

THE FOUR-DAY-WEEK: 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

ALEX SOOJUNG-KIM PANG, PH.D.

VERSION 1.0

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ABOUT STRATEGY & REST

Founded in 2019 by Dr. Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, Strategy & Rest is a Silicon Valley-based consultancy that helps companies trial four-day week. Building on two decades of work as a strategy consultant, workshop designer, and facilitator, Dr. Pang has created a series of workshops and exercises that help leaders and companies prepare for four-day weeks. Learn more at <https://www.strategy.rest>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang is a Silicon Valley-based consultant. Through his company Strategy + Rest, and his trilogy of books— **Shorter: Work Better, Smarter and Less— Here’s How** (Public Affairs, 2020); **Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less** (Basic Books, 2016), and **The Distraction Addiction** (Little Brown , 2013)— Alex shows how companies and individuals can better integrate rest, creativity, and focus into digital-age lives and work.

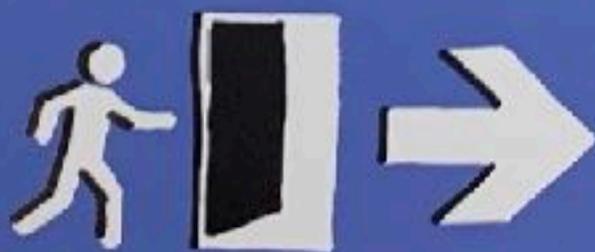
Dr. Pang’s opinions about the future of work are quoted in the *Financial Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and other publications. He is also a regular guest on podcasts and radio shows like BBC’s *Business Daily* and NPR’s *Marketplace*.

Before founding Strategy & Rest, Dr. Pang was a senior consultant at Institute for the Future and Strategic Business Insights, and a visiting scholar at Microsoft Research Cambridge, and Oxford University’s Saïd Business School. He received a Ph.D. in history and sociology of science from the University of Pennsylvania.

'One of the most hopeful books I have read about the state of modern work' BRIGID SCHULTE, author of *Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time*, and director of The Better Life Lab

How Working Less Will Revolutionize the Way your Company Gets Things Done

Shorter



Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

AUTHOR OF REST

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, I published my book on the four-day week, **Shorter: Work Better, Smarter and Less— Here's How**. I'd worked for two years visiting companies, interviewing founders, talking to academics, and distilling the experience of a hundred companies. I kicked off the release of the book with a series of events in the UK in February, and returned to the US for the book's American release in March.

I did one event at a local bookstore before COVID hit.

Suddenly, the tour was cancelled. Businesses were on lockdown. And it looked like a **terrible** time to be writing about the shorter workweek.

But interest in the four-day week **didn't** flag, and the movement didn't slow down. My press tour became all-virtual, and keynotes were on Zoom, but popular interest in the four-day week remained keen.

The pandemic liberated companies to experiment with lots of new things, including shorter working hours.

They found that going remote helped them be more efficient, at a time when their employees were struggling with kids, confinement, and stress— and when everyone was questioning their assumptions about the place of work in their lives.

As founder of Strategy & Rest, I've continued studying the movement, advising founders, working with companies to design their own four-day weeks, and talking with journalists writing about the future of work.

It's clear that nearly two years after **Shorter** was published, more companies have adopted four-day workweeks than ever.

And the four-day week isn't just growing in popularity. It's diversifying and evolving. Indeed, I see four big emerging trends in the movement:

- **Carving New Paths.** Companies are creating new ways of implementing shorter workweeks, combining shorter hours with flexible or remote work, or bringing back “summer hours” for all employees.
- **Going Public.** Firms used to launch their four-day week trials quietly, for fear of scaring clients. Now, they do it to show off their leadership skills, concern for employees, and professionalism— and they announce it on LinkedIn, YouTube, or their company blog.
- **Growing State Activism.** States are emerging as players in the movement to shorten working hours. At the beginning of 2021, Iceland became the first country to shorten working hours for its public sector. In December, the United Arab Emirates announced it would move government offices and schools to a shorter workweek in 2022. And elsewhere, countries are discussing policies to encourage adoption in the private sector or have announced support for trials.
- **Forging a New Culture.** Companies adopt shorter workweeks to solve pressing problems with burnout, recruitment and retention, and work-life balance. But they're also rejecting cultural ideals about that treat overwork as a badge of honor, and are crafting new ways of thinking about time and work, what ideal careers look like, and how to improve work-life balance.

Looking across this changed landscape, it was clear that it was time to bring the story I told in **Shorter** up to date. That is the purpose of this report— optimistically titled an annual report.

The report starts with an overview of the movement until the pandemic, and explain why it gained, not lost, steam during the pandemic. It then look more closely at new trends that have emerged in the last two years, with a deep dive into a few key areas: Iceland, the UAE, law firms, and schools. Finally, it discusses the future of the movement, and how the four-day week could unfold in 2022.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Before the pandemic, hundreds of forward-looking companies had already adopted four-day weeks **without** cutting salaries or sacrificing revenues or customers. It was already a **diverse** movement: it included creative and professional service firms but also software startups, restaurants, factories and nursing homes — industries where overwork is common and deadlines can be inflexible. It was also **global**: lots of firms in Europe and the Nordic countries moved to four-day weeks, six-hour days or other shorter workweeks, but two other centers of the movement were Korea and Japan— countries whose languages have invented words for “death by overwork.”

WHY COMPANIES ADOPTED FOUR-DAY WEEKS

Why did they do it? For many, it was a question of change, or die. Almost all these companies were led by seasoned founders who found themselves facing burnout, struggled to attract and keep great people, saw employees struggling to maintain work-life balance— and they thought they could find better ways of working that were more sustainable.

HOW COMPANIES DID IT

Once they had decided to move to shorter week, they meaningfully redesigned how they worked. For most companies— particularly creative and professional services firms— that meant focusing on three key areas: 1) tightening meetings; 2) introducing “focus time” when everyone can concentrate on their key tasks; and 3) using technology more mindfully. Studies show that while technology has made knowledge work much more productive, office workers are wasting two to four hours a day thanks to outmoded



processes, multitasking, overly-long meetings and interruptions. Deal with those, and you go a long way towards making a four-day week possible.

In other industries, better infrastructure was essential: for example, Edinburgh, Scotland restaurant Aizle moved to a four-day week after adding more tables in front and a larger stove, allowing the restaurant to serve more customers more efficiently. At Pioneer Pest Control in Michigan, AI-powered routing software saves exterminators so many hours on the road, they've been able to move to a four-day week while serving the same number of customers.

Other companies have implemented new tools or policies to encourage focus. Norwich, England digital agency Flocc divides the day into "red time" for focused work, "amber time" for meetings and calls, and "green time" for breaks and lunch. London digital consultancy ELSE now holds their internal meetings on hard chairs to encourage people to be brief, while Copenhagen-based IIH Nordic uses countdown timers to keep meetings short.

THE BENEFITS OF A FOUR-DAY WEEK

The benefits of a three-day weekend for people are obvious: better work-life balance; more time for "life admin" and family; and more energy for professional and personal development, restorative hobbies and exercise. But companies benefit, too.

Many are just as productive in four days as in five (a few even saw productivity go up dramatically), while revenues and profits rose because four-day weeks were cheap to implement and actually attracted new customers. This, in turn, boosted retention rates and attracted more experienced workers, and plucky startups and small-town firms could now compete with established companies in London or Silicon Valley for senior talent. Rich Leigh, whose Gloucester firm Radioactive PR moved to a four-day week in 2019, told me, "I can't move for great resumes from great people" who were wanting to escape London but remain in the industry. A few years ago, Korean e-commerce company Woowa Brothers used a shorter workweek to lure people from Samsung and LG; it's currently valued at more than US \$4 billion. Companies aren't losing out on their bottom line, and they have happier, healthier and better workers.

A shorter workweek helps these companies be more productive, not less, more attractive to first-rate talent, and more sustainable places to work.

For example, at Pursuit Marketing, a call center in Glasgow Scotland, productivity went up 40% after they implemented a four-day week, and annual staff turnover has dropped to an unheard-of 4 percent. Revenues at Woowa Brothers have increased more than tenfold since they cut working hours in 2015. Michelin-starred restaurants like Baumé in Palo Alto have moved to four-day weeks to reduce stress on staff. Employees are healthier and use fewer sick days because they have more time to exercise, cook better food, and take better care of themselves. Their work-life balance improves, they're more focused and creative, and less likely to burn out.

OTHER SHORTER WORKWEEKS

Not every company shortening working hours adopted a four-day workweek. A number of companies, particularly retail stores and services, put people on 6-hour shifts but stay open 12 hours a day.

For example, the Toyota repair center in Gothenburg, Sweden has operated on this schedule for nearly 20 years. Working a 6-hour day, mechanics are able to work harder and faster, and turnaround time is low: a customer can drop off a car early in the morning and have major repairs finished that evening. The center uses its equipment and bays more intensively, further lowering costs and boosting profits.

Other companies in the shorter-hours movement combine four-day workweeks and flexible work. At Philadelphia-based software company Wildbit, people take either Monday or Friday off, so the company can provide uninterrupted customer service. At London medical documentation company Synergy Vision, employees rotate weekdays off in order to keep the office open five days a week. In both cases, most customers never realize that staff are on shorter hours.

THE FOUR-DAY WEEK AND THE PANDEMIC

- The global pandemic did not slow down adoption of four-day weeks
- Companies leveraged the benefits of remote work to shift to shorter hours
- The pandemic highlighted the need for structural solutions to workers' problems

My book **Shorter** came out days before the United States began closing schools and businesses, and implementing the protocols we now live with. At the time, I assumed that the four-day week movement would wither while businesses, plagued by uncertainty, retreated into survival mode. But the opposite happened. Even more companies trialed and adopted four-day weeks. Why did the movement continue—even accelerate— during the pandemic?

Every company struggles with burnout, recruitment and retention, founder exhaustion, or has issues maintaining work-life balance. Their cultures normalize overwork: people come to see long hours as a sign of job commitment, and a way to fast-track your career, steepen your learning curve, and make yourself indispensable. They encourage people to seek individual rather than structural solutions— mindfulness classes rather than unionization— even at the cost of personal advancement.

Companies that moved to four-day weeks before the pandemic started off solving very practical problems, but they ended up challenging these assumptions. They were asking

whether long hours were really necessary. They were beginning to question whether endless toil was a sign of passion, or just poor planning. Finally, they were willing to treat these problems as structural and universal, and to try organizational solutions that everyone implemented together.

The global pandemic made the need for innovations like the four-day week clearer than ever. COVID created unprecedented problems and pressures for businesses; highlighted existing inequalities in workplaces, labor markets and economies; exposed the fragility of the structures families relied upon to balance work, school, and family life; and raised big questions about why work so much, and whether we could work things differently and better.

In other words, everyone was now confronting questions that four-day week companies had asked and answered years before.

THE PANDEMIC GAVE US AN EXCUSE TO ADMIT THAT WORK HASN'T BEEN WORKING FOR MANY PEOPLE, AND THE SPACE TO TRY ALTERNATIVES.

Reacting to the pandemic created a greater ability to experiment with shorter workweeks. If a company in early 2020 wasn't already using tools like Google Suite, Asana, Trello and Slack to let workers collaborate and communicate online and serve customers remotely, they quickly learned how to use them. Workflows became better-documented and -routinized, pushing hourly productivity upward.

At the same time, the challenges of managing life under lockdown were growing, as workers juggled home-schooling, the disappearance of work-life boundaries and longer working hours. And like everyone, they were wondering whether work should really be as central to their lives and identities.

CRISIS MODE AND ADAPTATION

In 2020, I interviewed people at social impact accelerator Uncharted; Donegal, Ireland-based online publishing platform developer 3D Issue; English magazine publisher and events organizer Target Publishing; and Bogota-based virtual voice agency Bunny Studio.



WORKMODE



All had recently started trialing four-day weeks, and their experiences illustrate how companies made the shift during the pandemic.

Initially, they had prepared for the worst, implementing pay cuts and conserving cash. But they also quickly moved to remote work, and worked on their processes. “When the pandemic hit it was seamless for us to work remotely,” 3D Issue CEO Paul McNulty said. “It was a matter of lifting your hardware and getting the staff longer Ethernet cables. We didn’t have to purchase any new platforms or anything.” At Uncharted, they clarified their objectives and key results and improved their collaboration tools. At Bunny Studio, having tools that supported “a culture of over-communication and internal documentation” had always been important, and became even more critical.

MOVING TO FOUR-DAY WEEKS

After a couple months, it was clear that productivity was not dropping. Working from home let everyone at Uncharted set aside several hours a week for deep work, and Banks started scheduling time for his core work, rather than letting meetings determine his day. Maika Hoekman, head of people operations at Bunny Studio, saw that workers were “improving in their focus and attention management, kind of letting go of their FOMO.” At Target Publishing, “things that would take up quite a lot of time before are taking up considerably less time,” David Cann said. “A meeting that would normally take an hour will take 15 minutes.”

THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES, NOT DESPITE THE PANDEMIC, BUT BECAUSE OF IT.

While the companies might have been working better, workers faced lots of other challenges. “Errands are taking longer, families are stressed out, and kids are at home,” Hoekman said. “We couldn’t expect our team members to bring their whole selves to work while ignoring what was going around them. Team members definitely need a mental break.” Target Publishing had reduced salaries and hours when the pandemic first hit, “I could see that the company was being quite efficient in those 12 weeks of lockdown,” David Cann said. It “made me think that actually, the four-day week could work and that we could give something back to the employees.” So when the company could afford it, he restored salaries, but kept the four-day week.

FOUR-DAY WEEKS DURING THE PANDEMIC

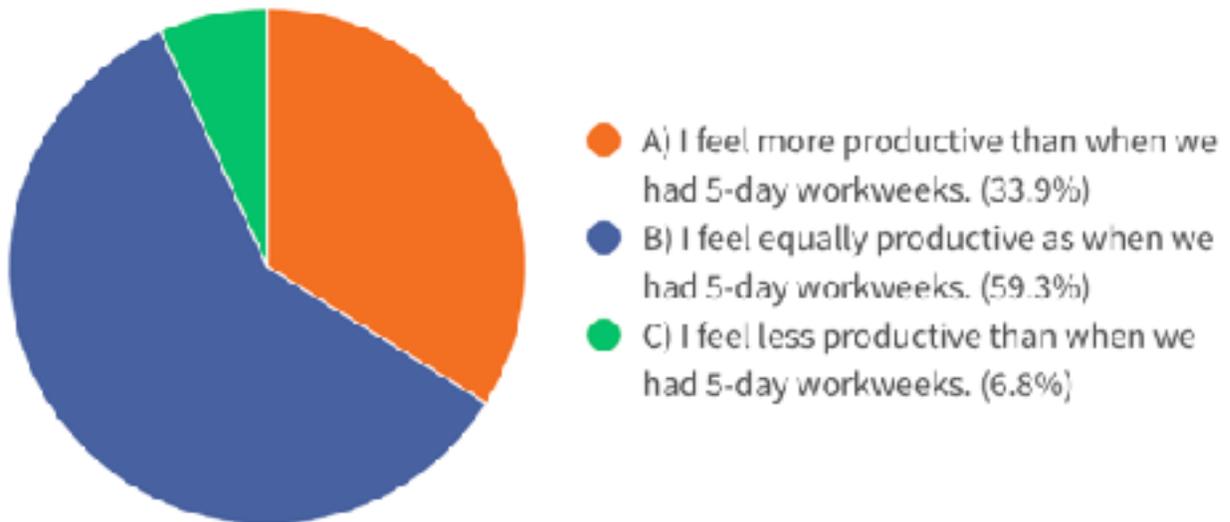
The impact on morale was immediate. At 3D Issue, Paul McNulty had given staff the option of a pay rise or shortened working hours; they voted in favor of the latter. The choice drove home that “because of the pandemic, people are really assessing their priorities. If they’re asking, ‘What am I doing with my life?’ and you offer them a day off or another 30 euro a week, they’re going to choose the day off.”

Shortening the workweek also encouraged people to be more thoughtful about how they worked. At Uncharted, “Giving people the space to figure out their working style has been an important optimization,” Banks Benitez tells me.

Buffer [tried a 4-day week in 2020](#); after three months, staff reported being more productive:

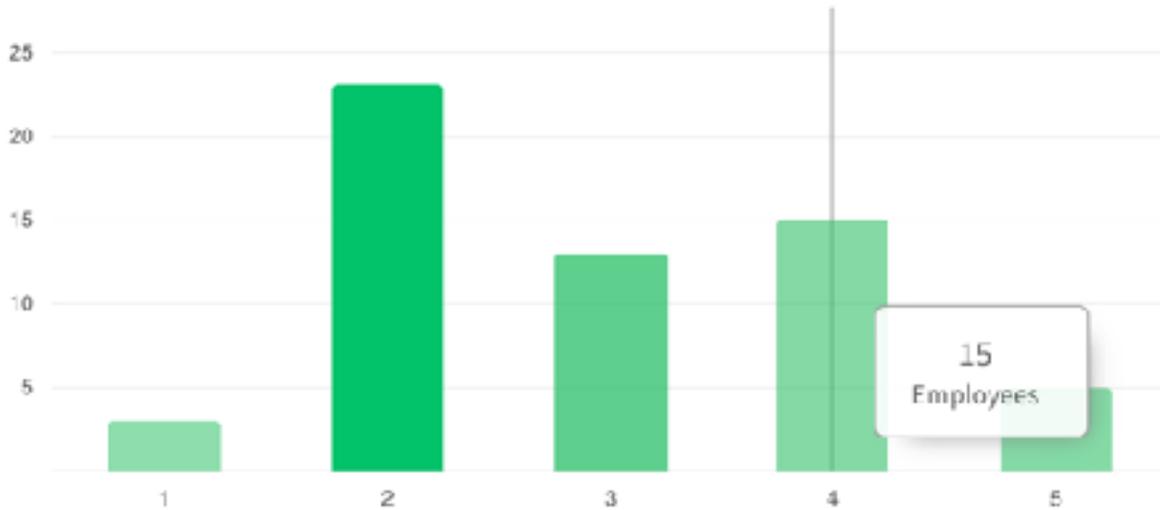
If you were to gauge your overall productivity, how would you describe it:

(Feel free to go off gut instinct if you don't track this in a more quantitative way.)



At the same time, people were less stressed, even though (or because) they were getting more done:

What would you rate as your overall stress level the past few months?



So the global movement to a four-day week continues, not **despite** the pandemic, but **because** of it. And it continues to evolve.

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TIME BACK**

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SOMERSET HOUSE



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CARVING NEW PATHS

- Companies are creating new ways of implementing shorter workweeks
- They are combining shorter hours with flexible or remote work
- Others are implementing “summer hours” and other temporary breaks

SCALING UP THE FOUR-DAY WEEK

Until the pandemic struck, almost all firms followed a common path to a shorter workweek. First came a planning phase to map out the new workday. Then came a 90-day trial during which a company would adjust to a shorter week, implement new practices, deal with unexpected problems, and gauge reaction from clients. Finally, they would permanently adopt a shorter week, or return to business as usual.

One of the striking changes in the last two years is that companies have tried a much wider range of experiments. The Asia-Pacific division of Medtronic, the world’s biggest medical device maker, is pioneering a new way to shorten working hours: if they meet goals for two consecutive quarters, they can work an hour less every Friday. APAC head Chris Lee explained, “I firmly believe that long working hours don’t necessarily translate into better outcomes.” Two years later, Medtronic Korea became the first office in APAC region to celebrate a half day Friday every week, and the Singapore and Tokyo offices were close behind. As the company explained on LinkedIn, “we believe in work-life integration” as well as “performance-based benefits,” and the program allowed the company link them together, rather than set them at odds.

Consumer products giant Unilever is likewise experimenting with a four-day week, but it’s conducting an experiment with their New Zealand operations for a year. Finally, two offices within Korean chaebol SK Group started operating on a four-day week in late 2018.

SK Group consists of ninety-five companies making everything from petroleum and semiconductors to consumer electronics, and felt it would have been impractical to move all 80,000 employees to a four-day week at once; instead, they're betting that lessons from small trials will eventually inform changes in larger units.

THERE ARE MORE PATHS THAN EVER TO A FOUR-DAY WEEK, AND COMPANIES ARE CREATING NEW ONES ALL THE TIME.

For large companies that worry that a four-day week could be too big a change, these kinds of local experiments— organized around experimentation at the national level, within functional lines or divisions, or based around performance goals— offer more measured, incremental ways of trialing and adopting four-day weeks. They follow an important historical precedent: the Ford Motor Company spent four years experimenting with the shorter week in different divisions before moving workers on the assembly line— the most important and logistically complex part of the company— to a forty-hour week in 1926.

NEW PATHS AND NEW DESTINATIONS

A number of companies have quietly implemented four-day weeks for a limited period during the pandemic. Canadian ecommerce giant Shopify, for example, shifted to a four-day week for much of the summer of 2020. They had already implemented a No Meeting Day to give people more time to focus on key tasks, but during the pandemic executives noticed that employees weren't taking vacation days (where could you go?), and worried that this would lead to lost productivity and more burnout. The NBA gave staffers Fridays off during November 2020, as dealing with the death of Kobe Bryant, a feud with China over support for Hong Kong, and then having to figure out how to play a season during the pandemic had made for long hours during the summer hiatus and a very demanding fall.

For some companies, these temporary measures became an on-ramp to a permanent four-day workweek.



Remote software company Starship created a “First Fridays” program in which everyone had the first Friday of each month off. As the CEO recalled, “The results were pretty great overall. People unplugged, productivity increased, and everyone seemed happier and more engaged at work. Despite being remote, people began to interact more and discuss life outside of Starship: artistic endeavors, community work, home improvements, and time spent with family.” As a result, they decided to make the four-day week permanent in 2022.

At HR software company Wonderlic, taking Fridays off during the summer convinced the company’s leaders that they could permanently move to a four-day week, and that a shorter week would let the company take a “progressive, sustainable approaches to building a culture that allows people to do their best work while living their best lives.”

The creation of new paths to the shorter workweek, and the growing diversity of companies trying it, is an indicator of the growing legitimacy of shorter workweeks in the eyes of business. The fact that more diverse companies are trying more diverse forms of shorter hours— sometimes as a reward for hard work, or as a company-wide means of dealing with stresses, and sometimes as a trial balloon for a permanent shorter week— shows that the four-day week is becoming part of companies’ and leaders’ toolkit. And the more companies experiment with shorter hours, the more will move to permanent adoption.

LAW FIRMS

When I talk about the four-day week, I often get questions like, “This sounds great for creative firms and salaried workers, but what about hourly workers? Do they lose out?” In fact, the four-day week has been adopted by factories, care homes, restaurants, and pest control companies, and shorter hours have been proven to benefit sous chefs and nurses assistants as much as software developers. In 2020 and 2021, the four-day week began appearing in another unexpected industry: law firms.

YLAW, CANADA

Vancouver, Canada-based family law firm YLaw moved to a four-day week in 2020. Founder Leena Yousefi had been working a four-day week for several years, and she recalls, “while having a glass of wine and cooking food, the thought crossed my mind: why not all of us?” In early 2021, after she “researched the topic obsessively and spent my evenings planning how to implement 4 work days a week without hurting our quality of service to our clients, our employee’s pay, and of course our profitability,” the entire firm moved a four-day week.

Yousefi calculated that eliminating Fridays might reduce net profits by 10%, but would have a positive impact on recruitment and retention, incentives to increase productivity, and more efficient operation. In fact, net profits grew by 12%, as people were fresher and able to work better during four days than five.

KROMANN REUMERT, DENMARK

Kromann Reumert, is a 500-person full-service firm working mainly with Danish-based international clients, began offering a four-day week in 2019. The firm implemented the “Expect Balance” program, which expanded opportunities to work flexibly or reduce workloads, in 2019. It was driven in part by a desire to reduce attrition among women associates, but from the start the program was available to everyone.

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The HR team heard about IIH Nordic and its four-day week in 2019, and when Danish companies started going remote in response to the pandemic, that opened up the opportunity to experiment with some new practices.

In October, they set a new policy allowing everyone to work from home two days a week. They also implemented a policy to allow people to work four-day weeks. This isn't a coordinated, company-wide redesign of the schedule, but does let people take a day off after a big deadline, or adjust weekly hours to deal with outside obligations.

MOLT WENGEL, DENMARK

Molt Wengel, a Danish firm that specializes in construction and real estate law, moved to a 4.5 day week. They had been trying to “change the mindset from being legal case workers to being strategic advisers who think holistically,” director Anne Katrine Schjønning says, and shift “the perception of value” away from “how many hours the service takes to creating value for the customer.”

That began a reorientation within the company from a focus on hours, to a focus on maximizing the productivity of your time. “There’s no point working too much. In the tenth or eleventh hour of work, we do not create value. We need to create power all the time we’re at work,” Schjønning says. “It’s important for us to work efficiently instead of working too much.”

The firm eliminated morning meetings, and reset the default length of meetings from 45 minutes to 20 minutes. They adopted pomodoro, working hard for 25-minute sprints then taking a break. Finally, these changes allowed them to implement a 4.5-day week, closing on Friday at lunchtime.

How have clients responded? At Kromann Reumert, they worried that it would be tough to sell this program, but so far, Bendtsen says, “The clients are doing the work for us”– they’re supportive, and even are talking about trialing it themselves.

GOING PUBLIC

- Public attitudes to the 4-day week have become more favorable
- Companies are more likely to publicize their trials
- The 4-day week signifies different things than in it before the pandemic

When I was writing SHORTER, it was a challenge finding companies that had moved to four-day weeks, and to get them to speak on the record. The problem was, there wasn't a well-developed way of talking about shorter hours as a positive thing. In manufacturing, moving to a four-day week has traditionally been a response to falling revenues or sales, and was seen as a signal of weakness, not strength. (Adding shifts or keeping the factory open on weekends, conversely, signaled vigorous demand.) Likewise, for creatives and professionalism, being busy signaled that you were in demand; idleness was a sign that things weren't going well.

No wonder companies that shortened working hours tended to keep their success quiet. They would confide in a few key clients that they were starting a trial, but otherwise they might say little or nothing in public.

COMPANIES USED TO KEEP THEIR SUCCESS QUIET. NOW THEY TALK ABOUT IT ON LINKEDIN.

This has all changed. Now, when companies trial or adopt a shorter workweek, they talk about it on LinkedIn, or publish a press release or blog post announcing the move. In December 2021 alone, seven companies— Atom Bank, Fairway Home Care, Igate, Nexton, Swash Labs, Starship, and Typetec— announced on LinkedIn that they were trialing or moving to four-day weeks. The arguments in favor of a four-day week are better-



developed, answers to objections are more robust, and fewer people assume that shortening working hours is impossible.

Employees are becoming more public about advocating for a four-day week as well. In the United States, the 4 Day Week Campaign has gathered more than 70,000 signatures from people around the country advocating for a shorter workweek at their companies, including Xero, Amazon, and Wal-Mart. A [November 2021 survey](#) found that 80% of respondents favored a 4-day week, 3% opposed it, and the remainder were neutral. In a [second survey](#) the following month, the positive responses nudged upwards to 83%.

- **Shorter** discussed 100 companies through 2019
- At least 75 have moved to four-day weeks since the pandemic began

This shift in rhetoric is important because it shows how the four-day week is becoming more mainstream. Two years ago, the only people you could count on to understand your decision to shift to a shorter workweek were people you already had a close working relationship with, who appreciated your professionalism and could see how this counterintuitive move made sense. Now, leaders can take for granted that a casual reader — or in the case of LinkedIn, other business people— will “get” why a four-day week is appealing, and how it can improve a company’s culture and bottom line.

This is not to say that overwork has been conquered; far from it. But at a time when people have seen that they can transform how they work faster than they ever imagined; are rethinking the place of work in their own lives; and are more receptive to once-radical economic ideas like Universal Basic Income and Modern Monetary Theory, imagining a shorter workweek no longer feels like science fiction. It’s about overcoming logistical challenges and anticipating problems, not about transforming capitalism.

GROWING STATE ACTIVISM

- Governments are experimenting with 4-day weeks
- Politicians are beginning to advocate for shorter workweek policies
- Iceland and the UAE have adopted shorter hours across their public sectors

When I was writing **Shorter**, governments had little impact on the movement. There were no policies encouraging shorter working hours in any of the countries where adoption rates were highest; nor did changes in labor law, vacation policy, or taxation figure into companies' decisions to move to a four-day week. Companies did have to figure out new rules for vacations, overtime, pension contributions and so on; but they did so with an eye to staying within the bounds of existing law, not in response to new laws.

GOVERNMENT EXPERIMENTS WITH SHORTER WORKWEEKS

Some governments have experimented with four-day weeks themselves. In Finland during a recession in the late 1990s, the federal government sponsored a program called the "6+6 Plan," under which municipal offices were open for 12 hours each day and staffed by civil servants on 6-hour shifts. During the two years this program was in effect, public satisfaction with government services went up, and most employees reported improved work-life balance. The states of Utah and Hawaii trialed four-day weeks for public servants in 2008 and 2009.

In those states (led by Republican governors, it's worth noting), the trials were mainly cost-saving measures: oil prices were high, and state revenues were squeezed by the recession. While the results were promising— public services were still well-delivered, though energy savings were not as great as hoped— there was little incentive to make the shift permanent once prices fell and new administrations came into power.

These experiments are starting to be revived. In 2020, Jefferson County, Colorado, and the city of Morgantown, West Virginia both implemented a four-day week for non-emergency staff. The Danish kommune (or province) of Odsherred began a three- year trial of four-day weeks in 2019, and several localities in Canada and other countries have followed suit.

STATES HAVE LONG EXPERIMENTED WITH FOUR-DAY WEEKS. NOW THEY'RE EXPERIMENTING WITH POLICIES TO ENCOURAGE ITS MORE WIDESPREAD ADOPTION.

In Nigeria, the state of Kaduna implemented hybrid work arrangements for civil servants in late 2021, as a run-up to adopting a four-day week in 2022. One paper reported, “the measure is designed to help boost productivity, improve work-life balance and enable workers to have more time for their families, for rest and for agriculture.” The move also reflected “lessons learnt from managing the COVID-19 pandemic which required significant relaxations of old working traditions and the ascendance of virtual and remote working arrangements.”

NEW POLICY INITIATIVES SUPPORTING SHORTER WORKWEEKS

2021 saw growing interest in policies supporting the four-day week. Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon, New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern and Japanese politician Kuniko Inoguchi have all expressed support for a four-day week. The government in Ireland provided financial support for a four-day week trial among small businesses. Regional governments in Scotland and Valencia have also announced plans to sponsor trials.

In South Korea, mayoral candidates in Seoul's 2021 election promised to launch programs to encourage companies to experiment with four-and-a-half-day weeks. The four-day week has become an issue in the country's 2021 presidential primary. "The four-day workweek system is something that should be implemented someday for a decent life and the reduction of work hours," Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) presidential candidate, Lee Jae-Myung said in late 2021.

In the United States, California congressman Mark Takano introduced legislation to make the 32-hour workweek a national standard; while it shows little sign of passing during this congressional session, the bill has picked up the support of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Of course, governments play a significant role in determining working hours through legislation, and can use fiscal or regulatory tools to create incentives that push working hours up or down. In all these cases, politicians and policymakers see an opportunity to define business as usual in the post-pandemic workplace.

Government interest in shorter workweeks is also significant because it signals an **expansion from exclusively charismatic to bureaucratic experiments**. In the early years of the movement, four-day week companies were almost exclusively small firms led by founders who had the authority to push their company in a new direction. This charismatic model can yield dramatic results, but its reach is limited, and it doesn't scale well to large complex organizations.

NATIONAL ADOPTION OF FOUR-DAY WEEKS

The most important advances in shorter working hours happened in two small countries, with very different economies, under quite different circumstances: Iceland and the United Arab Emirates.



ICELAND'S SHORTER WORKWEEK

Iceland rolled out a shorter workweek for its public sector workers in 2021. In 2015, the country implement a limited trial of shorter working hours in several government offices. By 2019, the trial and shown positive results, and the union made permanent implementation a priority in its collective bargaining with the government.

The negotiations concluded in 2020, and after a lengthy planning process— somewhat slowed down by the pandemic— public services began shifting to a shorter workweek in 2021. Most offices and jobs are not moving to a strict four-day week; instead, they're reducing working hours based on previous contract arrangements, and whether they are shift work (i.e., working evening and night shifts).

What's notable about Iceland's adoption is its scale and the political impetus behind it. The public sector employs about 15% of Iceland's workforce, and most workers in the private sector also were given the right to request a shorter workweek. So the 2021 implementation immediately affected tens of thousands of Icelandic workers and their families, and has cleared the way for more widespread experiments.

Another notable feature of the shorter workweek in Iceland is that it was largely driven by an alliance of left-leaning parties and the BSRB, the country's largest public sector union, all of whom shared a background in feminist politics and saw the shorter workweek as a feminist issue.

Women in Iceland have the same pressures around work-life balance and the "second shift" as their counterparts in other countries, and a shorter workweek was seen as a way to help them better manage those burdens. Further, a majority of Iceland's public sector workers are women, and many of them have traditionally worked in part-time roles; a shorter workweek has allowed many of them— night shift nurses, for example— to be reclassified as full-time workers, with improvements in benefits and pension contributions.

THE UAE'S 4.5 DAY WORKWEEK

In December 2021, the United Arab Emirates announced that its workweek would undergo two big changes in 2021. First, the weekend would shift from Friday-Saturday to Saturday-Sunday. In much of the Middle East, Friday is part of the weekend, though the length of weekend varies: in Iran, offices reopen on Saturday, while in Lebanon the weekend varies depending on company policy.

The UAE calculates that moving to a Saturday-Sunday weekend is a way to help it better coordinate with the rest of the global economy. According to the state news agency WAM, the new weekend “will better align the UAE with global markets, reflecting the country’s strategic status on the global economic map”.

The second important development is that for schools and government offices, the UAE’s weekend will begin with afternoon prayers on Friday, making the official workweek 4.5 days long. In the emirate of Sharjah (the third largest in the UAE), they will move to a four-day week week.

**“THE EXTENDED WEEKEND COMES AS PART OF THE UAE GOVERNMENT’S EFFORTS TO BOOST WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND ENHANCE SOCIAL WELLBEING WHILE INCREASING PERFORMANCE TO ADVANCE... ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS.”
(OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT)**

The UAE’s announcement of a shorter workweek is arguably the most important development of 2021 in the global movement to shorten working hours.

For one thing, while most four-day week companies are startups with fewer than a hundred people, the UAE’s 4.5 day workweek will touch more than 900,000 civil servants. And it’s not just workers whose lives touched by a shorter workweek: the lives of their spouses and families are, too. These are numbers large enough to change a nation’s culture and quality of life.



Second, it's also being taken up by schools, and 1.4 million children will see a 4.5 day week (or 4 days in Sharjah) as normal. In the near term, schools are mainly responding by lengthening the school day on Monday-Thursday, and adjusting the lengths of breaks and lunch (the shift is happening in the middle of the academic school year); but a number of educators in the UAE see this as an opportunity to make more substantial curricular reforms. (In Iceland, in contrast, schools are still operating on a 5-day week: teachers' unions are not part of BSRB, and the leaders who drove a shorter workweek in the public sector won't support a shorter school week unless state-supported childcare is expanded.)

The simultaneous adoption by government and schools will also provide air cover for more executives to implement a shorter workweek at their firms, and sell it to skeptical investors or boards. A small number of companies in the UAE had already adopted a shorter week, but the number is likely to grow in 2022. Given the number of global corporations that have offices there, practices first developed in Dubai and Abu Dhabi could spread to Hong Kong, Singapore, New York, and London.

Finally, the adoption of the 4.5 day week is part of a larger set of strategic initiatives aimed at remaking the UAE's economy. In other countries, politicians gesture vaguely at the need to stay competitive or invest in human capital when talking about a four-day week, but no one has implemented a shorter workweek as part of a bigger plan to transform a nation's economy and society.



SCHOOLS AND THE FOUR-DAY WEEK

The four-day week movement in schools has been driven largely by budget constraints, not by visions of reforming education, reducing teacher burnout, or giving students more time for things like experiential learning, independent study, or extracurriculars. But this may change in 2022.

In the United States, roughly a quarter of school districts have had at least one school operating on a four-day week calendar. These have usually been adopted because of financial pressures. Bayard, New Mexico, a small school district in the southwest portion of the state, moved from a five-day to a four-day school week after a round of budget cuts, but it found that a shorter week reduced absenteeism, improved teacher retention, and boosted classroom performance and gave coaches more time for practices and games. However, efforts to shorten the school week often run into opposition by parents concerned about the long-term effects on learning, or the logistics of shorter workweeks.

As a result, the United Arab Emirates experiments with education will be especially worth watching. Schools in the UAE will move to a 4.5-day week in January, and the mid-year change will not immediately be the catalyst for ambitious curricular experiments. But in conversations with teachers and school heads in Dubai, I hear excitement about the opportunity to use the shorter week to move to a more experiential model, experiment with more case studies and active learning, or conduct other experiments. Further, while it is starting as a half day off, teachers I've spoken to think that Fridays will evolve into a genuine day off, rather than a day for online classes, field trips, or club meetings.

Because they're not moving to a shorter workweek as a cost-cutting measure, financial pressure, these schools' experiments could provide some practical inspiration to educators elsewhere. With the growth of expat communities in places like Singapore and the UAE, the growing wealth of non-Western countries with elites seeking Western-style education, the international school sector in recent decades has evolved from an exotic detour for young teachers or hardship post for spouses of diplomats and businessmen, and more like the foreign service. The cosmopolitanism of this community, and its use of tools like social media and WhatsApp groups, means that people and ideas circulate quickly, and so teachers elsewhere will learn quickly about novel practices in the UAE.

FORGING A NEW CULTURE

- 4-day workweeks nudge companies to change their culture
- They overturn customary ideas about overwork and professionalism
- They think differently about time
- They emphasize collective and systemic solutions over individual ones

Companies that adopt shorter workweeks do so out of a practical necessity, but companies that move successfully to a shorter workweek develop a new set of cultural norms around work, time, and success. In the early years of the movement, these cultural changes followed the implementation of shorter workweeks; now, though, they're starting to emerge as desirable goals in their own right, and as attractive alternatives to our always-on, rise-and-grind work culture.

OVERWORK GOES FROM A SIGN THAT YOU LOVE WHAT YOU DO, TO A SIGN THAT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

What are the features of this new culture?

- **Overwork is not a badge of honor.** Haste and constant toil are not signs that you're in demand, or crushing it; they're more likely to signal that you haven't managed your tasks or can't respond efficiently to emergencies.
- **Short workweeks are a sign of professionalism.** In the early years of the movement, companies worried that shorter hours would be interpreted as a lack of commitment.



Now, companies see it as a sign of competence. Being able to do the work in four days shows you're better at your job than the person who needs five. For managers, planning well enough to avoid last-minute problems, crashed schedules, and late nights, is a sign of expertise. And real leadership involves helping people design more sustainable careers, rather than exploiting their idealism.

- **Focus on results, not time.** Working a four-day week requires thinking of time as a valuable resource, not as something to be extracted from your workers in ever-larger quantities. It also means moving away from treating automation or efficiency improvements as ways to extract more output from workers, to treating them as tools for reducing work time.
- **Lean into collective solutions, not individual ones.** Everyone's life is different, and we tend to see problems with work-life balance and stress as entirely individual. This creates a preference for one-off solutions like flexible or part-time schedules for working parents, but it also means that those solutions are seen as zero-sum: my great flexibility comes at the company's expense. But treating work-life balance as a universal problem that we can solve together changes the equation. They create more time for everybody by cooperating to make the company more efficient: this creates incentives to collaborate, and aligns company goals with personal needs rather than putting them at odds.

In his classic essay, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," labor historian E. P. Thompson argued that factories and the Industrial Revolution ushered in a new way of thinking about the relationship between work and time. In agrarian economies, work was **task-oriented**: defined by the seasons, the rhythm or the tides, or the mercies of the weather. In industrial economies, it became **time-oriented**. Factory workers followed a rhythm defined not by natural time, but by mechanical time: the standard hour of the clock, and the operating time of the factory. The workday was not organized around a particular set of tasks, but doing the same tasks over and over. Finally, in trading it for a wage, the worker lost autonomy over their time.

The way we think about work and time are deeply intertwined: change one, and you change the other. Change both, and you change a company's culture, create new ways of thinking about careers, and even open up new ways for measuring success.

THE FUTURE FOUR-DAY WEEK

Companies in 2022 will look the 4-day week to:

- Help make offices safer and more attractive
- Build organizational resilience
- Respond to new government incentives
- Repair problems with the way we work

The four-day week movement shows no signs of slowing down. But just as the global economy and business environment changes, the reasons companies will adopt it will continue to evolve.

These are the major trends we see driving the 4-day week in the coming year.

REVIVING AND TRANSFORMING OFFICES

The shift to a 4-day week will more explicitly link to efforts to reopen offices and find a new normal in an era of regular disruptions.

While more people may feel they are “done with the pandemic,” the SARS virus is not done with us. Companies that reopen physical locations will still need to practice social distancing, and develop the capacity to adapt more rapidly to the next emergency. A four-day week and flexible work will help offices prevent becoming virus hotspots.

About 70% of offices in the United States are open plan, with people working at desks four or five feet wide and thirty inches deep, often surrounded by coworkers on three sides, and sharing common spaces like elevators, hallways, meeting rooms, kitchens, and

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bathrooms. The problem is that viruses love open offices, with their mix of crowded desks and common space, recirculated air, and glass and plastic surfaces, almost as much as interior designers. If OSHA recommendations and social distancing rules remain in force (or if workers demand them), companies will have to reduce the number of people in an office by about half.

Shifting to a four-day week (or expanding operating hours and dividing your workforce into two 6-hour shifts) would let companies reopen at a lower per-person density, which would help dampen down another outbreak, while still serving their customers' needs. Running two 6-hour shifts would offer customers the convenience of longer hours, and could be attractive to businesses anxious to recover sales lost during the lockdown. Companies that want to maintain an 8-hour day could reopen with less crowded offices if half the staff worked Monday through Thursday, half worked Tuesday through Friday, and everyone worked from home 1-2 days a week.

BUILDING RESILIENCE AGAINST FUTURE DISRUPTIONS

Companies usually shorten working hours after a founder burns out, the company's finances take a hit, or some other crisis signals a need for radical change. Redesigning workdays, learning how to make the most of technology, and developing new habits teaches employees how to work together to find novel solutions to problems, and encourages companies to become more flexible, experimental, and resilient places. These are all qualities companies will need as long as the pandemic lasts, and, again, when the next black swan appears.

Indeed, companies that had moved to four-day weeks before the pandemic report being able to transition to remote work quickly and smoothly. When Copenhagen-based software and design agency Abtton shifted to remote work in March 2020, chief people officer Bo Konskov was confident that employees could tackle the challenges the pandemic would present. At other companies, "one must constantly document that one is at work, but not with us," journalist Pernille Grade Abildgaard says. "It would be a waste of time because we know that all our employees are on and working."

Once you've created an infrastructure that supports remote work and collaboration, shifted from a time-oriented to outcome-oriented mindset, and established a rhythm that allows people time to focus and do deep work, you have everything you need to support both remote work and a four-day week. You need to extend flexibility to your workers and ask them to be flexible, too. The four-day week creates space for a more creative business, a more resilient organization, and a better future.

CREATING POLICY FRAMEWORKS

As the example of Iceland the UAE show, governments are becoming more active players in the global four-day week movement. Governments help set both formal and informal market standards and behavior, and their influence on the movement will increase.

First, more state-sponsored experiments with shorter workweeks in the public sector—following those in Nigeria, US counties, Danish provinces, as well as Iceland and the UAE — will encourage and ease the way for wider private adoption, as companies synchronize their own working schedules to state partners, or use government working hours as inspiration for their own experiments.

Second, we're likely to see new regulations that clarify policies around overtime, benefits, the definition of part-time employees in a four-day week. Labor markets will also start to adjust to the idea that, regardless of how quickly private companies follow, a four-day week is now a viable alternative to the traditional 40-hour week.

IMPROVING THE FUTURE OF WORK

Finally, the pandemic has shown us several important things about the nature of work in the 21st century. We're all anxious for the pandemic and state of emergency (or perpetual uncertainty) to end, but are unlikely to forget these lessons. And they will help drive the four-day week movement forward.

ACTING ON TRANSFORMATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

The pandemic revealed that people and companies can change how they work more quickly than anyone imagine. As one founder told me, "In 2019, I knew we could never

work from home. In 2020, my employees proved me wrong in about three weeks.” This means that the old excuses that “we’ve always done things this way” are less likely to constrain people from demanding changes in how they work.

The four-day week movement has already benefitted from this widened perspective, as more executives, employees, and policymakers look seriously for ways to improve how we work.

ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Second, the pandemic threw a harsh light on the inequalities in work and compensation. We learned that nurses, delivery workers, care home assistants, warehouse workers, merchant sailors, and other people who have been largely invisible and underpaid are far more essential than high-paid executives or “creatives” to making modern life work. For people in low-income jobs, time pressure can be extreme; and for companies operating on thin margins, raising wages can seem impossible.

Giving back time to workers offers a powerful way of compensating workers at every level of the economic ladder. It has an immediate tangible impact on their lives, delivers indirect financial benefits (e.g., fewer days commuting, less spending on child care), and is deeply egalitarian in a way few benefits can be: when a company moves to a four-day week, a janitor gets as much benefit as an executive.

STABILIZING WORK-LIFE BALANCES

Third, the pandemic exposed the fragility of the systems most workers had built to balance work and life. We imagine work-life balance as like a precision scale, but it’s more like a Rube Goldberg device, held together through enormous effort, demanding constant attention, and fragile—close schools and care centers, make health care scarce, or briefly disrupt supply chains, and it all risks falling apart.

The four-day week gives people more time to deal with “life admin,” but also more time for exercise and hobbies, family and community. It moves people away from time scarcity, and nudges companies away from business models that reward long hours, both of which can help people create stabler work-life balances.

USING COLLECTIVE ACTION TO SOLVE COMMON PROBLEMS

Finally, the pandemic demonstrated the power of collective and policy solutions to common problems. Individual choice, personal autonomy, and “doing your own research” proved less potent a defense against COVID than universal mask mandates, income support, business loans, and social distancing rules. When we all face the same problem, collective solutions are more powerful and individual actions.

We all struggle with problems with workloads and burnout, juggling professional and personal life, or dealing with family and work schedules, but traditionally we’ve seen these as individual problems that require bespoke solutions. The four-day week recognizes that if we all have these problems, the most robust way to solve them is to act together. Everyone benefits from a four-day week, so everyone is incentivized to work together to it a success. Making meetings shorter, streamlining processes, and building new cultural norms around overwork all require collective effort, and everyone sees the benefits equally and immediately.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

My book, **Shorter: Work Better, Smarter and Less— Here’s How** (Public Affairs) explains how companies have used design thinking to work through best- and worst-case scenarios, design trials, learn and adapt, and evaluate the pros and cons of a shorter week. It joined Stephen Aarstol’s **The Five Hour Day** (Lioncrest) and Andrew Barnes’ **The 4 Day Week** (Piatkus Press) in arguing that shorter workweeks were not only desirable for individuals, for practical for companies.

Ashley Whillans and Charlotte Lockhart’s **Harvard Business Review** article, “A guide to implementing the four-day workweek” (<https://hbr.org/2021/09/a-guide-to-implementing-the-four-day-workweek>), outlines the issues companies should consider when implementing a four-day week./

Since the publication of *Shorter*, a number of other books have made the case for, and explored the benefits of, shorter workweeks. Pedro Gomes’ **Friday is the New Saturday: How a Four-Day Working Week Will Save the Economy** (History Press) and Anna Coote et al, **The Case for a Four Day Week** (New Economic Foundation) argue that widespread adoption of a shorter workweek would benefit economies, while Pernille Garde Abildgaard’s **The Secret of the 4 Day Week** (Frydenlund) offers a deep dive into one pioneering company, IIH Nordic.

Other articles about the four-day week and related topics include:

[“UAE Joins the Global Movement for a Shorter Workweek,”](#) **Gulf News** (December 2021).

[“How to Rest Well,”](#) **Psyche** (November 2021).

[“Why We Need to Consider Switching to a Four-Day Workweek— Now,”](#) **TED Ideas** (July 2021).



Podcasting with @askpang - cannot wait to release this conversation about 4 day

[“How Better Routines Create Happier Workers,”](#) **Financial Times** (28 September 2020).

[“Surprising COVID-19 Side Effect: More Companies Adopt the Four-Day Workweek,”](#) **Fast Company** (18 August 2020).

[“To Safely Reopen, Make the Workweek Shorter. Then Keep It Shorter,”](#) **The Atlantic** (30 April 2020).

[“It’s Time to End 9-5 Office Hours,”](#) **The Guardian** (10 March 2020).

[“Shorter Hours Make Stronger Businesses,”](#) *Wall Street Journal* (27 February 2020).

[“Why Companies Should Say Goodbye to the 996 Work Culture, and Hello to four-day Weeks,”](#) *South China Morning Post* (20 April 2019).

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