



The Four Day Work Week: Sixteen Reasons Why This Might Be an Idea Whose Time Has Come

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This is a guest post by Aaron Newton, who is working with coauthor Sharon Astyk on the forthcoming book, A Nation of Farmers. [Aaron contributes at Groovy Green](#); he also blogs at [Powering Down](#). Aaron is a land planner and garden farmer in suburban North Carolina, seeking ways to transform the current course of human land use development in an effort to prepare for the effects of global oil production peak and its outcome on automotive suburban America.

The notion of our standard work week here in America has remained largely the same since 1938. That was the year the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, standardizing the eight hour work day and the 40 hour work week. Each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday workers all over the country wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast and go to work. But the notion that the majority of the workforce should keep these hours is based on nothing more than an idea put forth but the Federal government almost 70 years ago. To be sure it was an improvement in the lives of many Americans who were at the time forced to work 10+ hours a day, sometimes 6 days of the week. So a 40 hour work week was seen as an upgrade in the lives of many of U.S. citizens. 8 is a nice round number; one third of each 24 hour day. In theory it leaves 8 hours for sleep and 8 hours for other activities like eating, bathing, raising children and enjoying life. But the notion that we should work for 5 of these days in a row before taking 2 for ourselves is, as best I can tell, rather arbitrary.

The idea of a shorter work week is not a new one to anyone old enough to have lived through the energy shocks of the 1970's. It should be fairly obvious to anyone interested in conserving oil that reducing the number of daily commutes per week would reduce the overall demand for oil. There are about 133 million workers in America. Around 80% of them get to work by driving alone in a car. The average commute covers about 16 miles each way.

So let's stop and do some math...and I'll try to argue for **16 reasons** why a four day work week is a good idea.

The math, as I see it, goes as thus (I welcome a discussion of these numbers, by the way...):

133,000,000 workers X 80% who drive alone = 106,400,000 single driver commuter cars each day.

106,400,000 X 32 miles round trip = 3,404,800,000 miles driven to work each day

3,404,800,000 / 21 mpg (average fuel efficiency) = 162,133,333 gallons of gasoline each day

Each barrel of crude oil produces, on average, 19.5 gallons of gas. (It is important to note that other products like kerosene and asphalt are produced from that same barrel.)

162,133,333 / 19.5 = 8,314,530 barrels of oil each day.

What this shows is **Reason #1; the impact a 4 day work week could have on crude oil imports.** I'm talking about a reduction (5-10%? and perhaps even more--ED by PG) in the amount of oil we need Monday through Friday simply by rearranging our work week. No wonder this idea was utilized in the 70's.

But the clear fact that a 4 day work week would save such a precious non-renewable resource is just the first of 16 reasons why I think it's time to revive the idea of reducing the numbers of days we work each week.

Reason #2 The 4 Day Work Week would reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollutants.

As you pull out of your driveway on your way to work your automobile has already begun to emit Carbon Monoxide, Carbon Dioxide, Sulphur Dioxide, Nitrogen Oxides, Hydrocarbons, Ozone, particulates, Lead and Chlorofluorocarbons. Some of these compounds are responsible for the greenhouse effect that is warming our planet and throwing our global climate system into increasing instability. Others of them contribute to air pollution that causes everything from dramatically rising rates of childhood asthma to cancers, heart disease and respiratory illnesses. Sometimes I drive to work too, so don't think the whole thing is your fault. But it's true that we're playing fast and loose with our ecosystem and poisoning ourselves with our autos. 60-70% of urban air pollution is caused by cars. Taking 20% of them off the roads during the most heavily traveled time of the day would obviously reduce the overall amount of pollutants produced by our autos. And this is key, if a worker transitions to a 4 Day Work Week and then spends all day off driving around when he or she would have be at work, then the savings in terms of fuel and pollution will be lost. This is not a plan to provide everyone with more time to drive around but a plan to bring people back into their homes and their local communities. It's an effort to give them more time with family, more time to exercise, more time to write the great American novel or learn to keep bees, or get another degree, or start a garden.

Reason #3 The 4 Day Work Week would reduce workers exposure to pollutants.

A recent study by the California EPA says "50% of a person's daily exposure to ultra fine particles (the particles linked to cardiovascular disease and respiratory illnesses) can occur during a commute." A report by the Clean Air Task Force in 2007 found diesel particle levels were between 4 to 8 times higher in commute vehicles than in the surrounding air. It makes sense when you think about it. The pollution coming from the tailpipe of a vehicle is mostly likely to affect you while you're sitting directly behind it, especially if you're stuck in slow moving traffic where the concentrations of such particles can build up.

Reason #4 The 4 Day Work Week would mean less traffic congestion.

Rush hour exists because everyone needs to get to work at about the same time. Anyone who's lived in a city of size can tell you that early in the morning and late in the afternoon the roads fill

The Oil Drum | The Four Day Work Week: Sixteen Reasons Why This Might Be <http://www.theoil Drum.com/node/3931>
up. The average 16 mile commutes takes 26 minutes each way. That's 52 minutes a day traveling at roughly 35 miles per hour. Imagine if 1/5 of the cars suddenly disappeared? If the work week was staggered so that 1/5 of all workers took a different day off, the U.S. commuter would see a 20% reduction in rush hour congestion without building a single new road. Which leads nicely to the next reason:

Reason #5 The 4 Day Work Week would reduce money spent on new road construction and existing road maintenance.

With 1/5 few cars making the commute each day, fewer new road projects would be necessary and existing roads would last longer with less maintenance. This is not to say that we shouldn't take advantage of this cost savings to invest in alternative transportation systems. In fact it's the opposite. This could be a gift to the tax payer who would receive new and better options for travel without any rise in taxes.

Reason #6 The 4 Day Work Week would result in a reduction in personal expenses.

From www.ridetowork.org,

"2002 annual household private vehicle expense is \$7,371. This is divided into \$3,665 for vehicle purchases, \$1,235 for gas and oil and \$2,471 for insurance and misc."

If workers used their cars 20% less often to drive to work, they would see a reduction in the frequency of oil changes, tune ups and the purchase of new tires just to name a few savings. The above numbers also reflect the price of gasoline in 2002. We all know it has increase since then and will continue to increase now that global oil production has peaked. Remember those 162,133,333 gallons of gas we're going to save?

$162,133,333 \times \$2.75 \text{ per gallon} = \$445,866,665.00$

This would save US workers a lot of money! And because our cars would be driven less frequently, they wouldn't need to be replaced as often. That's not to say that would shouldn't try to replace inefficient older cars with more efficient new ones, but this could give the auto manufactures time to wake up to the global peak in oil production and make changes in the types of vehicles they offer. It could also give communities time to respond with planning strategies that favor other types of transportation including walking, biking and mass transit.

Reason #7 The 4 Day Work Week would mean fewer auto accidents each year.

I don't have statistics on the number of automobile related deaths and injuries that occur specifically during rush hour but almost every radio station on the dial offers a regular update of car crashes throughout each morning and evening commute. It seems safe to assume that fewer cars on the road during those periods of time would result in fewer accidents and the injuries that result from them.

Reason #8 The 4 Day Work Week would mean less time spent in VSC or Voluntary Solitary Confinement

Now some people tell me the time they spend alone in their car is relaxing. Personally I think if that's true then what those people are really enjoying is time alone on uncongested roads. Rush hour on a busy street is not relaxing. Personal time away from other people can be a positive experience. But we don't have to spend our time alone in a metal box burning nonrenewable resources that heat the planet. If less time was spent commuting each week, people would have

more time for themselves to enjoy, even if they wanted to enjoy that time alone. It seems to me that as a nation we are experiencing an epidemic of disconnect. Ever see those people early in the morning on their way to work at 6:30am talking on their cell phones? Just who are they talking to? Maybe some of them are already working (before even arriving at work) but I bet many of them are talking to other friends and family who are, quite possibly, out in traffic too. How many of you have ever made a cell phone call because you were bored or lonely in your car? I have friends who will call me and announce that's what they're doing, calling me to get some company. The car is an insulator that keeps us from interacting and as naturally social creatures this isn't a good practice. Less time spent in cars can mean more time spent with other human beings living life.

Reason #9 The 4 Day Work Week would mean a reduction in absenteeism

A recent survey found that 43% of respondents admitted to playing hooky last year. That is they stayed home from work even though they weren't sick. Another day scheduled during the week to address the needs and wants of workers would give people more time to complete all sorts of activities. It could keep them from taking their own day off. It could also give people a day to schedule appointments like medical, dental, tax, attorney or other. A Four Day Work Week would mean fewer random interruptions when workers must leave the office to take care of these matters. Even the occasional summer day spent hiking with a child sounds like a good national exercise to me.

Reason #10 The 4 Day Work Week would increase productivity

Yes I said "increase productivity."

In 1930 famed cereal maker W.K. Kellogg had this to say about his decision to decrease his companies work week from 40 to 30 hours.

The efficiency and morale of our employees is so increased, the accident and insurance rates are so improved, and the unit cost of production is so lowered that we can afford to pay as much for six hours as we formerly paid for eight.

Peak oil and climate change could make for turbulent business waters ahead. This country needs more business leaders willing to navigate these waters not by burdening their workforce with limitations or restrictions but with a willingness to try new strategies. Ideas such as this one should be strongly considered by corporate America or maybe it's time for the Federal government to revisit this issue through law. New ways of working really could benefit both businesses and employees. It's important in the time ahead not to simply saddle the workers of America with the rising costs of energy and ecological destruction.

There are lots options concerning the number of hours a 4 Day Work Week could contain. Employees could work 10 hours a day and keep a 40 hour work week. Or they could simply eliminate an entire day and drop down to a 32 hour work week. In between is the idea of working 4 days a week, 9 hours a day. But regardless of how many hours people work, the important part to remember is that most tasks are going to get accomplished each week just as they did before. A recent survey by salary.com of over 10,000 American workers revealed that on average, we waste more than 2 hours each day surfing the web or making phone calls to friends. Might these distractions be activities that workers must be willing to trade for an entire extra day off to spend surfing on the Internet? I say that tongue in cheek as there are better ways to spend your new day off but the point is that the inbox is never empty and that important tasks could probably be completed in a shorter work week if time spent at work was all about work. A shorter work week

Reason #11 The 4 Day Work Week would give us more time for family

60% of Americans say they do not have enough time for family. To be sure we could change that statement to read, make time for family, because time is after all what you make it. It's important to note that we work more hours than any other nation on the planet. But why? Why do we work? I think this question is at the heart of support for a shorter work week. We work so we can support our families right? But is more money and the always increasing amount of stuff that money buys really supporting our families? We have to pay bills but would your son rather have you at home or have a new flat screen television? 7 out of 10 teenage pregnancies are conceived at the home of the young girl between the hours of 3pm and 5pm. It is my view that what might be in my daughter's best interest isn't me working 50 hours a week so I can buy her a sweet sixteen car. It might be spending more time at home with my daughter talking to her about her future. A shorter work week would give this nation an opportunity to spend more time at home with our families.

Reason #12 The 4 Day Work Week would decrease labor costs

Long work hours increase the worker turnover rate which leads to more money spent on acquiring and training new employees. Employees who have almost as many days to spend on their own as days they spend working will be much happier and more loyal. These are employees who will work harder and stay longer at any given company.

Reason #13 The 4 Day Work Week would decrease operational costs

Depending on just how a company chooses to structure its 4 Day Work Week, any number of operational costs could be reduced. The energy savings from the climate control of unoccupied buildings could be enormous. Fewer security or maintenance issues could result from having a smaller number of people in the office each day. A shorter work week could mean more infrequent cleanings and less information technology service calls.

Reason #14 The 4 Day Work Week would mean a reduction in the cost of childcare

If a two parent household were to switch to a 4 Day Work Week then their childcare costs could be reduced by 40%. Childcare ranges in cost depending on the type care and the specific location in which a worker lives. Estimates range from \$3,000 to \$15,000 annually per child. A family spending \$5,000 who could reduce the number of days their child is in care from 5 days to 3 could save \$2,000 a year. This also means more of the child's time spent with parents which fosters stronger families. It is important to note here that childcare that exceeds the normal 8 hour work day is more expensive. If both parents switched to 10 hour work days their childcare costs might not decrease.

Reason #15 The 4 Day Work Week would provide time for a transition into the informal economy

There are a lot of reasons why consumer culture is bad for us. It focuses not on people and their relationships to one another but instead on things, on stuff, on cheap plastic crap from Wal-Mart. It's worth pointing out that not only is our habit of consuming mass quantities of junk toxifying our lives and our environment with all sorts of chemicals and pollution, it's also using up a number of nonrenewable resources at an alarming rate. It seems reasonable to assume that we can't continue on this ride of infinite growth for a whole lot longer. The coming era will be one of a

decline in the availability of all sorts of resources we take for granted right now. Learning how to reshape and relocalize our lives will be an immense effort for both communities and the individuals living in them. Having an extra day each week to begin this process could prove invaluable. Need time to learn how to cook or garden? Have you always wanted to start a new cottage industry business from home? Maybe you'd like to be more active in volunteer efforts in your community to address peak oil and climate change. This extra day could be our ticket as a nation to scaling back on our consumption while we reconnect to local life.

Reason #16 The 4 Day Work Week feels great!

I write this proposal not as an academic making a theoretical suggestion but as a participant in the new 4 Day Work Week movement. At the beginning of 2007 I renegotiated my contract with my employer and started staying home on Fridays. I now have more than a two day speed bump on the highway of American employment. I get to enjoy almost as many days at home each week as I spend working at my job. And it feels wonderful. Since making the change I have even taken a new job and was still able to continue with my shorter work week. 25% of U.S. companies already have some sort of policy towards alternative work schedules.

Telecommuting, cell phones and the Internet are just some of the other tools that can offer more flexibility to the outdated idea that we should all be at the office from 8 to 5 on Monday through Friday. I can tell you from experience that this feels great. I am able to spend time on projects that are important to me. I get to see my young daughter more. Lately it's been a Friday bike ride together. And I have a chance to share my ideas with more time to write proposals like this one.

Changes require action. Our nation is at a point where we need change. Not politicians talking about change but an actual change in the way we live our lives. The 4 Day Work Week could be a catalyst for a change from a nation that lives to work into a nation that works to live. Come join me won't you?

This piece was originally posted [September 20, 2007](#), for the old comments revisit the old thread.



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