

# Can the 4-Day Work Week Heal People and Planet?

*For reducing burnout and greenhouse gas emissions—the four-day work week could be the key.*



“NO ONE on his deathbed ever said, ‘I wish I had spent more time on my business,’” said lawyer Arnold Zack to his friend with a cancer diagnosis. The quote has since been repeated by uncountable people who relate—that their life is about more than their time at the office.

In the days of The Great Resignation and quiet quitting, many people are reevaluating relationships with work and productivity, for the health of people and planet.

“Employers understand they can work differently, employees recognize they want to work differently, and everyone realizes they can and should advocate,” explains Charlotte Lockhart, co-founder and managing director of the non-profit 4 Day Week Global.

The organization’s goal is reducing working hours while maintaining pay to prioritize the wellbeing of workers, the planet, and business success.

In 1926, Henry Ford dropped his company’s work week from six days to five. Four years later, economist John Maynard Keynes predicted a 15-hour work week in the future. Clearly, that hasn’t happened, even as productivity during a 40-hour week has risen significantly without pay increase.

“Burnout culture cannot be sustained,” says Dr. Wen Fan, a sociology professor at Boston College.

“Employers need to find a way to recruit and retain. One option is to increase salaries, but not all businesses have that capacity—an alternative is more benefits, like a schedule change.”

## Rejecting Burnout, Embracing Life

Some employers permanently reduced working hours long before the four-day work week concept gained traction—indeed, Green America has had a four-day work week since 2001. The organization had been considering it and made the decision to adopt it in the aftermath of 9/11, due to the pressures and uncertainties of those times.

Since helping implement a four-day work week at Green America for the past two decades, human resources director Dennis Greenia has seen why it’s a favorite benefit among staff.

“Recognizing that everyone on staff has a whole and complete life outside of work has helped us recruit and retain,” he says. “It provides the capacity for people to enjoy a fuller life over time.”

Ginger Lieb, coordinator for Green America’s Center for Sustainability Solutions agrees: “The four-day work week has been crucial to my mental health and well-being. It allows me time to get outside, rest, or spend time with loved ones.”

This experience is not unique to Green America. Research shows that a four-day workweek creates benefits for employees and employers alike around the world.

Results from the most recent and biggest study yet, the UK’s four-day week pilot, were released in 2023. The research organization Autonomy, along with 4 Day Week Global, spearheaded the

program.

This UK study, which both Lockhart and Fan worked on, ran for six months in 2022 involving 61 companies and 2,900 employees. Across the board, the study’s results showed promise.

Tyler Grange, an environmental consultancy firm and study participant, reported a 22% productivity increase. Most study participants agreed—78% found no change in workload, while 62% found their work pace increased but only 13% reported an increase in stress.

“More employers are recognizing the economic benefit, too, of a healthy workforce,” Lockhart says.

These economic benefits were present in the study results, including increased revenue (+34.5% compared to a previous, similar six-month period) and decreases in resignations and absences.

What researchers and activists are most excited about, however, is the impact on quality of life.

“My favorite one is the insomnia statistic,” says Lockhart, referring to 46% and 40% of employees reporting reductions in fatigue and sleep difficulties. “There are many reasons why we don’t sleep well—stress, poor eating, no exercise.”

Added time in a person’s week, to spend how they choose, can help holistically, suggests Lockhart and the study.

Mary Meade, editor and digital content manager at Green America, agrees: “Work-life balance is very important to me. I use my three-day weekends to take mini trips. It’s the perfect amount of time to get things done: Friday is for errands, Saturday is for fun, and Sunday is for relaxation. I am truly able to unplug from work with three days.”

By the end of the UK study, 92% of the participating companies continued with the program, 30% confirmed a permanent shift, and most employees said only a significant pay increase would get them to go back to a five-day work week.

## Not Just People: Is the Four-Day Work Week Better for the Planet, Too?

There is research to suggest reduced working hours will benefit the planet, with an important caveat: intentionality.

Reducing commuting distance (691 million miles a week with a four-day work week, per one UK white paper) is cancelled out if people start jetting off on their three-day weekends. The UK study showed 52% of employees did increase leisure travel during the six-month period.

Where experts believe a four-day work week or similar reduction in working hours could help the planet is in people’s daily habits.

“There’s no denying the amount we’re working now is bad for the planet,” Lockhart says. “I’m looking at you, Uber Eats. How environmentally unfriendly is it to have a single meal delivered because you didn’t have time to grocery shop and make dinner.”

During the 2020 COVID lockdown, a UK government report showed more people adopted eco-friendlier practices like recycling when at home and working less. This is the consistent intent required to maintain the climate benefits of decreased business traffic rather than offset them.

Data from the US Energy Information Administration shows potential positive outcomes with a reduced working week—Americans burn 10% less fossil fuels on weekends. Increasing a person’s weekend to three days, then, has the potential to significantly decrease fossil fuel emissions if people have more time for and

choose low-carbon activities like hiking, gardening, or cooking for your friends and family.

It should be a communal effort, though, says Anupam Nanda, urban economics and real estate professor at the University of Manchester, UK: “Eco-friendly facilities and neighborhood green spaces should be created across urban areas in order to encourage people to spend their free time in a sustainable way.”

## The Gift of Time Is Justice

“As business leaders, we need to remember that we borrow people from their lives,” Lockhart states.

People are more than the money they bring in or work output. Giving back time to workers to be with friends and family, cultivate hobbies, contribute to their communities, supplies not only benefits, but justice. People will get to define what productivity means to them, like pursuing education or volunteering, which is down in the US year over year since 2019, according to Gallup.

Some may discover justice in other areas. Following the UK trial, 21% of employees reported a decrease in childcare costs and more men than women reported an increased involvement with childcare duties. In the US, where childcare costs and gender roles are huge challenges to family life, such benefits could be lifechanging.

It is also important to recognize who will benefit from reduced working hours.

“Typically, already advantaged organizations and sectors are more likely to be part of these trials,” Fan explains. “We also see an over-representation of highly educated workers.”

Fan says companies should work to extend these models to all employees, primarily less educated, marginalized, and immigrant workers, as well as non-office workers. Solutions could look like tax incentives for smaller businesses, and acknowledging this work is not one-size-fits-all. Some industries—hospitals or restaurants, for example—will need to hire more employees or reduce hours in other ways, like shorter shifts across five days.

Rep. Mark Takano’s (D-CA) solution is to make the four-day work week federal law with the Thirty-Two Hour Workweek Act.

“We have before us the opportunity to make common-sense changes to work standards passed down from a different era,” he said.

Organizations like Green America, or New Zealand’s Perpetual Guardian, which adopted a permanent four-day work week in 2018, have already seen and felt such increased happiness—is it time other employers follow suit? 🌱