it, every hire is make or break.”

The London Stock Exchange’s recent consultation on a reduced trading day should encourage other large institutions to re-evaluate their hours. Mr Pang admits, however, that those organisations which have an “infinitely large, disposable workforce” will not be disposed to enhancing working conditions.

These include banks, organisations that “can throw an awful lot of money at new hires and essentially have a kind of production line in which you use people up and then cast them aside after three years — and a tiny number of survivors win the gladiatorial battle in order to move up in the firm.”

I tell him I was struck by how many people did bits of work in their downtime. Stuart Ralston, a chef and owner of Aizle, a restaurant in Edinburgh, for example, spoke of tiring of 90-hour weeks, missing out on his son’s early years, being weary and overweight, so he decided to reduce opening days to just four. As well as feeling healthier, the extra day of free time gave him the opportunity to research new dishes.

“It is often the case that downtime consists of things that allow your creative subconscious time to turn over ideas or to work on problems that have eluded your conscious effort,” says Mr Pang.

That benefit, though, tends to be the preserve of knowledge workers. “The demarcation between work and leisure, if you are an Uber driver or if you work in 100 other occupations, is strikingly clear and instantly obvious,” says Mr Pang.

There is a divide between the time-rich and time-poor, he says. “Whether it’s inequality expressed in whose time is valued, whether it’s inequality in terms of who is judged worthy of rest.”

Having three days off work each week encouraged people to exercise more and get on top of their life admin. “I didn’t hear people talk about feeling like, in three days, they had to do 50 per cent more relaxation than they did in two days, so that kind of anxiety about ‘are you being relaxed enough in the right way’ doesn’t seem to grow with time.”

Some employees felt the workplace became less social as a result of shorter hours. “Over time, companies all seem to figure out ways of recovering that,” says Mr Pang. Nonetheless, I suggest that some workplaces seemed so hell-bent on maximising productivity in fewer hours that the move to shorter hours seemed counterproductive.

“It is important for that not to become kind of a mania,” says Mr Pang. Or as a way of making individuals feel bad. “If you are always thinking that you should have become more productive or more effective with your time [and] not having done so is somehow your fault or reflects some basic flaw in your character, that’s lousy.”

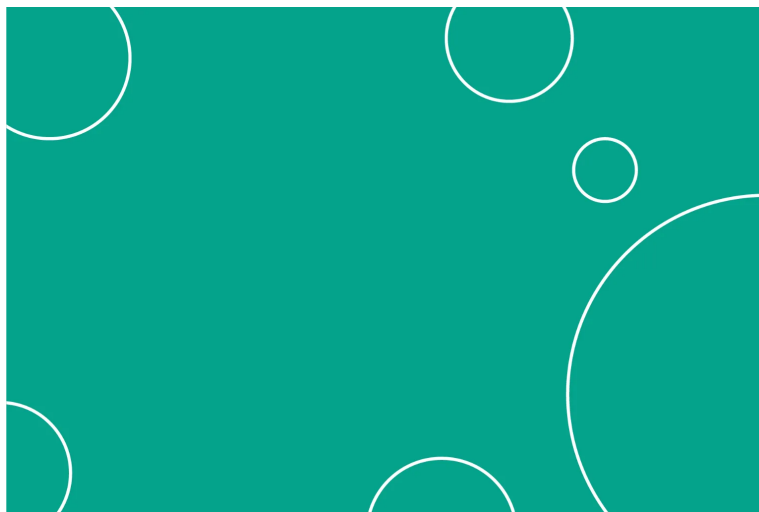
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