

Less Work, More Living

Movements such as the four-day workweek, right to disconnect, and fair workweek aim to save our sanity and the planet.

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¹ Karina Soto has spent the past nine years as a sales associate at an office supply store in Los Angeles. As businesses nationwide closed their doors to stop the spread of COVID-19 last year, the 33-year-old found herself with a new title: essential worker.

² “Working retail is not easy, and not everyone can do it, and that’s been especially true during the pandemic,” Soto says, adding that she’s helped many customers print **obituaries** for loved ones who died of COVID-19. “We are the faces of these companies. We bring them in profits. A lot of us go out of our way to make sure our customers are happy while being put under a lot of pressure and getting mistreated.”

³ In addition to the standard stressors of working retail, Soto says she had to reschedule medical appointments and care for her aging parents, while juggling shifts for her second job and part-time degree program, all because her employer rarely gave her more than a few days’ advance notice of her work schedule.

⁴ But Soto, who still works 8-10 hours weekly at the office-supply store, sees hope on the horizon. The L.A. City Council is currently considering a “fair workweek” **ordinance**, which would require employers of 300 or more people to provide schedules at least two weeks in advance, give employees the right to request changes or turn down shifts that conflict with previously scheduled **obligations** without **retaliation**, and end practices like the “clopeners,” sticking someone with an opening shift after they’ve closed the night before. Since 2016, several U.S. cities have **enacted** fair workweek ordinances, and Oregon became the first state to pass a similar law in 2017, which took full effect in July 2020.

⁵ “If we have this policy, that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about when it comes to working in retail,” Soto says about the proposed ordinance. “That’s a lot of stress taken away from your day-to-day life.”

⁶ Conversations about work-life balance **often skip workers** in industries like retail, restaurants, and hospitality. Yet they typically have the least **latitude** over schedules that are often **irregular and**



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Chicago Federation of Labor, which helped win passage of a fair workweek law last year in Chicago. “There’s issues of overworking, underworking, and just not being able to predict what your work-life balance looks like.”

A Rare Rethinking

⁸ After a year that forced us to recognize that low-paid workers are essential and remote work on a mass scale is possible, the pandemic has pushed a rethinking of work that is rare in U.S. society.

⁹ Now, as U.S. businesses fully reopen, several legislative and organizational actions are providing a **glimpse** of what a more **sustainable** work life could look like. In addition to bringing predictability to hourly scheduling, this includes shortening the workweek to four days, and giving workers a “[right to disconnect](#)” from technology. Across industries, these reforms share a common, simple goal: protect people from the demands a company can make on their time, when technology and a globalized economy make it possible to work around the clock.

¹⁰ In 2018, the New Zealand will, trust, and estate planning company Perpetual Guardian captured the world’s attention. After the company shifted its more than 240 employees to a four-day workweek —without cutting pay—employees’ stress levels decreased by 7%, while job engagement increased by 40%, according to [an independent study](#) the company **commissioned**.

¹¹ “We were the second most-read story in *The New York Times* after the Trump-Putin summit,” says Andrew Barnes, Perpetual Guardian’s chairman and founder. “This **transcends** borders and cultures and everything else. We realized overwork is a problem that is global. And this, whilst it’s not a silver bullet, is a way to address that.”

¹² Inspired by their success, Barnes and his partner, former Perpetual Guardian sales and marketing director Charlotte Lockhart, launched [a global four-day workweek movement](#). They believe theirs is

[assigned with little notice](#), since many employers use [software that schedules shifts based on store traffic and sales](#). In L.A., 77% of retail workers got their schedules less than one week in advance, [according to a 2018 survey](#).

⁷ “There are heartbreaking stories of low-wage workers, often people of color, who are trying to take care of themselves and their families, advance, and plan for their lives, and they’re unable to because of these difficult scheduling practices,” says Jake Lewis, director of communications for the

not an isolated experience but reflects a common-sense and evidence-based idea: When well-being is supported, people work better.

¹³ Leaders in Finland and New Zealand have since come out for a four-day workweek, and Spain **piloted** a program to encourage companies to adopt it. In July, Iceland reported on the largest-to-date trial of a shortened workweek with 2,500 workers across sectors and found “incredible success” in such measures as improved productivity and reduced burnout. But to make the practice widespread, Barnes and Lockhart launched a U.S. 4 Day Week campaign in June 2021 to convince American companies.

¹⁴ “If we can crack the U.S., everywhere would broadly follow,” says Barnes.

¹⁵ He acknowledges what they’re up against: Employees in the U.S. **work some of the longest hours** of any wealthy nation and have no federally guaranteed paid vacation, sick, or parental leave, though federal employees are eligible for 12 weeks of parental leave as of October 2020.

¹⁶ “You have a really, seriously **appalling** work culture, with the greatest due respect,” Barnes says.

¹⁷ A few American companies piloted a four-day workweek before the pandemic. The abrupt shift to remote work prompted even more experimentation, with large organizations including **Slack**, affiliate marketing company **AWIN**, and social media management software company **Buffer all testing shortened weeks in 2020**. Buffer and AWIN chose to extend the practice **indefinitely**, and Kickstarter in June became the latest company to test a four-day workweek.

¹⁸ Ilana Broad and Sterling Champion decided to **implement** a four-day workweek for **The SheMark**, which certifies women-owned or -operated organizations.

¹⁹ “It’s **unsustainable** the way we do things now. It makes you feel the need to be productive all the time,” says Champion. “We now can enjoy our weekends without the Sunday Scaries aspect,” she adds, referring to feelings of dread before the start of a new workweek.

²⁰ Broad says SheMark’s approach is based on the **tenets** of “conscious capitalism,” which promotes a “triple bottom line,” prioritizing people and the planet as much as profit.

²¹ “In the U.S. everyone is an employee first and a human second,” says Broad. “Capitalism is a race to the bottom. Conscious capitalism is a direct counter. [It] truly believes the best outcome is a race to the top.”

Switching Off

²² The shift to remote work during the pandemic led to more flexibility, but it also further **blurred** boundaries between work and home, leading **people to work more hours** and experience **significant burnout**.

²³ “The complete **conflation** of private space and work space has led to this pressure on people

[when it comes to] switching off,” says Andrew Pakes, director of communications and research for Prospect, a union representing workers in white-collar fields like science, tech, and civil service in the United Kingdom. “How do you put a bad day at work behind you if your office is also your kitchen or your dining room or your spare room?”

²⁴ Prospect is leading an effort to include a [right-to-disconnect](#) policy in an upcoming U.K. employment bill, which requires companies to give workers the right not to respond to digital communication after hours. First passed in France, similar laws have been adopted in Italy, Spain, Chile, the Philippines, Slovakia, and Ireland, and are under consideration in the European Union, Canada, and Japan, among other nations.

²⁵ [Pushback](#) against the right to disconnect argues it’s too **rigid** given the popularity of flexible work. However, [flexibility is often defined in the interest of managers, not workers](#), as British labor and management researchers recently noted. For many workers, boundaries around work relieve the [psychic toll](#) of feeling we should always be working. Even [the expectation one should be checking work email causes spikes in anxiety](#).

²⁶ “What we need,” says Pakes, “is proper conversation around how we get the best out of flexible working coming out of this crisis without overstepping the mark.”

Finding Balance

²⁷ Working less is the rare idea where often-competing interests are **aligned**. A shorter workweek can benefit the environment by [reducing commuting and its attendant pollution](#). Boston College sociology professor [Juliet Schor and two colleagues](#) found a 10% reduction in work hours would lead to a 14% decline in the global carbon footprint. And a study by the [Center for Economic Policy and Research](#) showed if the U.S. reduced its work hours to European levels, there would be a 20% drop in energy consumption.

²⁸ Advocates also note that shortening the workweek has the potential to boost employment rates. A [2020 study by the think tank Autonomy](#) found a 32-hour week would create up to 500,000 jobs in the U.K. public sector. Under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s 1933 “Reemployment Agreement,” [at least 1.34 million people were brought into the workforce in just four months](#), after companies received incentives to reduce the average workweek to 35 hours.

²⁹ Admittedly, in our current techno-capitalist economic system, which prioritizes growth above all, putting even modest boundaries around work is a radical—and risky—act. But the environmental, economic, and social **fallout** of **unrestrained** work makes such action increasingly necessary. As Barnes says, a four-day workweek is “a sensible economic decision for a country, it’s a sensible ecological decision for a country, it’s a sensible health decision for a country.”

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