

Work Life Balance

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Abstract: There is need to ability to reduce number of working hours

I was working in Japan in 1996 as a software engineer and was slogging 7 days a week from 9 in the morning till 11 at night. And then my Japanese boss sent a fax to my Indian boss that I was irresponsible since I did not stay longer than 11 at night.

In Japan there is a term called KAROSHI - this means overwork death. Though most Japanese manage to escape death, many are prey to overwork. Almost 25% of Japanese employees work more than 60 hours a week which is 50% more than average. Even efforts to curb overwork are feeble, with overtime limited to 80 hours a month.

Actually, Japan is not so bad. The average number of working hours in Japan is just 1600 hours per year. In the USA, an average number of working hours is 1750 hours per year but in Germany the average number of working hours is 1350 hours per year. But the Japanese government is trying to introduce 4 day working week. But the Japanese overwork is resulting in lower productivity. Japanese productivity is as low as 40 dollars an hour, whereas the USA has productivity of 70 dollars an hour and France and Germany have the productivity of 65 dollars an hour and Britain has productivity of 50 dollars an hour. There does seem to be an inverse correlation between productivity and working hours.

The Below table is from Wikipedia on a number of working hours per year for 2019.

Table 1. Number of Working Hours/year-Nation wise

Nation	Number of Working Hours/year
Germany	1350
Britain	1500
France	1500
Japan	1600
USA	1780
Italy	1720
South Korea	2000
Russia	1960
Mexico	2150

Source: Wikipedia

Even in developed nations working hours can differ from almost 2000 hours in South Korea to just 1350 hours in Germany. That is a difference of almost 700 hours a year or almost 14 hours a week. That means almost 2 days less in a working week.

Surely everybody would like to work 2 days less if it is possible.

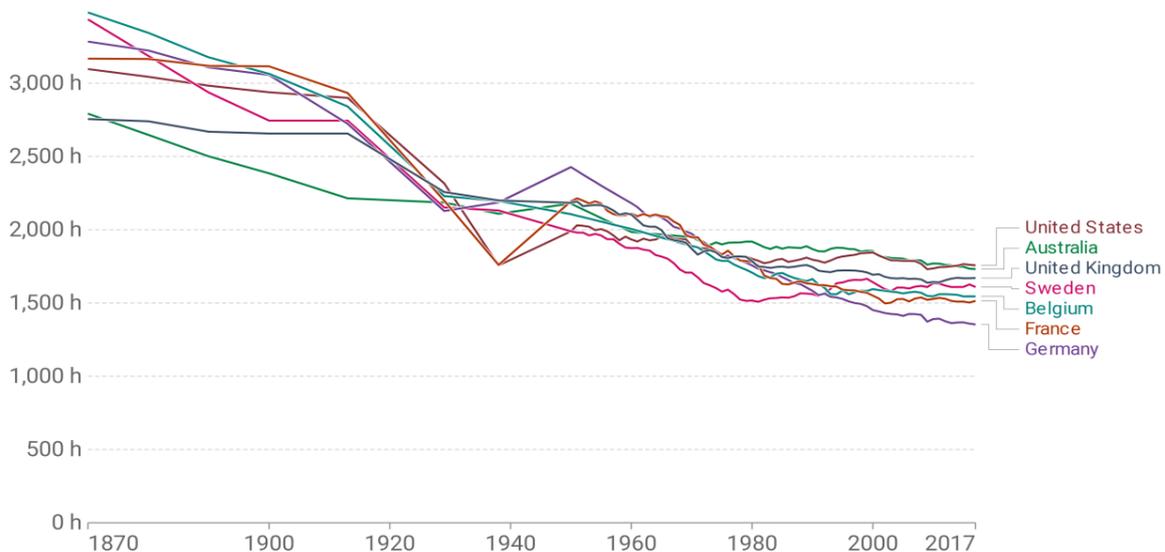
At this point, I must reiterate another work experience in India. Once I found that my colleagues were chit chatting from 9 am to 3 pm and then started work at 3 pm to stay late till 7 pm. That is waste of time leading to overwork.

Even in Britain, I have found many people pretending to work. Indeed at a workplace it is safe to say that most employees are pretending to work an average of 35% of the time. Thus there is slack during work hours even as there is overwork.

In this context, it is pertinent to reiterate the famous Murphy's Law - Work expands to occupy time available. Hence the only solution to overwork is to actually reduce the time available for work so that more leisure and less work are possible.

Annual working hours per worker

Average working hours per worker over a full year. Before 1950 the data corresponds only to full-time production workers (non-agricultural activities). Starting 1950 estimates cover total hours worked in the economy as measured from primarily National Accounts data.



Source: Huberman & Minns (2007) and PWT 9.1 (2019)

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Note: We plot the data from Huberman & Minns (2007) and extend coverage using an updated vintage of PWT, which uses the same underlying source. Comparisons between countries are limited due to differences in measurement.

Figure 1. Annual working hours per worker

Source: Huberman and Minns

The above chart shows that the number of working hours per year has seen a steep decline from almost 3000 hours per year in 1870 to around 1500 hours by 2020. This represents an almost 50% decline in the number of working hours per year. In some nations such as the USA the number of working hours is still around 1750 hours per year, whereas, in some nations such as France the average number of working hours is 1500 hours per year. Now that 250 hours per year can translate into 30 working days more of vacation or an additional weekly off every alternate week. But in Germany, the number of working hours per week has already reached 1350 hours per year compared to 1500 working hours per week in France. That additional 150 hours per year can mean 20 additional days of vacation.

It is possible to work less and produce as much. Now to enforce this is it possible to legalize and mandate 4 working days per week plus 50 days of vacation. This means 25 working hours a week and 1250 working hours a year. That is certainly a small stretch from 1500 hours per year that is the norm. Honestly, four day work week has been discussed at least since the 1970s but hasn't been taken off seriously. Japan, Finland, and New Zealand have considered it. In Britain, Labour Party has been proposing Four day work week from 2029. Honestly, most places in most parts of the world is still stuck at five day week. But if the average number of working hours could reduce from 3000 hours per year in 1870 to around 1500-1600 hours per year by 2020, is it unreasonable to argue for another 250-350 working hour decline. Surely all this technology should make it possible for humanity to work less.

Of course, developing nations such as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia, will take a long time to reduce working hours per year. But the developed nations have been working far too hard for far too long and developed nations of the world need to start reducing their number of working hours per year. The pressure on reducing the number of working hours must come from workers themselves, through trade unions and lobbying with governments. In the famous movie "My Fair Lady" adapted from George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion there is a character Alfred DoLittle who says "Work!!! Don't mention that word in my presence. I used to do that sort of thing once. Just for exercise. Isn't worth it". He then sings "The Lord above gave man an arm of Iron so he could do his job and never shirk. But with a little bit of luck, someone else will do the blinking work. With a little bit of luck, you will never work" Humanity may not be so lucky as to never work. But can we hope to work a lot less?