

A 4-day week for Ireland?

A report on the feasibility of a
four-day working week in Ireland

by Oisín Gilmore



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The usual disclaimers apply.



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1 Introduction

After long being off the agenda (Hunnicutt, 1990), the last few years has seen a growing interest in the prospects for future reductions in the working week (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017; Coote et al, 2010; Stronge et al, 2019). Just this month (September 2019), Lord Robert Skidelsky released a report on "How to Achieve Shorter Working Hours". The report argued that a "reduction in hours is both desirable ethically and desired by most people". (Skidelsky, 2019)

And there is much evidence that this is the case. As will be shown below, a reduction in working hours has very many benefits and it is widely desired.

Reduced hours can lead to higher hourly productivity, healthier workers, greater equality for women, a more sustainable economy and a more balanced society. People could spend more time with friends and family, adjust to retirement more smoothly, spend more time as carers, have more time to explore their personal interests, and more time for education and retraining.

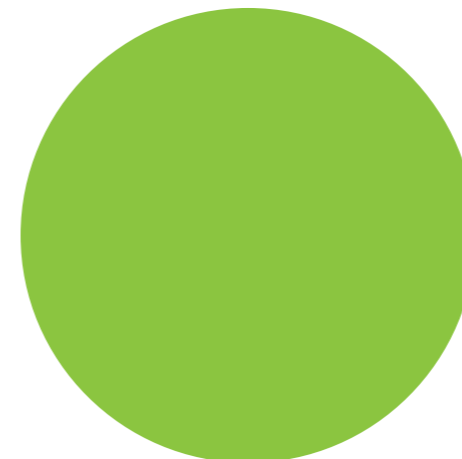
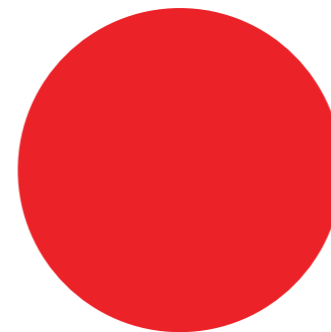
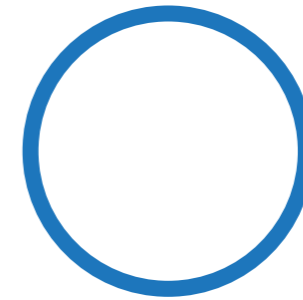
A reduction in working hours is widely desired. A recent Fórsa survey of its members found that 82.46% of the public service workers surveyed believe the four day week is a realistic, achievable objective for unions, while over 9 in 10 (90.3%) believe that a four day week trial is desirable and feasible in their work context.

This report considers the prospect for reductions in working time for Ireland. In particular, it looks at the feasibility of a four day week.

The report deals with the history of the working week internationally looking how it has developed since 1870 up until today. It finds that the history of the working week was not a smooth development. Rather it saw periods of rapid change and periods of little-to-no change. Since the 1980s, we have been in just such a period.

The report goes on to consider how questions of working hours and the welfare implications of reductions in working hours can get lost by focusing excessively on using national income to measure societal and economic welfare.

Finally, the report considers what benefits there might be to reducing working hours, if it is feasible, if it is desired by Irish workers, and how it might be achieved.



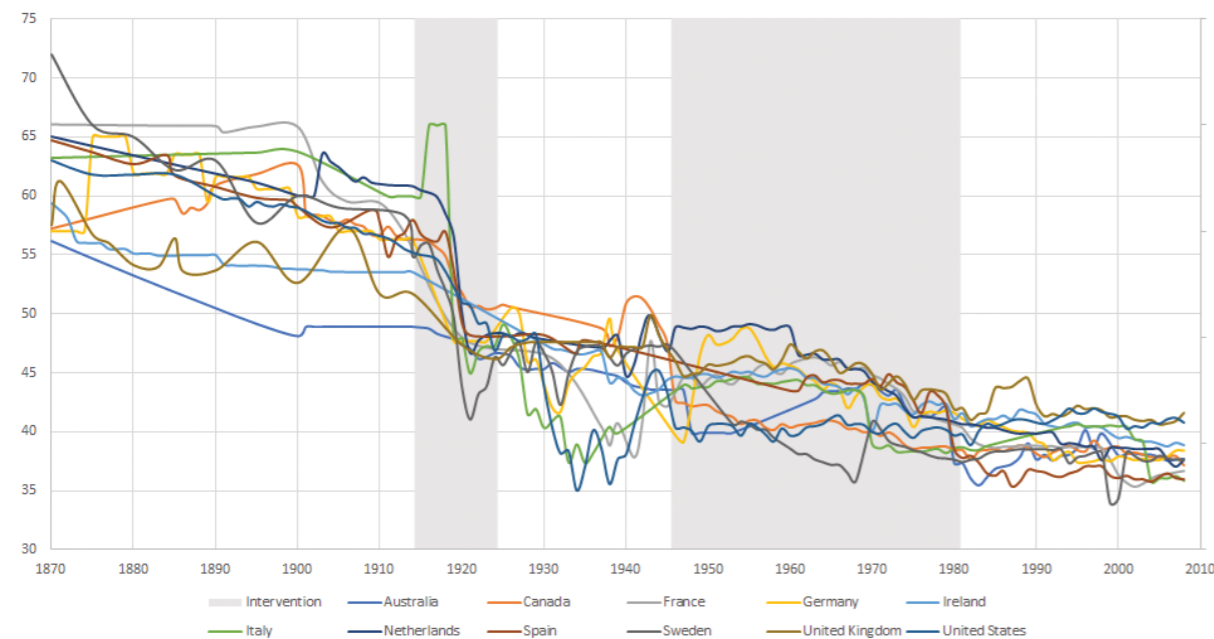
2 The working week up to now

The standard story told by economists regarding working time is that as income increases, the length of the working week decreases. The reason for this is that as people's income increases, they decide to move from consuming their income in the form of a money-wage to consuming their income in the form of leisure time. The relationship between income and leisure is portrayed as a relatively simple positive relationship¹. As I will show, the relationship between income and leisure is not so simple. Instead, when we look at the history of working time in western developed economies, we can identify several separate periods in the development of the working week.

2.1 History

Looking at weekly working hours for men employed in manufacturing, figure 1 shows that between 1870 and 1914 there were only minor reductions in the length of the working week. Significant reductions in the working week only began in the first half of the twentieth century, and most of this reduction happened rapidly and a limited time frame. While there was some reduction in the first 18 years of the century, it was really in the immediate aftermath of World War 1 that the western world saw a rapid reduction in the working week.

Figure 1: Weekly working hours in manufacturing 1870-2010



Source: Gilmore (2020)

¹ See Borjas (2016:21-83) for a standard textbook example of this.

In the period between 1870 and 1914, there was very little reduction in the length of the working week. In 1870, the average length of the working week was between 55 and 65 hours a week for most countries. By the early 1910s there had been hardly any decrease, and most workers continued to work between 55 and 60 hours per week. In other words, over a 40-year period the length of the working week for the average male worker declined by less than 5 hours per week. Simultaneously to this, women's access to work was being reduced and it was in this period that the male breadwinner model of the family developed. This had long term consequences for the social status of women. (Seccombe, 1995) As discussed below, there are ways that reductions in working time may help to redress the development of this inequality.

The period after WWI was remarkably different for hours of work. Between 1919 and 1933, in almost all western countries, the 8-hour day was introduced and the length of the average working week rapidly converged around 48-hours a week for all workers. In the period between 1923 and the start of World War II, working hours in different countries diverged again. There were attempts to reverse the reduction in the working week and in some countries, there were experiments with further reducing the working week. In France there were moves towards a 40-hour week (Cross, 1989b), and in Italy and the USA there were experiments with work-sharing in response to the Great Depression. (Mattesini & Quintieri, 2006; Taylor, 2011) Also, in some countries there was a move from a 6-day week towards what was frequently referred to as the English weekend, i.e. a half day on Saturday. (Rybczynski, 1992) By 1945, the working week for most workers in Western Europe was between 45 and 50 hours a week. In the USA, the working week was already at 40 hours per week for manufacturing workers. The years after 1945 heralded the move towards a 5-day week and a 2-day weekend. By 1980, the 5-day week and 8-hour day had been consolidated as the new norm in the west. However, after 1980 the long years of progressive reductions in the length of the working week had largely come to an end. The working week had stabilized at 40 hours a week and there were few further reductions. (Lee et al, 2007)

Looking at this history we can identify several separate periods. There were two periods where there was a sharp and identifiable decline in the length of the working week: 1919-23 and 1945-80. And there were periods where there were only marginal declines in the length of the working week: 1870-1914, 1923-1945 and, our current period, 1980-today.

2.2 The need for intervention

As this should make clear, the standard story told by economists of a simple trade-off between income and leisure does not seem to explain historical development of the working week. There are identifiable periods where the working week declined, and other contrasting periods where the working week hardly declined at all. What is important to note here is that is any major reduction in the working week all involved significant policy intervention.

The period after WWI saw the simultaneous passing of legislation introducing the 8-hour day in 1919. The 8-hour day legislation was passed in this co-ordinated manner because agreeing to the introduction of 8-hour day legislation was a requirement of membership of the newly formed International Labour Office (ILO). All western economies apart from the USA joined the ILO at this stage. It was also a period of an unprecedented rise in trade union membership, a revolutionary wave across Europe following the Russian revolution, the expansion of the franchise and the nearly universal belief that society needed to be significantly restructured. This all led to governments not only introducing an 8-hour day, but also to creating new labour inspectorates and enforcement agencies to ensure compliance with this new legislation. (Huberman & Minns, 2007; Cross, 1989a)



Likewise, the characteristics of the period between 1945 and 1980 has been described variously as: embedded liberalism, social democracy or as a post-war compromise. (Eichengreen, 2008; Ruggie, 1982; Berman, 2006) However, underlying all these names, some common features can be identified. These include strong social democratic parties, a heavily interventionist state, high levels of trade union density and coordinated bargaining between unions, employers and the state regarding wages and working conditions. (Eichengreen, 2008) It was within this framework that the shift from a 6-day week to a 5-day week was made possible.

In contrast, prior to WWI and since 1980, we have much weaker trade unions and much lower levels of government intervention in the economy. Therefore, not surprisingly in these two periods, the decline in working hours has been much more gradual, where a decline is observable at all. The prospects for future reductions in working hours are discussed below in section 7.

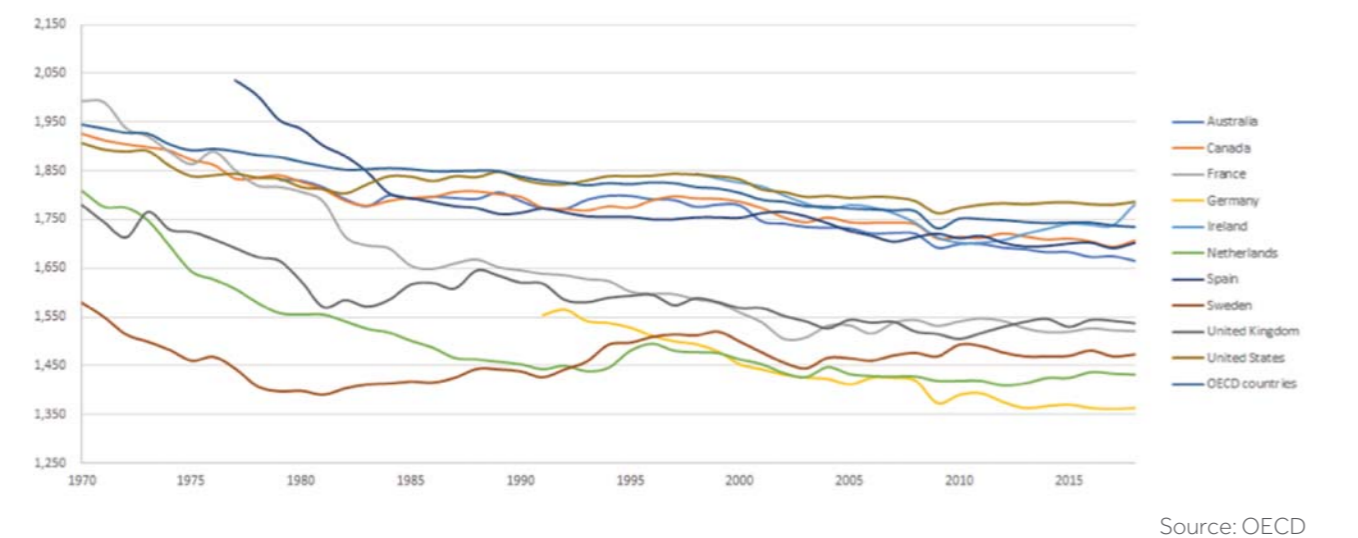
The average working week does not simply decline due to individual choices in the labour market. The decline in average working hours observable over the last 150 years is not due to millions of individual choices in the labour market. Rather, the decline in working hours was due to collective action and collective decisions to reduce the working week.

There are many reasons why individual workers are unlikely to be able to reduce their own hours in a way that would drive significant aggregate changes. There is the problem of monopsony, i.e. that a worker must accept the contract offered to them by their employer or reject it. They have little role in negotiating its content. (Manning, 2005: 227-234) Secondly, even if a worker was able to negotiate a shorter working week, not working a full-time week carries costs regarding promotion, wage increases etc. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 60) Finally, there are the normal collective action problems that prevent people from moving from one equilibrium to another. (Olson, 1974; Shiels,1990)

2.3 Recent trends

There are many ways to measure working time; we can count the average hours worked in a week, or the average hours worked in the year. We can decide to only include full time workers in our counts – but then we have to decide what the cut-off point is between full time and part time work, and this has changed over time and between countries. (Ward et al, 2018) This variety of measurement means that we need to be careful when comparing changes over time and across countries to ensure that we are actually comparing like with like. As I have shown above, if we look at changes in the working week since the 1980s, what is notable is that there is no evidence that working hours have declined. However, if we look at annual hours instead of weekly hours, the picture changes. Now, in Europe, there appears to be a clear working hour reduction, a reduction that is not evident in the US.

Figure 2: Average annual hours actually worked per worker



In the 1990s authors such as Juliet Schor (1991) and others (Alesina et al, 2005) noted the lack of any decline in the annual hours since 1970 in the US, and contrasted this with the continuing decline in annual hours in Europe. However this decline in annual hours in Europe should not be overstated. Firstly, this decline can be accounted for by two major factors. (i) There was an increase in the number of holidays in Europe over this time period, an increase that did not occur in USA. (Huberman & Minns, 2007) (ii) There was a rapid increase in the number of part-time workers in Europe.

(Eurostat, 2019) This is particularly visible in Netherlands, where the increase in female labour market participation involved a significant increase in the number of part-time workers. Furthermore, we should be cautious when we look at annual hours because there is not a standardised method for collecting this data. (Ward et al, 2018) We should also note that since Schor's work appeared in the 1990s, the development of working time in the US and in Europe has looked very similar. In both Europe and the USA annual hours worked have stopped declining. If we look at the hours worked by full-time workers in Europe over the last 15 years, there has been effectively no change whatsoever.

Table 1: Hours worked per week of full-time employment

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Euro area	41.6	41.5	41.5	41.4	41.4	41.4	41.3	41.2	41.2	41.1	41.0	41.0
Germany	41.7	41.7	41.9	41.8	41.9	41.9	41.7	41.5	41.4	41.3	41.2	41.0
Ireland	40.1	39.9	39.6	39.7	39.8	39.9	40.1	40.3	40.4	40.5	40.6	40.7
Spain	42.0	41.8	41.7	41.7	41.5	41.5	41.7	41.6	41.4	41.2	41.0	40.9
France	41.1	41.0	41.1	41.1	41.2	41.1	40.7	40.5	40.4	40.5	40.5	40.4
Italy	41.1	41.0	40.7	40.6	40.4	40.3	40.4	40.5	40.6	40.6	40.7	40.7
Netherlands	41.1	41.0	41.1	41.0	40.9	40.8	40.7	40.9	40.9	40.9	40.8	40.8
Sweden	41.0	40.9	40.9	40.9	40.8	40.8	40.8	40.8	40.7	40.7	40.7	40.6
United Kingdom	43.0	43.0	42.8	42.8	42.7	42.8	42.8	43.0	42.9	42.8	42.6	42.5

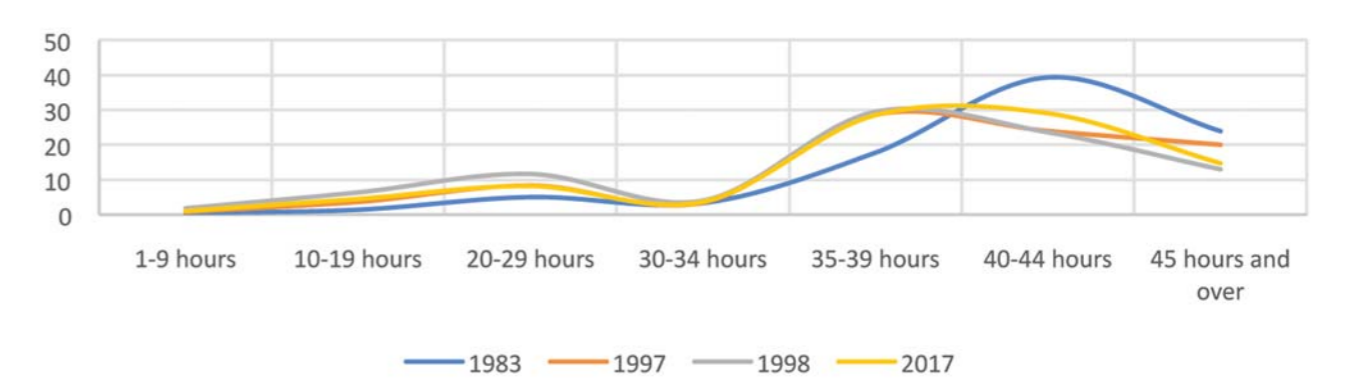
Source: Eurostat (2019)

Of course, not all workers work full time. Over the last number of decades there has been a continuous growth in part time work. In Ireland the number of part-time workers has grown from 3.9% in 2002 to 8.6% today. (Eurostat, 2018) If we look closely at the hours worked in Europe, we can see that there are variations in working hour durations between European states. At one pole, the standard working hour day is still prevalent, that is a full-time job worked by the majority, particularly in the new EU member states. At the other, you have countries like the UK with huge variations in types of working hours. Within these two extremes, European states vary. Often there is a standard peak which encompasses most workers. However, in some countries, there is an additional short-hours peak which reflects high rates of part-time working (such as the Netherlands, with high numbers at 20 hours a week), and in some countries a long-hours peak. (Plantenga et al., 2010)

In Ireland we also see this kind of bimodal distribution of working hours, where a proportion of the population is working longer hours, and a proportion of the population is working shorter hours. But this has come more to the fore in recent years.

In figure 3 we can see how in 1983 there is one clear peak in the distribution of working hours. Nearly 40% of workers worked between 40 and 44 hours per week, and most other workers worked close to those hours.

Figure 3: Working hours as % of total employment by sex in Ireland, 1983-2017: Total



However, more recently there has been a move towards a bimodal distribution. With workers working either 35 hours or more a week, or working a part time job, that is, with fewer than 30 hours a week. If we explore this further, we find that this bimodal distribution is driven largely by the pattern of female work. Looking at Figure 4, we can see that while amongst men there has also been a shift towards a bimodal distribution of work, this shift has been quite limited. Looking at figure 5, you can see that in contrast a very clear bimodal distribution of working hours has developed within the female workforce.

Figure 4: Working hours as % of total employment by sex in Ireland, 1983-2017: Men

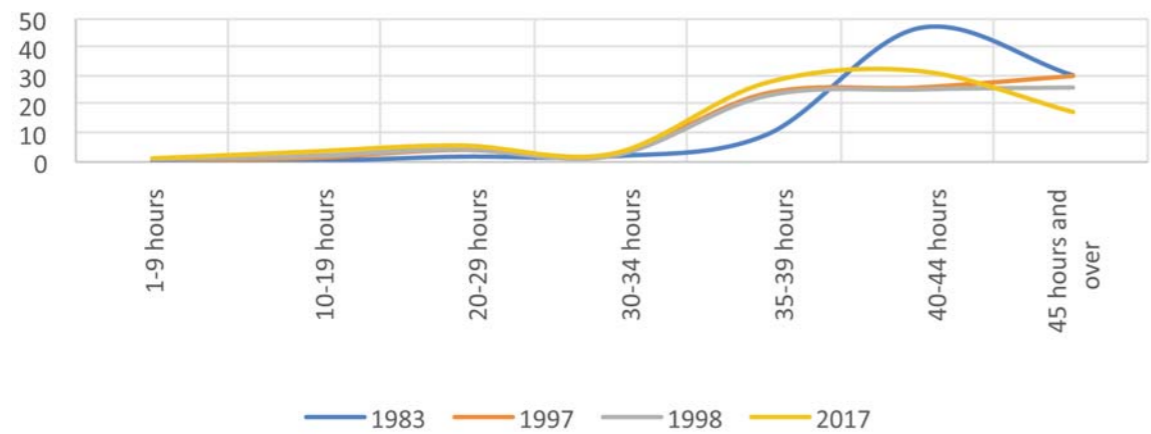
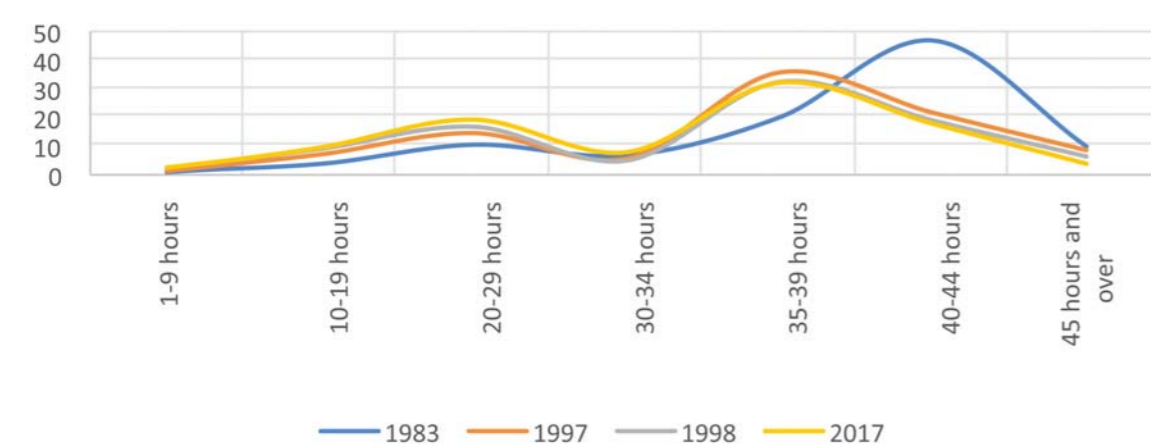


Figure 5: Working hours as % of total employment by sex in Ireland, 1983-2017: Women



This highlights the way in which part time work is of concern in particular for female workers. Some of the implications of this for gender equality are discussed in section 4.9 below.

2.4 Summary of the working week up to now

There have been dramatic changes in the length of the working week over the last 150 years. Today the average full-time worker works around 60-65% what the average full-time worker worked in 1870. The welfare implications of this are quite significant but have often been under appreciated. (de Jong, 2015)



3 The working week, welfare and economic growth

In most discussions on the welfare of a society, there is a focus on measurements of economic output. We talk about economic growth, we talk about wages and we talk about national income. A very substantial amount of our discussion about social progress is focused on questions relating to GNP, GDP or in Ireland adjusted GNI.

There are good reasons to focus on measurements of national income. Firstly, national income is a very good indicator of the productive capacity of a society. And of course, the higher the productive capacity of a society, the greater its ability to ensure a high level of living standards for its members. Further, national income is closely correlated with nearly every other measure of welfare. High levels of national income is associated with democracy, strong political institutions, low levels of crime, high life expectancy, gender equality, high levels of education, and higher levels of leisure time. (OECD, 2017)

Despite all of this, there are serious limitations with measuring societal welfare by exclusively looking at national income. One major problem is that it only measures market activity. This is a problem when we think about work. Not all work is measured through the market. For example, much domestic work is unpaid, and therefore is not counted in national income. If instead of cleaning your house, you pay someone to clean your house, the amount of labour does not change but in the former situation this labour is not counted in national income while in the second situation it is. This of course is relevant for any consideration of gender equality, as the burden of unpaid domestic work falls unequally on women.

A second problem with national income accounting is that it measures total national output or output per capita. However, it does not consider the amount of work required to produce a given level of output. It seems beyond doubt that if I can produce my income by working 20 hours a week, I am better off than I would be if it took me 80 hours a week. However, national income accounting does not consider this rather obvious welfare concern. What is surely of more importance for any consideration of the productive capacity of a society, is not simply it's a level of output but rather it's level of hourly productivity. However, that is not what is measured with national income accounting.

In order to accurately assess how competitive Ireland is, hourly productivity is probably a better measure than GDP or GNI* per capita. Hourly productivity is normally of greater concern to employers and investors than total GDP. And significantly, hourly productivity normally increases with reductions in working time.

A further limitation of national income accounting is that it fails to consider the very significant negative externalities that arise from modern methods of production and consumption. We are aware now of the growing climate catastrophe that is approaching us. High levels of carbon emissions and climate change are of major societal concern, and have very large and obvious welfare implications. Consider two societies that produce the same amount per capita, but one does so in a carbon neutral manner and the other does so in a carbon intensive manner. Given the welfare consequences of carbon emissions for subsequent generations, it is clearly the case that the latter society leads to a lower level of societal welfare than the former society. However once again national income accounting does not consider these questions of sustainability.

Proposals to reduce working time are frequently met with the objection that reductions would have a negative impact on growth, a negative impact on the national economy, and a negative impact on GDP. However, given the above, we need to be careful when we accept these objections too quickly. There are good reasons to value a reduction in working time that should be considered independently of the impact on national income.



4 Benefits

There are many benefits that would arise from further reductions in the working week. Here I will focus on the prospect for the introduction of a four day week.

A four day week would increase people's leisure time. People could spend more time with their families; with their children and parents. People would have more time to spend on caring duties. Retirees could have a smoother transition between working life and retirement. An economy with a shorter working week could be more environmentally sustainable. Workers would be healthier. And a shorter working week could help move us towards greater gender equality.

4.1 Leisure

One obvious benefit of reduced working time would be the increased leisure time that people would enjoy. This would include more time for travel, more time for sports and hobbies, more time for socializing and to spend with friends. A primary concern of economic and social policy is improving living standards. Increases in leisure are an obvious way in which living standards can be improved.

In a recent review of over 60 studies, it was found that in almost all studies found a negative relationship between work/life balance and long hours. (Albertsen et al, 2018) This relationship was particularly strong for women. A reduction in working time could benefit everyone by helping them improve their work life balance.

4.2 Family

A major benefit of a reduction in working time is that it would increase the amount of time that people could spend with their families.

The question of working time and the family has been at the centre of working time legislation since the early 19th century. The first working time legislation was to restrict the number of hours that children could work. This was due to children coming to the factory with their parents and engaging in prolonged hours of child labour. Subsequent to this a problem arose. If both parents were working, children would be left unsupervised. In response to this women's hours were reduced to ensure that children would be supervised. Through this process, which was replicated across Europe, there was the development of the male-breadwinner family model whereby the husband/father went out to work for a wage, while the wife/mother was engaged in unpaid domestic labour in the home. It was only subsequent to this that the demand for the reduction of working time for men also started to be made. But once again, a major part of the argument for the reduction of working time to 10-hours a day for men was to enable them to spend time with their family. This continued into the twentieth century, where the introduction of the 8-hour day and 40-hour week was justified on the basis that it enabled people to spend more time with their family. (Cross, 1989a)

4.3 Children

A reduction in working time would enable people to spend more time with their children. This time could be less stressful as the time pressure parents face may be reduced. If a shift to a four day week also involved a degree of flexibility, it may allow parents to spend up to two extra days with their children while remaining in full time employment. This could have a significant impact on the amount of unpaid domestic work women do in the home, and it could enable women to engage in full-time paid work on a more level playing field. (Coote et al, 2010: 20-21)

4.4 Caring

In the 2016 census of Ireland, 195,263 people were registered as providing unpaid care to others. That is 4.1% of the population. (CSO, 2016) Again this is work that is disproportionately performed by women. It is work that often goes undervalued, but it is of major importance for our society. Allowing people more time off work would allow them to manage this burden more easily. A four day week would enable people who are carers to balance their caring role and their paid employment more easily. (Coote et al, 2010)

4.5 Aging

Our society is aging. The proportion of people aged over 65 is growing all the time . This poses several challenges to our society. One of them is the question of care for the elderly. This has been addressed above. But in addition to this question of care there is also the question of work and retirement.

For many years the age of retirement was declining but recently it has increased. The reason for this is essentially two-fold . Firstly, as life expectancy has increased it has become increasingly difficult to finance pensions for the elderly . By reducing the period that people are on pensions and out of work, and increasing the amount of time that they are in work, this financing problem can be reduced. Secondly people's health in their late 60s and early 70s is improving relative to what it was. Therefore, people can extend their working life beyond what would have been possible previously.

For people who want to extend their working life, a four day week might enable a smoother transition from work to retirement . It might be possible to incrementally move people into retirement over a longer time frame. It is possible to imagine workers going from a four day week to a three day week, then a 2-day week and a 1-day week before retirement. This would reduce the impact of the sudden shift that retirees experience when drawn from full time work directly to retirement. It would also avoid a sudden loss of tacit knowledge and expertise from workplaces on retirement of employees, and allow instead for the gradual transfer of skills and responsibilities from the more senior to the more junior employees. And it could reduce the financial burden of early retirement. (Coote et al, 2010: 21; De Spiegelare & Piasna, 2017: 38)



4.6 Interests with uncertain/long run return

A further benefit of a four day week is that it might allow people to spend time working on things that do not have an immediate or a certain financial return. In today's labour market there is a need for constant re-skilling and up-skilling. Some of this can be done at work and financed by a worker's employer. However, some can't. If a worker wants to learn a new skill because they want to transition from one career path into another, then much of this might need to be done outside of work. A four day week could allow people greater time for the investment in education that would be necessary for this type of career transition. Finally, it might allow time for work on side projects. Many software companies allow their employees time to work on side projects. A four day week might allow for this to happen in a more generalised way. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 37-38)

4.7 Sustainability

A four day week could involve a shift in social priorities away from economic growth for its own sake and towards a more sustainable approach to improving living standards. If increased productivity growth translated into reduced work time instead of increased production, this would have major implications for carbon emissions and environmental sustainability. (Coote et al, 2010)

One way that a reduction in working hours could reduce carbon emissions is through its impact on consumption patterns. There is good reason to believe that working long hours might be associated with high carbon consumption patterns. With less leisure time people might consume ready-made meals, weekend flights, etc. A study in France found that even controlling for income, longer working hours were associated with more energy intensive consumption patterns. (Devetter & Rouseau, 2011) A shift to lower working hours might involve a shift to less energy intensive consumption patterns. We can imagine people cooking their own meals, using active modes of transport more, and using less carbon intensive forms of leisure, should working hours be reduced. (Coote et al, 2010)

There is some evidence that a 4-day week could have significant impact on energy use and carbon emissions. Knight et al (2013) examine 29 high income countries and find that shorter hours were associated with lower ecological footprints, carbon footprints and carbon dioxide emissions. Rosnick and Weisbrot (2006) estimate that if the US had working hours the same as in Europe, this alone would reduce the US's energy consumption by 20%. And Nassén and Larsson (2005) find that a 1% reduction in working time leads to a 0.8% reduction in carbon emissions. A four day week might therefore lead to a carbon reduction of 16%. (Stronge et al, 2019)

A final, slightly counterintuitive, way of thinking about this is to think about it in the other direction. As Coote et al (2010) have pointed out. In 1974, when the UK Conservative government had to rapidly reduce energy consumption due to a coal workers' strike and high energy prices, they introduced the 3-day week. Given our current need to reduce carbon emissions and energy consumption, this would suggest that a move towards a four day week might be an effective tool.

4.8 Health

Workers' poor health is bad for everyone. It is bad for workers and it is bad for employers. Sick workers are less productive, take more sick days and make more mistakes.

It is now well established that longer hours are associated with poor health. (Artazcoz et al., 2009; Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Sparks et al., 1997) Working long hours is associated with high risk of accidents, higher levels of anxiety and poor mental health. The famous Whitehall studies found that British civil servants working more than 11 hours a day were more than two times as likely to have a major depressive episode in subsequent years than people working a 7 to 8-hour day. (Artazcoz et al., 2009; Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Sparks et al., 1997)

Examinations of the relationship between working time and health have found that reducing working hours leads to improved health outcomes. When Kellogg's introduced the 6-hour day in 1930, there was a 41% drop in working accidents. (Hunnicut, 1996) And in a recent experiment in Sweden, workers who had their hours reduced to a 6-hour day reported better sleep, lower fatigue and reduced stress than the control group who continued to work an 8-hour day. (Schiller et al, 2017)

4.9 Equality for women

A four day week would be a major step in improving the gender distribution of labour. Today it remains the case that women do far more domestic work than men. There have been dramatic changes in time use over the last 60 years, but the gender divide in domestic unpaid work remains very clear.

In 1961 in the UK, the average woman spent over 300 minutes a day in unpaid domestic work, while the average man spent under 100 minutes on the same tasks. Today, the amount of time men spend on shopping, childcare and adult care has increased from 76 to 115 minutes per day, but the amount of time spent on cooking, cleaning etc. has hardly changed remaining roughly 70 minutes a day. In contrast the time spent by women on cooking, cleaning etc. has dropped from 243 minutes a day to 133 minutes a day. But the time spent by women on shopping, childcare and adult-care has also increased. (Gershuny et al., 2019: 40-43)

In Western developed countries today women spend around 125 to 200 minutes on the average day engaged in unpaid cooking and cleaning, while men spend on average only between 50 and 100 minutes. (Ibid: 67) Women spend between 1.75 to 3 times more hours on child and adult care as men do. (Ibid.: 69)

Unfortunately, time-use data for Ireland is rather sparse but at the time of the 2005 Irish National Time-Use Survey, the gender division of labour was if anything unusually bad in Ireland. With women spending 5 hours 7 minutes in caring and household work on the average weekday, while men spending only 1 hour 42 minutes on the same forms of work. (McGinnity & Russell, 2007)

This increased burden of childcare and domestic work on women forces many women out of full-time employment. This has major implications on the level of income, wealth, social status and financial security of women relative to men. Women are compelled to engage in part time work rather than full time work. This combined with their unequal share of caring duties has major implications for their employment prospects, severely curtailing their possibilities for career advancement. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 27-28)

By introducing a new reduced standard for the working week, a four day week would enable women who are unable to work 40 hours a week to return to full-time employment. This would reduce the disadvantage they suffer by being forced into part time employment. Further, by reducing the hours that all workers work, it would reduce the number of hours that men work, allowing men to do an increased amount of domestic work and thereby reduce the burden of domestic work on women. As stated above, over the last number of decades, the inequality in the distribution of domestic work and paid work between men and women has been reducing. A four day week would help to support and advance that development. It could be a major boon to the advancement of gender equality.

When France reduced its working hour to 35 hours a week (discussed below), men spent more time with their children and did more housework, thereby alleviating the work burden of women. Further, with the reduced hours, it saw women move from part time to full time employment. However, it is important to note that it did not fundamentally alter gender relations or the gendered distribution of labour. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 29)

5 Case studies

Despite the many benefits that would arise from a reduction in working time, people still object to the idea. Some of these objections include concerns about the feasibility of any further reduction in working time. Perhaps a four day week could have serious negative economic consequences.

But if we look at previous attempts and experiments with reducing working time, we find that rarely if ever have reductions in working time had significant negative economic consequences. Rather, the normal result of a reduction in working time has been an increase in hourly productivity.

5.1 Introduction of 10-hour day in the United Kingdom

The introduction of the 10-hour day in the United Kingdom was a gradual process that took place over decades, beginning with the first Factory Act of 1802, which restricted the working hours of child apprentices to 12 hours a day. Outside of the United Kingdom, restrictions on working hours often did not get introduced until the 1890s or early 1900s. The earliest restrictions on working time were just for children. They were then extended to women and children, and much later extended to men. (Huberman, 2012)

While the campaign for the 10-hour day in the UK is often remembered as an exclusively working-class movement, it was significantly broader than that. It had a significant base in the churches, who were concerned about the impact that long hours for children and women were having on the family, and on the educational, personal and spiritual development of children. The 10-hour day was also strongly advocated for by businessmen such as John Fielden. However, the broad opinion within the business community was that the 10-hour day would be ruinous for the British economy². Some within the business community however believed that the introduction of the 10-hour day would need to be coordinated, arguing that it was impossible for one company to introduce the 10-hour day as they would be undercut by other companies who would be able to extract more from their capital investment by working their workers longer. As Fielden wrote: "those who have wished for the hours of labour to be less for all ages than the legislature would even yet sanction, have had no alternative but to conform more or less to the prevailing practice, or abandon the trade altogether". (Fielden, 1969)

Ultimately, of course, none of the various acts that were introduced to restrict working time in the UK had any serious negative impact on the British economy or on British competitiveness, and Britain remained the world's leading economy into the 20th century.

² See for example Nassau Senior (1837).

5.2 The introduction of the 8-hour day

Likewise, the introduction of the 8-hour day at the end of World War I does not appear to have had serious negative economic consequences. As described above, the introduction of the 8-hour day was a very large shock to the labour supply. There has been no other reduction of working time of comparable size. But, perhaps due to its minor economic effect, it has largely gone unremarked upon by economic historians. (Dowie, 1975)

Despite that, there has been some controversy over its significance. Stephen Broadberry, perhaps the world's leading expert on Britain's relative economic decline in the 20th century (Broadberry, 2005), has argued that the introduction of the 8-hour day was a major reason for Britain's economic decline. He argues that the introduction of the 8-hour day with no loss of earnings was a serious shock to British competitiveness, and that this set in train a series of events that marked the UK's economic decline. (Broadberry, 1986) However, there at least two problems with this argument. Firstly, Britain's main competitors at the time (Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands etc.) experienced larger relative reductions in working time than the UK did. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the reduction in working hours in the UK had a significant impact on domestic output. As Scott and Spadavecchia (2011) have demonstrated, the introduction of the 8-hour day did not lead to the UK suffering any significant loss in its major export industries. Instead, reduced working hours saw an increase in hourly productivity.

5.3 35-hour week in France

In 1998, the French government proposed to reduce the working week from 39 to 35 hours a week. It did this in two steps. First, the Aubry I law introduced the 35-hour week for companies with more than 20 employees. This reform was very well received. Then the Aubry II law both extended that to all workers and, under pressure from employer lobby groups, introduced greater flexibility around the arrangement of working hours. For example, it allowed for the annualization of the reduction in hours. So, provided they worked no more than 1600 hours annually, a worker could take his/her hour reduction as extra holidays and continue to work 39 hours a week.

This project was overall quite successful. It led to a real reduction in average hours worked by about two hours a week. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 69-70) And workers were broadly happy with the reduction, with 58% saying that it had a positive impact on their lives. However, workers who experienced less security in their hours of work were less enthusiastic. (Fagnani & Letablier, 2004) Additionally, some workers complained of work intensification due to the changes. (Askenazy, 2013) And, Prunier-Poulmaire & Gadbois (2001) argue that the 35 hour week led to a serious reduction in workers control over their own time, as employers tried to increase work intensiveness.

The hours reduction was paid for through the introduction of an 18-month wage freeze. So, although wages were not cut, over the period overall labour costs were relatively unaffected and there was actually a slight increase in productivity. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017: 69) With the election of the Sarkozy government in 2007, the legislation for the 35 hour week was largely reversed. (Coote et al, 2010) Therefore, it is unclear what the long term outcome of this reduction in hours would have been.



5.4 6-hour day in Sweden

Over a 23-month period, a widely discussed experiment took place in the city of Gothenburg in Sweden. In a carefully designed controlled experiment, the hours of workers in a single retirement home, Svartedalen, were reduced to six hours a day, i.e. 30 hours per week. The costs of this experiment were entirely borne by the local municipality, as there was no other change to the workers' pay scale. The reduced hours were made up by hiring new workers. In total 15 additional full-time equivalent workers were hired.

The experiment resulted in an official research report (Lorentzon, 2017), which compares the outcome in Svartedalen with a control retirement home. The findings indicated a significant improvement in health for the workers at Svartedalen. These workers had a more active lifestyle, were more alert, were less stressed and overall had a higher self-reported "good health status" than the control group.

In addition to a positive health outcome for the workers, the residents of the care home reported an improvement in service, with staff engaging in more activities such as walking, singing and dancing with the residents. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017)

5.5 28-hour week in Germany

There have been at least two experiments with the 28-hour week in Germany. Both were negotiated by the IG Metall engineering workers union. Due to the structure of Germany's wage bargaining system, IG Metall plays a disproportionately significant role in German labour politics. It's negotiations over wages and conditions are often used as the benchmark for the rest of the labour market. (Crouch, 1993)

The first experiment with the 28-hour week was a defensive one at Volkswagen in 1993. Volkswagen were experiencing problems of overcapacity and said that they needed to lay-off one third of the work force. Instead, workers negotiated to go on to a shorter working week of 28.8-hours, thereby preventing the mass layoffs. As the economic situation for Volkswagen improved, the need for this arrangement reduced and it ended in 1999. The results of this experiment were somewhat mixed. On the one hand, there were some very positive outcomes. Productivity increased and the mass layoffs were avoided. On the other, some problems arose. There were complaints of higher levels of stress. The highly varied work schedules were socially disruptive. Higher divorce rates were attributed to this (Zagelmeyer, 1999). This finding should caution us against strategies which tie working time reductions with highly variable hours. Additionally, the reduction in wages for the workers was significant, and only acceptable to the workers because Volkswagen workers had previously a wage rate that was higher than the industry standard. (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017) Again, any working hour reductions must be not result in wage loss.

The second experiment is more recent. After strikes in over 80 companies simultaneously in January 2018, IG Metall won a 4.3 % pay rise and an option to reduce working time to 28-hours per week. If within two years, they choose to return to full time work, they can do so. The main motivation behind this was to enable workers to engage in more childcare, caring work or to recover from strenuous shift work. The long-term impacts of this change are yet to be seen. (Balhorn, 2018; Chazan, 2018; Ottermann, 2018; Stronge et al, 2019)

5.6 4-day week in Perpetual Guardian

In March 2018, Perpetual Guardian, a New Zealand company that manages trusts, wills and estate planning, launched an eight-week trial of the four day week. All other conditions remained the same. Workers received the same remuneration and were expected to provide the same output. The trial was a major success. Prior to the trial, only 54% of Perpetual Guardian workers said they were able to manage their work/life balance. The shift to a four day week lead to a 24% improvement on this metric, with 78% of workers now saying they were able to manage their work/life balance. (Dunedin, 2018) And the trial was also a major success on a productivity front. Despite only being required to provide the same output, productivity increased by 20%! After the eight-week trial, the company was so impressed with the outcome that they decided to allow workers the option to opt-in to a four day week across its business from 1 November 2018. (Perpetual Guardian, 2019)

5.7 Summary of case studies

These cases studies describe six very different experiences around the reduction of work. There are significant differences regarding when historically these reductions happened, in terms of who paid for them, how much of the economy they affected, and their impact on worker's health. These differences highlight that it matters greatly how a reduction in working time is managed, designed and implemented. Further study on what might be the best process to reduce working time in the future is needed. But despite the many differences, there is one constant: the persistent concerns that a reduction in working time would have a terrible economic outcome. But this didn't happen in any of these case studies. Instead, an increase in hourly productivity, if not an increase in total productivity, has been the normal outcome. This should give us confidence that the economic feasibility of a reduction in working hours might be greater than suspected.



6 Do people want a 4-day week?

While the above has demonstrated both the desirability of a reduction in working time and the feasibility of a reduction in working time, a simple question remains: Do people want a reduction in working time? The available evidence appears to indicate that the answer to that question is a strong yes.

6.1 RICOH

A recent international survey conducted by the technology company Ricoh found that 57% of office workers in Ireland believe that a four day working week is likely in the near future as technology makes work practices more efficient. However less than half of Irish workers agreed that their employers are doing enough to keep up with evolving employee needs. (RicoH Europe, 2019)

Chas Moloney, director at Ricoh Ireland & UK, said that "Interest in an appetite for a 4-day week is growing - people want to work less hours but be more effective and productive with the time they spend working". He said it was "very disappointing" that Irish business leaders are not recognising this trend and adopting more flexible ways of working to motivate, encourage and retain staff. "A happier workforce often equates to increased employee productivity, business performance and company growth," he added. (RTÉ, 2019)

6.2 TUC

In 2018, the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) conducted a poll of its members. It asked them to "Imagine a future where using machines and computer programs at work made Britain much more productive and wealthier, and we could fulfil all our needs with less work. If it was up to you to decide how long the maximum working week should be for everyone, what would you choose?" In response to this question 45% of respondents answer that that they would prefer a maximum working week of 4-days. Only 10% said a working week of 5-days. (TUC, 2018)

6.3 Fórsa survey

In 2018, Fórsa, the leading public sector union in Ireland, surveyed its 80,000 members regarding their attitudes to a 4-day week. The survey had a high response rate with 5,619 members filling in the survey. Of these 5,429 were public sector employees. The results of the survey indicate a high level of dissatisfaction with their current work life balance, and a very high level of support for the introduction of a 4-day week.

Figure 6: How would you describe your current work life balance?

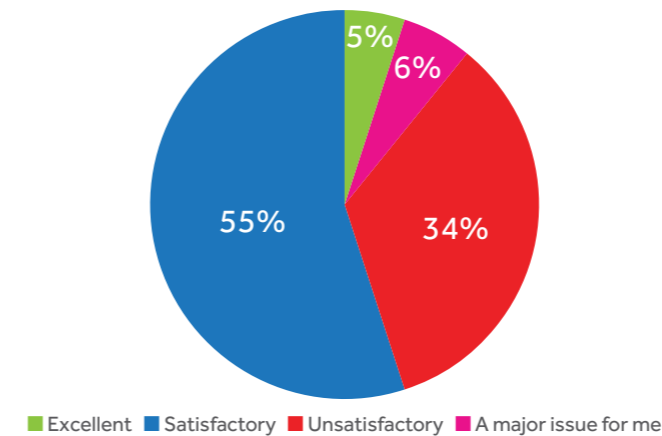
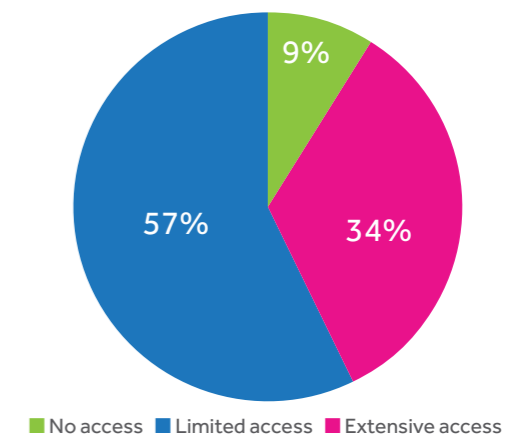


Figure 7: Do you currently have access to flexible working and family friendly workplace policies?



Regarding the current work situation, nearly 40% of Fórsa members say that their current work life balance is unsatisfactory or "a major issue" for them. And only 33% state that they have extensive access to flexible working and family friendly workplace policies. 57% say that they have limited access and nearly 10% say they have no access.

Figure 8: Which would be your preference is a shorter working week were to be made possible?

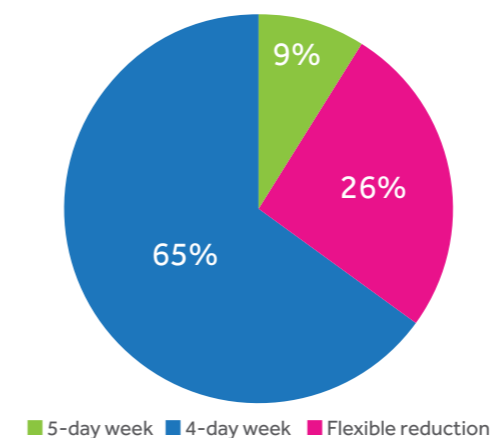
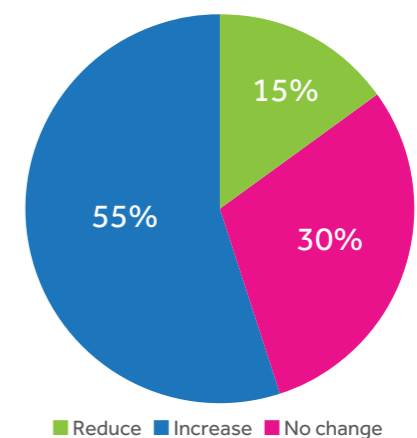


Figure 9: Do you believe that you could reduce your working hours and maintain or enhance your productivity?



If a choice was available 65% of Fórsa members would have a preference for a four day week. Only 9% have a preference for a 5-day week. Between these two options, 87.8% would prefer a four day week to a 5-day week.

When asked if they believed that they could reduce their working hours and maintain their level of productivity, 84.55% of respondents believed that they could either increase or maintain their current productivity with reduced working hours.

When 'Don't Know' responses are excluded, 82.46% of the public service workers surveyed believe the four day week is a realistic, achievable objective for unions, while over 9 in 10 (90.3%) believe that a four day week trial is desirable and feasible in their work context.

Figure 10: Which of the following would best describe the impact you would expect on your levels of wellbeing and work-related stress if your working hours were reduced?

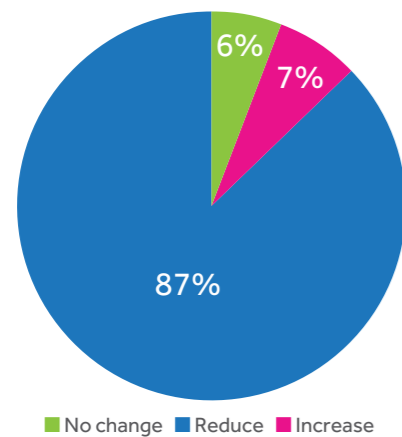
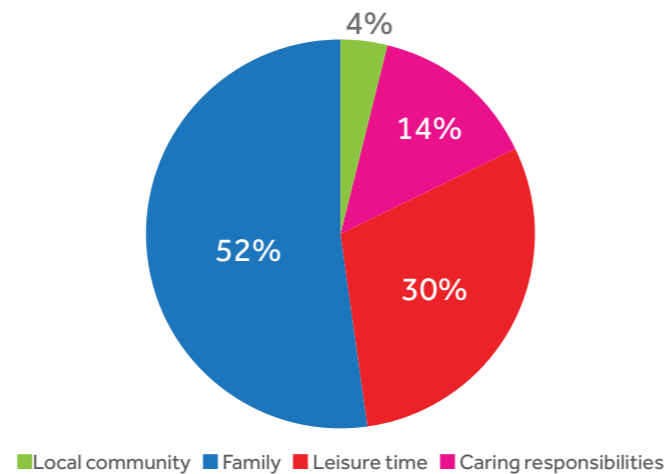


Figure 11: Which of the following would best describe how you would spend your additional time outside of work?



When asked what the outcome of a reduced working week would be, 87.29% of members believe that reducing their working hours would also reduce their work-related stress and increase their wellbeing. Over half of all respondents said that they would use their increased non-working time to spend it with their families. 15% said they would use it for caring responsibilities. And 4% said they would use it to give back to the local community.

6.4 Summary of events

There appears to be a significant appetite amongst Irish workers for reductions in working time, with substantial numbers believing it is feasible. Of course, survey data is often tricky, with the answers often changing with minor changes in the question asked³. However, all the evidence points towards a large proportion of Irish workers wanting a reduction in the length of the working week.

7 How do we move towards a 4-day week?

When people think about reductions in working time, their mind often goes immediately to the most significant two changes: the introduction of the 8-hour day and the 5-day week. These were momentous changes and a move towards a four day week promises to be another momentous change. But, as we can see from the above, changes in working time do not exclusively come about through the kind of big-bang approach that we saw with the introduction of the 8-hour day in the aftermath of World War I.

The norm is rather that there are many different experiments with reducing working time, and through that people learn what works and what doesn't. Even the shift from a 6-day to a 5-day week didn't happen suddenly. Instead the introduction of the 5-day week happened in different workplaces, industries and countries, at different times and at different paces. It took a long time, a period of decades, before the normal working week went from 48 hours to 40 hours. In planning to move from 40 hours to 32 hours, it is also likely to take a while.

We can think of the move towards working time involving three dimensions: there is the introduction of legislation, there is collective bargaining over working conditions, and there is company specific initiatives. Today many of the first steps towards a four day week are being explored at a company specific level, with different businesses seeing how moving to a four day week can improve productivity and profitability. It is likely that the experiments of these innovative businesses, and the experiments in specific parts of the public sector, are likely to be the first indicators of how a four day week might work.

It takes time to get things right and this is very much the case with future working time reductions. One of the big differences between previous reductions in working time and the move to the four day week is that older "one size fits all" approaches to working time are unlikely to work. The decline in the 9-5 job is often overstated, but it is nevertheless a real and widely observed phenomenon. (Crary, 2013; Gershuny et al., 2019) The reorganisation of work time to accommodate a four day week is likely to have to take into account the differing preferences of differing workers.

We might imagine that workers with young families might like to take their extra day off on differing days to facilitate childcare. But we might also imagine that young workers without children and older workers with teenage children might want to take their reduced hours as holiday time. Likewise, carers, workers engaging in upskilling, and workers transitioning to retirement, might have unique preferences.

Different sectors of the economy might also require special consideration. Even if we think for example of education, a four day week for a secondary school teacher might be more easily managed than a four day week for a primary school teacher.

Even different regions might have different preferences. For example, for workers living in major 24/7 metropolises, the inconvenience of working differing hours to other workers might only be a minor inconvenience. In smaller towns and cities, there might be a greater desire to have leisure-time coordinated.

Clearly, there are many questions and issues to be researched, debated and addressed. But, given the benefits of a reduction in working time and the widespread desire for it, these tough questions are worth addressing.

³ The European Working Conditions Survey finds much smaller numbers wanted reductions in working time. (Anxo et al, 2017: 59)

8 Conclusion

The western world has now gone decades without any significant reduction in working time. This is despite growing productive capacity and growing concerns around environmental sustainability.

People have made many objections to the feasibility of a broad reduction in working time, arguing that it might have serious negative economic consequences. By examining past experiences with reductions in working time, hopefully this report goes some way to moderating those concerns.

We have seen how we have a lot of experience with reducing working time to draw on and learn from. And one clear lesson is that it is possible to both move towards shorter working hours and have a flourishing economy. There are many experiences to draw on and it is almost certain that over the coming years there will be many more.

The idea of a four day week is one that is rapidly growing credence across the developed world. More and more workers are demanding it, and more and more employers are interested in the productivity increases that come with it. But there are so many more benefits to a reduced working week. There are improvements in health, sustainability and equality for women. People have more time to enjoy spending with family and friends, and more time to undertake education and caring responsibilities.

Today the question is less if working time can or should be reduced, today the question is more: how can we set about the task of reducing working time.



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