THE FOUR-DAY WORKWEEK

Could working less reshape the economy—or simply move the costs?

Level: C2 · Proficiency | **Target:** Interrogate economic and causal claims, distinguish possible job creation from cost-shifting, and defend a proportionate legislative proposal.

01 WARM UP / Talk before reading

1. Is leisure best understood as a private benefit, a labour right or a public good? Defend your distinction.

2. If a country shortened standard working hours without cutting pay, who might bear the immediate cost?

3. Could fewer hours create more jobs for younger workers, or might employers respond differently? What would determine the outcome?

02 READING / The shorter-week dividend: who collects, and who pays?

The appeal of a four-day week lies partly in its apparent refusal to choose between prosperity and leisure. If employees can produce as much in fewer hours, the argument goes, societies can reclaim time without sacrificing income. Yet that elegant proposition conceals a more uncomfortable question: what happens when an efficiency gain in one workplace is promoted as a blueprint for an entire economy? The answer depends on whose time can be compressed, whose cannot, and where any additional costs ultimately land.

The evidence is more substantial than a fashionable slogan, but less conclusive than its advocates sometimes imply. In a 2022 UK pilot involving 61 organisations and around 2,900 workers, 56 employers intended to continue after six months. Seventy-one per cent of surveyed employees reported reduced burnout. A 2025 study in Nature Human Behaviour examined 2,896 workers in 141 organisations across six countries, alongside 12 comparison companies, and found improvements in several well-being measures. Such results challenge the premise that longer attendance necessarily means better work. They do not, however, establish the long-run fiscal or employment effects of a nationwide mandate.

One intriguing possibility is a redistribution of paid work. Where output depends on continuous staffing rather than individual concentration, shorter shifts could create vacancies, provide an entry point for younger workers and ease the burden on an ageing workforce. In principle, more people might share both earnings and opportunities for advancement. But vacancies do not materialise by arithmetic alone. Firms must recruit, train and retain staff; skilled labour may already be scarce. Employers might instead raise prices, automate tasks, intensify workloads or reduce opening hours. Whether the net effect is job creation, wage pressure or simply cost displacement is an empirical question, not a foregone conclusion.

Business size complicates the picture. A large company may be able to stagger teams, absorb transitional costs, purchase technology and spread specialist functions across departments. A small retailer, restaurant or care provider may have little financial slack and few interchangeable employees. An across-the-board rule could therefore entrench the advantage of larger incumbents, even while ostensibly improving working lives. Equally, exempting smaller employers indefinitely would risk producing a two-tier labour market, with the least secure workers excluded from its benefits.

THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

READING / Continued: who benefits, who bears the costs?

There is a further distributional paradox. Higher-paid knowledge workers may gain an extra day without losing earnings because their output is not tightly bound to clock time. Lower-paid workers in healthcare, cleaning or transport may see their duties compressed or may need replacement staff to preserve essential services. If those costs are borne through higher consumer prices or taxes, the reform's beneficiaries and its funders need not be the same people. Nor should unpaid care be treated as an invisible windfall: who actually receives the additional free time within a household matters as much as the headline number of days.

Legislation could mitigate these asymmetries, but its design would be contentious. A statutory reduction in standard hours with wage protection differs fundamentally from merely permitting compressed four-day schedules. Transitional tax relief for small employers, sector-specific phase-ins, collective bargaining and public funding for essential services are conceivable safeguards. Each also carries risks: subsidies can reward firms that would have changed anyway; exemptions can become permanent loopholes; and rigid rules can undermine the flexibility they purport to create.

A defensible policy would be judged against a counterfactual: what would have happened without it? Evaluation should track hours actually worked, pay, employment among younger and older workers, productivity per hour, prices, staff shortages, business closures and the distribution of unpaid care. Outcomes ought to be disaggregated by sector, firm size, income and gender, with adverse findings made public. Only then could lawmakers distinguish a genuine social dividend from a rearrangement of burdens. The real ambition is not simply to work one day less, but to ensure that any recovered time is broadly shared rather than quietly paid for by those least able to object.

ARGUMENT MAP / Before discussing

Identify one established finding, one plausible employment mechanism and one unresolved distributive question. Which would require a control or counterfactual?

Evidence / inference / uncertainty:

WORDS WITH A PURPOSE

03 VOCABULARY / Match each word to its meaning

1. counterfactual ____	**A.** a result treated as certain before the evidence has been examined
2. cost displacement ____	**B.** break a dataset into distinct groups so differences are visible
3. labour-market entry ____	**C.** public funding for an action that would probably have happened without the incentive
4. work intensification ____	**D.** the gradual introduction of a new rule over an agreed period
5. financial slack ____	**E.** a system in which different groups have sharply unequal conditions or protections
6. incumbent ____	**F.** relating to how benefits and burdens are shared among groups
7. distributional ____	**G.** an already established firm or participant with an existing advantage
8. two-tier labour market ____	**H.** spare resources that allow an organisation to absorb additional expenses
9. phase-in ____	**I.** an increase in the amount or pace of work expected within a given time
10. deadweight subsidy ____	**J.** the process of securing an initial foothold in paid employment
11. disaggregate ____	**K.** shifting a cost from one group or institution onto another
12. foregone conclusion ____	**L.** the plausible outcome that would have occurred without a policy or intervention

The underlined vocabulary items are clickable Cambridge Dictionary look-ups. All meanings needed for class are also printed here.

Find three of these expressions in the reading. Explain what each means **in that sentence** to a partner.

USE THE WORDS / Complete with a word or phrase from the list

1. A credible evaluation needs a _____: what might firms have done without the reform?

2. The reform could lead to _____ if employees must finish five days' work in four.

3. A generous grant may become a _____ when it pays companies for changes already planned.

4. Researchers should _____ the results by company size before claiming universal success.

SAY IT / Make the language your own

Choose two words from the list and use them to express your opinion about a shorter working week. Ask your partner a follow-up question.

READ, WATCH, THINK

04 COMPREHENSION / Choose the best answer; justify it

1. What is the author's central qualification to the case for a shorter week?

A) The trial evidence is irrelevant because it concerns only individual well-being

B) Firm-level results do not establish how gains and burdens would be distributed economy-wide

C) Any nationwide policy must necessarily reduce hourly productivity

2. Why might shorter hours fail to produce additional jobs, even where services need continuous coverage?

A) Employers might respond through automation, prices, reduced services or more intensive work

B) A reduction in hours automatically lowers demand for services

C) Younger workers are legally excluded from replacement positions

3. Which policy dilemma best captures the distinction between large and small employers?

A) Large employers are always less efficient, so they should be exempt

B) Small employers can necessarily absorb extra staffing costs through productivity gains

C) Uniform obligations may disadvantage small firms, while permanent exemptions may institutionalise unequal rights

4. Which evidence would most seriously test the article's proposed social dividend?

A) Employee satisfaction at participating technology firms only

B) Sector- and size-specific changes in jobs, pay, prices, real hours and unpaid care relative to a plausible comparison

C) The number of newspapers reporting the policy positively

05 VIDEO / An optional 2:52 BBC News report

World's biggest four-day working week trial ends in success · BBC News · 21 February 2023

Watch the report on YouTube (external link; use captions if helpful).

Before: What does the word 'success' in the headline leave undefined: for whom, by which measure, and over what timescale?

During: Identify one measured outcome, one implied causal claim and one economic consequence not addressed by the report.

After: Give a 30-second editorial caveat that a rigorous broadcaster might add, without dismissing genuine improvements in well-being.

No video or no internet? Your teacher can use the short source-fact card provided in the teacher notes instead.

EXPLORE THE EVIDENCE / Clickable sources and comparisons

UK trial: 61 organisations, 56 continuing, employee survey figures (Cambridge)

Later six-country study (Nature Human Behaviour, 2025)

Compare annual working hours across countries (Our World in Data)

What the data mean and comparability limits (OECD)

Optional data question: Cross-check annual hours with output per hour, employment rates and income distribution. Which confounders could make a shorter-hours economy appear more productive or more equitable than it is?

SAY SOMETHING WORTH HEARING

06 DISCUSSION / Build on your partner's ideas

1. Under what conditions would a shorter standard week generate additional jobs rather than simply compress existing work?

2. Could sharing paid hours rejuvenate an ageing workforce and improve opportunities for younger entrants? What skills and hiring barriers might intervene?

3. Would a shorter week spread wealth, or could it increase inequality between salaried professionals and hourly workers?

4. Should a multinational and a family-run business face the same legal obligations? If not, for how long should exemptions apply?

5. Is a statutory reduction in hours more defensible than a voluntary scheme incentivised through tax relief? What are the unintended consequences of each?

6. If hospitals and schools need additional staff to maintain services, should the public pay higher taxes, accept some service reduction or postpone the reform?

7. How could employee bargaining power, gender and unpaid care responsibilities alter who actually gains leisure time?

8. Which observable result would make you revise your current position—and whose testimony might change your mind?

07 GROUP CHALLENGE / Draft and defend a shorter-hours bill

A parliamentary committee has asked whether to legislate a 32-hour standard week at unchanged full-time pay. The committee is divided over jobs for younger workers, small-business costs, essential-service coverage and who ultimately pays. Prepare a conditional bill, not a slogan.

Labour economist: Scrutinise whether employment creation and wage redistribution are likely; demand a counterfactual, sector data and an honest budget.

Small-business coalition: Expose cash-flow and recruitment constraints, challenge unfair advantages for large firms, and negotiate transitional support.

Intergenerational union delegate: Defend job access for younger people, security for older workers, paid hours and protections against work intensification.

Legislative rapporteur: Resolve disagreements over legal standards, phase-ins, exemptions, funding, audit metrics and a sunset review.

Your outcome: Deliver a two-minute committee statement: a proposed legal rule, a timetable, one provision for small firms, one for essential services, an employment-and-equity metric, a funding trade-off and a serious minority objection.

USEFUL LANGUAGE

The counterfactual against which we should judge this is ... · Even conceding the potential for ..., it does not follow that ... · The distributional implications are easily overlooked ... · A statutory requirement would be defensible only insofar as ... · We must distinguish net job creation from the reallocation of existing hours ... · The strongest objection to our proposal is ..., which we would mitigate by ...

REAL EXPERIMENTS / EVIDENCE CARDS

These cases involve different changes in hours, schedules and leave. Use them to test the bill your group has drafted; none by itself demonstrates national job creation.

Iceland: public services (2015–2019): About 2,500 public-sector workers tested 35–36 hours instead of around 40, with no pay cut. A report found that most services performed as well as before or better. This was not always a four-day schedule. Source

South Cambridgeshire: local government (2023): An English district council trialled shorter working weeks. Independent researchers checked real service indicators against past results; performance was broadly within normal ranges, with some services improving. Source

Microsoft Japan: Fridays off (August 2019): Microsoft Japan closed its offices on five Fridays in one month and measured changes to meetings and work patterns. Several changes happened together, so these numbers cannot prove that Friday closures caused higher productivity. Source

Unlimited vacation: an unexpected problem: The technology company Buffer said its unlimited-vacation policy was underused: some staff were not taking enough rest. It introduced a three-week minimum recommendation and regular check-ins. Unlike a four-day week, this is about holiday policy—not a measured productivity gain. Source

Compare: Distinguish time reduction from work intensification in each case. Which firm-level gains would survive if all employers, including small firms and essential services, adopted the policy?

Friday has left the chat. The workload would like a word.

Notes / decisions / evidence to use in your report-back:
