GAME CHANGERS
Economic Policies for a Working America

CONFERENCE DRAFT

BACKGROUND PAPER

America's Working People Need a Four Day Week

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Background paper for 4 Day Week: Game Changers Project

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Executive Summary will go here (policy brief)

It's Time for a Four Day Week

It has been eighty-five years since the introduction, via the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), of a standard 40 hour week in the United States. While the early part of the 20th century witnessed significant reductions in working hours, working time began to plateau after the Second World War, and in the 1970s, to rise (Schor 1992). Since then average annual hours have increased. As a result, US workers are among the most stressed and disengaged in the world. When the pandemic hit, levels of distress skyrocketed, leading to a "Great Resignation." Pre-pandemic levels of well-being have not been restored.

While hours have stalled in the decades since 1940, American productivity has increased four-fold. This offers the opportunity to reduce hours of work without loss of pay, as had occurred since roughly 1870. There's growing recognition that **it's time to amend the FLSA to reset the standard workweek to 32.** This change will benefit workers and society at large. Longstanding arguments against shorter worktime from business may be less compelling than previously thought, as new research suggests that many businesses are thriving by offering a 32 hour workweek with no reduction in pay.

Long Hours and High Stress among American Workers

In the United States, hours began to rise in the 1970s and they haven't stopped increasing. There are two major sources of hours for which we have decades of data–household surveys and surveys from companies. From households, the Economic Policy Institute has used data from the Current Population Survey and provided a consistent series of annual hours beginning in 1975. Annual hours are a preferred indicator compared to weekly because there has been considerable change in weeks per year over the past 50 years. Between January 1975 and January 2024, the average American worker increased their hours by 268 per year, or 6.7 additional weeks (assuming a 40 hour week). This increase varies by gender. Men had a rise of 165 hours and women's increase was 415, or the equivalent of 10 additional weeks of work a year.

[Figure 1 here]

On a weekly basis, although hours have fallen a bit, the more striking trend is their failure to decline in line with either productivity growth, the period from 1870-1945, or the trajectory of comparably wealthy countries. In January 1970, average weekly hours of paid work were 39. By

2023, that figure, which includes part-timers, had fallen to 38.5. For full-timers, the 40 hour week hasn't yet been achieved–they're still at 40.8.

US hours are also long in comparison to Western European countries, who have similar levels of wealth. Here we have harmonized data from companies. These numbers tend to be lower because they don't include multiple job-holding, salaried hours beyond the standard workweek and unpaid overtime. In 2023, the average American worked 460 more hours than counterparts in Germany; 400+ more than in Denmark and the Netherlands, 300+ more than in France, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Iceland; 200+ more than in the UK and Switzerland, 150+ than Spaniards and 70 more than in Italy. Even Japan, which a few decades ago was thought of as a workaholic country like Korea or China, where people were suffering from "karoshi," or death by overwork, now has lower annual hours than the United States, by about 155. Since 1950, the Germans have reduced their hours by more than 1000 a year, five times more than in the US.

[Figure 2 here]

The long hours of US workers are not the only source of time squeeze. Unpaid work devoted to the reproduction of households and communities is also long. According to Nancy Folbre's analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey, on average, weekly hours of unpaid labor on child care, household work and volunteering are actually larger than time spent in paid employment—29.4 hours versus 24.5. (Folbre 2026, Fig 1, p. 77) This finding replicates what we see elsewhere. In high-income countries as a whole, paid and unpaid work are just about equal (Addati, et al., 2018, Figure 2.8, p 56). And contrary to what might be expected given the significant growth of hours of paid work for women, time spent in childcare has also been rising. Even as hours of paid work increased for women, and men began to do more, American women increased the time they spent caring for their children (Pailhé et al 2021). Here again, the US diverges from Europe, where there is more use of out of home care. According to one estimate of middle-class families with two full-time earners, combined weekly hours of paid and unpaid work total 139 a week (Sawhill and Guyout, 2020, p.22).

Together the demands of paid and unpaid work have created a pervasive sense of "time squeeze," "overload," and stress. Data from Gallup's extensive workplace surveying reveals that the high-stress period of the pandemic has not ended for many workers. Gallup's Annual State of the Global Workforce reports that the US has the highest level of daily stress of any across the world, with 51% of workers experiencing stress "A LOT OF THE DAY yesterday?" (Gallup 2025, p.28) And although stress levels have fallen from their pandemic peak, that decline has ended, and they remain considerably elevated in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. Gallup's 12-item measure of employee engagement declined precipitously at the beginning of the pandemic, has failed to recover at all, and now sits at a 10 year low. Similarly, a "life evaluation" measure, which measures employee thriving, struggling, and suffering reveals no improvement since the pandemic, with the fraction of thriving employees (50%) continuing to fall, and struggling (45%) and suffering (4%) still rising. Similarly, job satisfaction has fallen and intent to leave has grown, with just over half (51%) now reporting they are "watching for or actively seeking a new job." These trends can also be seen in population-level measures of mental health, such as depression and anxiety, which remain elevated in comparison to pre-pandemic rates (Shah et al 2021).

The 4DW Trials

Before the pandemic, there was sporadic interest in the four day week, but with a few exceptions, it was largely characterized by journalistic stories of individual companies. That changed with the pandemic. Stress levels and employee attrition rose. At the same time, the experiment with work-from-home showed that dramatic changes in workplace practices could be viable for employers. Beginning in 2021, four day week advocates began planning what would become landmark trials to test whether giving employees a 32 hour week with no reduction in pay could be achieved with either no loss in productivity or other cost reductions that resulted in success for participating businesses.

The trials, which consisted of cohorts of companies changing their schedules together, began in February of 2022, and trials are ongoing.[1] The original trials were organized by a number of non-profit organizations who enlisted academic researchers to study their impacts. By early 2026, trials had occurred in 15 countries involving more than 400 companies and roughly 13,000 employees. In Portugal and Scotland, these trials were conducted with government sponsorship, and governments have conducted their own trials in Spain, the Dominican Republic, Belgium, and mostly recently, Poland. While the pace and size of trials is now slower, countries and companies continue to experiment with the four day week schedule.

[Table 1 here]

The independent trials and a few of the government efforts follow a common model. They begin with two months of training and preparation for the new schedule. This process includes coaching and mentoring for the companies, as well as time for them to share with each other. Once the trials begin, companies operate largely on their own, although they may reach out for advice. The philosophy behind the trials is that for most companies it is possible to maintain or increase existing levels of productivity on the 32 hour schedule with a robust "work reorganization" process. This involves identifying time-wasting and low-value activities and making organization-wide changes to practices. Companies are advised to follow a bottom-up process in which all employees contribute to work reorganization. Across the trials, just over 67% of participants report being involved in pre-trial decision-making. There is no comprehensive data on how the organizations

[1] For the NGO-run, or "independent" i.e. non-governmental trials, a team from Boston College led by Juliet Schor and Wen Fan did all the surveying of employees and organizations in Anglophone countries, and collaborated with local teams in non-English speaking countries. Both the Boston College team, and local researchers conducted interviews with employees and management in many of the countries. Some country teams added questions and other types of research (eg., biometric). In addition, the Boston College team has been enrolling additional companies into its research. As a result, researchers now have a large volume of data with which to assess the impacts of this schedule on employees and companies. Reports from individual country trials can be found on the 4DWG website, and for the UK trial, the Autonomy Institute. Unless noted, all findings in this section come from the Boston College research, summarized in Fan et al 2025, Schor et al 2025, and Schor 2025.

implemented time-saving strategies, however, our qualitative research found that common strategies were reductions in meeting frequency, time and attendance, the use of uninterrupted (i.e. focus) time, changes in communication and project management software, more asynchronous work, and heavier investment in time-saving practices such as documentation. Descriptions of individual company experiences can be found in Lewis et al (2023) and Schor (2025). The majority of companies involved in the trials aimed to maintain (or expand) productivity. However, a small number were more concerned about employee burnout and turnover, and did not generally reorganize or intensify the workloads of participating employees. These organizations seemed to be mainly in the areas of healthcare and non-profits (Schor 2025, ch 4).

While the 4DW trials have been unusual in enrolling many more companies than is typical for workplace intervention studies, they are not representative of economies as a whole. There are two salient features of participants. First, they are small and medium sized companies. (In the few cases of very large companies, the whole company did not participate in the trial.) And 28% of these are in the very small (1-10) category. Over time, firm size did increase, however the largest company to date has 5000 employees. (Only 1000 of them took part in the original trial; they subsequently rolled out the schedule to their whole labor force.) Second, they are heavily white collar organizations. The largest group is professional services, followed by civil and social services, administration and IT. Smaller numbers are found in healthcare, education, finance and insurance, manufacturing and construction and retail. The size and sectoral skew of the companies means the sample is not representative, however 46% of US workers are estimated to work in businesses with fewer than five hundred employees and approximately 60% are white collar. The sample represents a large portion of the economy along these dimensions. There are also unrepresentative employee demographic characteristics in the trials. Participants have been disproportionately female (64%), white (72%) and college educated (73%). The age range is similar to that of the US labor force.

[Tables 2a and 2b here]

4DW Trials Find Improvements in Employee Well-being

The survey instrument used in most of the trials included twenty well-being metrics. These included the Copenhagen burnout scale, and questions on stress, anxiety, fatigue, negative and positive emotions, mental and physical health, work-family and work-life balance and conflict, and five domains of satisfaction (life, time, finances, relationships, job) plus questions on sleep problems, sleep time, and exercise. On all of these questions, employees experienced statistically significant improvements from baseline (i.e. before the trial began) to endpoint (six months later).

[Table 3 here]

Some of the largest changes were in work-family relations, and satisfaction with time and life. More than two-thirds of respondents had lower burnout scores and 59% registered more work-life balance. More than half had fewer negative emotions. In addition to the companies transitioning to a four day week schedule, a second group of five-day week companies were recruited to serve as controls (i.e. they experienced no reduction in worktime). Those companies did not experience increases in well-being, suggesting that the schedule change was responsible for the

improvements. These results have been stable across the Anglophone trials since 2022, with the exception of one trial in South Africa in which worktime did not decline as much and subsequently, well-being improvements were smaller. Similar findings using the same measures were also found by researchers studying trials in Portugal and Germany, again with the use of control companies. Furthermore, re-surveying at 12 and 24 months from the start of the 4DW indicates stability in the well-being gains (although sample attrition is high at the 24 month mark).

Regression analyses (Fan et al 2025) for four well-being metrics (job satisfaction, burnout, mental and physical health), show that the larger the worktime reduction, the greater the well-being increase, with a four hour weekly reduction yielding half the well-being improvement of the full eight hours. (Not everyone recorded a full eight hour reduction in the previous four weeks, due to the ability of people to work more if they wanted to). Mediation analysis of how worktime reduction improves well-being found that the key factors were a reduction in fatigue and the large increase in self-reported productivity that many employees recorded. (We return to productivity impacts below.) These findings replicate a considerable body of research about the beneficial effects of working time reduction on employee well-being that has been done, largely in public sector contexts in Northern Europe. Prior research includes studies from Sweden (Barck-Holst et al., 2017; 2020), Iceland (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021) and the UK (Pink et al 2024). The 4DW trials are the first large-scale studies of private sector companies, and show similar positive results for employees.

In addition to impacts on workers, the 4DW also affects families and communities. These impacts have been less studied. We know that work-family conflict is reduced on a 4DW schedule. There are likely positive ripple effects outward from workers to their households, social connections, and potentially to their communities.

Organizational Success with the 4DW

While it may not be surprising that employees benefit from a four day workweek, the trials also found high levels of company satisfaction and continuation of this schedule beyond the six month trial period. Researchers went back to companies who had been on the trial for at least one year and found that 90% of them were still on the 4DW schedule (Schor et al 2025). Companies also provided a small set of metrics at trial baseline and for the next six months. These included revenue, absenteeism, quits and new hires (See Table x). Revenue increased an average of 19.8% over the trial period. Weighted for company size, the increase was 9.8%. Resignations fell, from an average of 1.8 per month to 1.4. Sick and personal days decline from 1.0 to 0.8 days per month. Companies also registered a 4.8% increase in their total number of employees. (The weighted average was 2.4%.). Overall, all the metrics collected showed improvements over the trial period.

At the close of each trial companies were asked to rate the trial. The overall rating was 8.2 on a scale of 1-10. Ratings of “impact on productivity” and “impact on company performance” were 7.3. Impact on ability to attract employees was rated at 8.5. When asked whether they planned to continue the trial, 77% said they were “definitely going to continue” or “planning on continuing but no final decision,” and an additional 8% were “leaning towards continuing.” Only 7% were “definitely not going to continue” or “leaning against continuing”. Three percent were undecided and 6% did not answer the question.

[Table 6 here]

Of course, the fact that participating companies succeeded may not be surprising. They self-select into trials. They are likely to know, or at least suspect, that this model will work for them. Considering a large-scale shift to a 4DW the question arises whether it can work for many more, most, or even all firms. In other words, how serious is the selection bias associated with these results? For employees, it's likely to be much of an issue. They are not selecting in, and there's a large body of evidence in a variety of contexts that worktime reduction is a benefit for workers. The issue of selection bias is much more serious for the firms. Are they unusual or different in ways that mean their results will not be more widely replicated? There is no way to know the answer to that question without much more research. It seems likely that there are many more companies than this group who can replicate these kinds of results, especially in the sectors where we have seen more successful adoption. How large that group is is impossible to tell at this point. However, we do have the experience of 150 years of successful worktime reduction in the West. Not all companies will be able to do this costlessly, as the early adopters are doing. And as it becomes more common, the competitive advantages of a 4DW will fade. But as we argue in the next section, there's more economic reasoning to support the viability of a 4DW than is generally acknowledged. And the 4DW is not so different from many worker-friendly policies that business says it cannot afford, but that history shows are viable.

The Unexpected Economics of the 4DW

Productivity Rises when Hours Fall

The outcomes of the 4DW trials are improbable from the point of view of most conventional economic thinking. The idea that companies are operating with high enough levels of inefficiency that they can reduce working hours by 20% without loss of productivity does not accord with standard economic thinking. Perhaps the key reason is that firms are presumably subject to competitive pressures. Inefficiency at that level should be eliminated by market pressures. The 4DW looks like what economists call a "free lunch," something that should not exist. Motivated companies will see the inefficiencies, lay off 20% of their workers and improve their profit margins.

However, in the real world, there is considerable variation across firms and industries in terms of how efficient they are. One reason is that the competitiveness of markets varies across industries. And within industries, productivity varies both because there is a range of technologies, but also variations in the management of labor which affect labor effort and by extension, productivity. For example, both "high" and "low" road firms (those who treat workers well and poorly) co-exist. Firms employ a wide variety of strategies for managing their workers, which have varying effects on effort and productivity.

Firms who adopt the 4DW believe that they can improve hourly productivity and therefore maintain or increase weekly productivity because they can identify time-wasting practices and low

value activity. They identify these opportunities both for individuals, but perhaps more importantly for the organization as a whole. Some of these practices have been well-identified by scholars and management practitioners. The most prominent is a dysfunctional culture of meetings which has taken place in many organizations. A 2023 global Microsoft survey of 31,000 respondents found that the top "disruptor of productivity" is "inefficient meetings (Microsoft Work Lab 2023). With "too many meetings" as the third-most frequent response. A 2002 study found that on average people have 17.7 meetings per week, and professionals spend a third of their time in meetings (Rogelberg 2022). Academic research on meetings reductions finds that instituting meeting-free days improves stress, productivity, collaboration, engagement, autonomy and engagement (Laker et al 2022). A real world study of meetings quality found that poorly run meetings are associated with worse organizational outcomes in the future (Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock 2012).

A second reason is that there isn't much research on how productivity varies over the day or week, and how it responds to changes in working hours. However, there is a longstanding correlation between hours of work and hourly productivity. Across countries, those with high hourly productivity tend to have short hours of work, although the causality may be in part from productivity to hours. There is also evidence that increasing hours reduces productivity and the reverse. A classic paper on munitions workers in World War I found that after a certain threshold, output per hour declined as hours increased (Pencavel 2015). Historical evidence from the shift from a six to a five day week supports this view. In 1929, the National Industrial Conference Board surveyed a number of manufacturing companies who had instituted the five day schedule National Industrial Conference Board Report (1929, p. 41, Table 9). More than half did not know what happened to output, but among reporting companies who reduced total hours, 68% witnessed stable or rising output.

There is also contemporary evidence. Data from a Dutch call center found that as hours rise, the amount of time it takes to complete a call also goes up (Collewet and Sauermann 2017). A Belgian study also finds that at the margin, additional hours reduce productivity (Delmez and Vandenberghe 2018). In a review of the existing literature, Alison Booth and Martin Ravallion conclude that "hourly output declines dramatically at the end of the working day as well as at the end of the working week," implying that cutting hours may raise productivity (Booth and Ravallion 1993).

The most compelling evidence for an inverse relationship between hours and productivity over much of the hours distribution is that worktime reductions which are enacted to boost employment have generally poor results. Existing employees become more productive and employers do not need to hire more staff. When the French workweek went from 40 to 39 in 1982, work intensification replaced half the lost output (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001, p223). One review found that in advance of a worktime reduction scheme, productivity increases are typically predicted to compensate for about half the decline in worktime, but that actual increases are generally higher (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001). Economists Cette and Taddei take the view that "the bill" i.e. the cost of worktime reduction "is always paid for by productivity gains" (quoted in Bosch and Lehndorff 2001, p. 231). This literature suggests that productivity increase is greater in white collar, service sector settings (Bosch and Lehndorff 2001, p. 224). This finding may be due to higher levels of inefficiency in this sector, or alternatively because"knowledge work" is

sufficiently mentally taxing that productivity can not be maintained on standard schedules This may be relevant for the findings of the 4DW trials.

A recent in-depth exploration of hours and wages has attempted to reconcile some anomalies in the standard macroeconomic models, and concludes that hours and productivity move together. Bick et al (2022) finds a steep decline in wages after 50 hours per week for salaried workers, which they interpret as being caused by declines in productivity, given the standard assumption that wages reflect productivity. While there may be other reasons for this finding, such as the fact that salaries are typically pegged to 40 hours, their analysis is nevertheless consistent with the view that as hours fall, productivity rises.

There are also some specific reasons why companies have been able to make up the lost productivity from their off day. One is that more privileged workers are already taking time from their work schedules for personal activities, such as medical appointments, child care and the like. On a 4DW schedule, those activities are scheduled on the off day. A second reason is that for the majority of companies who opt for a Monday through Thursday schedule, they are not losing a full day's productivity because Friday has already been evolving into a slower day for business. Studies have shown that on Fridays, earnings reports get fewer and more delayed responses, suggesting investors are paying less attention on that day (Dellavigna and Pollett 2009). Responses to business surveys also reveal a Friday effect (Hennrich and Wohlrabe 2024).

Findings from the trials support the conclusion that hourly productivity rises with shorter hours. The preponderance of companies with knowledge workers whose productivity is hard to measure and small companies whose investment in workplace metrics is limited meant that it was not possible to collect actual productivity data from the companies. However, the survey instrument included a number of self-reported productivity questions, including an item on "current work ability compared to your lifetime best," "productivity," and a smart working scale that included 4 items. In addition, respondents were asked about their "pace of work," "workload," and the intensity of work, as measured by a two-item scale. Across the trials, the work ability measure increased significantly, from 7.0 to 7.8. This is a consistent finding over the entire period and across countries. Productivity also increased a considerable amount, by 0.7 points. More than half of respondents registered an increase in work ability and productivity. Smart working increased, but by less. Results for intensity, pace and workload suggest that work re-organization, rather than simple speedup, was responsible for the productivity increase. Workload and pace of work did increase, but only by 0.1 point each, while and the pace of work increased slightly more. While we lack hard productivity numbers, the self-reports and the ratings and qualitative evidence from the companies suggest that the trials achieved their intended results of maintaining performance. One finding from the statistical analysis is that the large jump in self-reported work ability mediates the impact of hours reductions on well-being. Feeling more capable, on top of one's work and "productive" improves not only employee performance but their sense of well-being.

[Table 5 here]

The value of a four day week job

If it's true that many companies are operating with inefficiencies which they can eliminate with concerted effort, an obvious question is why they need a four day week to make those changes. Interviews with management in 4DW companies yielded answers focusing on "busy-ness." But there is another explanation rooted in theories of labor management that can explain why asking people to work smarter and more efficiently may require employers to offer something in return. In the 1970s, economists began developing models of the labor market to explain why wages tend to stabilize above a market clearing wage–in other words, why there is involuntary unemployment in "free" labor markets. The explanation was that by offering a wage above the worker's next best alternative, the employer will get a more disciplined, harder worker employee. Basically, by offering a wage premium, the employer makes the job more valuable and increases what has been called "the cost of job loss" (Bowles 1985; Schor and Bowles 1987). At any point in time, there's an equilibrium wage and effort level, even if the latter isn't explicitly specified. Understanding that bargain is key to why companies don't do this on a five day schedule, and why they can do it in four.

If the employer unilaterally decides to reduce inefficiencies and raise the effort level without giving employees something in return, it will lower the value of the job (and the cost of job loss). That may induce resistance, lower labor effort, and higher quits. If the employer gives the worker something in return for more efficient work, such as a higher wage or a day off, it may be an appealing bargain.

Evidence from the 4DW trials shows that an additional day off is very highly valued by employees. Among the 95% of participants who preferred a 4 to a 5 day schedule, willingness-to-pay for a 4DW is considerable. When asked what level of salary adjustment they would require to return to a 5DW, half said they would require a 26% increase or more, with 13% saying no amount of money would induce them to take a 5 day week job.

[Table 7 here]

These findings suggest that employers may be able to use a shorter workweek as an alternative to wage increases, and may be a significant part of the explanation for why the takeup of the 4DW has been so much greater among small and medium-sized employers. As the graph below shows, wages vary by firm size with those in the size range most common in the trials falling significantly below large firms.

[Table 8 here]

The cost of job loss model is also useful in understanding why the pandemic created momentum for worktime reduction and other worker-friendly innovative workplace practices such as remote work. The pandemic lowered the value of jobs in multiple ways. Jobs became more dangerous and stressful. The value of time at home (because of school closures) increased. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people began caring more about quality of life as they contemplated its precariousness. As the cost of job loss fell, the US experienced its highest ever level of quits, termed the Great Resignation. Estimates of disengagement–also called "quiet quitting" rose dramatically. These factors destabilized the prior wage/effort bargain. Firms could respond by raising the wage, which many did. However, a 4DW is an alternative, bold policy which has a

large impact on the value of the job, and is more viable for smaller firms who are unable to raise wages. That is especially true if they are able to maintain productivity as so many reported being able to.

The Costs of Turnover

As noted above, the pandemic led to increased levels of turnover across the economy, and especially in industries such as professional services, health care and restaurants. Such turnover is costly, both for firms and society as a whole. A subset of companies who participated in the trials were less concerned about maintaining productivity for employees and more with keeping them from leaving. This group did less in the way of improving efficiency and work intensity, and concentrated on giving their employees time off. Some of them, for example health care firms and restaurants were already operating with high intensity, which was leading to burnout and attrition. In these cases, the research showed small increases in staffing and/or a changing division of labor. These companies were successful with the new schedules because the shift to a four day week had dramatic effects on turnover and the ability to hire. In the case of nurse managers, resignation letters were rescinded (Schor, 2025, ch 4). Turnover in some of the cases fell to roughly zero. And companies reported using the 4 day week in their recruiting materials. Companies rated ability to attract workers most highly among all the impacts recorded.

[Figure 4 here]

The graph above shows the number of job openings (in thousands) by industry for 2015-2025. The industries included in the graph are: Accommodation & Food Services, Healthcare & Social Assistance, and Professional & Business Services. The Great Resignation is apparent in the graph.

[Figure 5 here]

Turnover is a costly phenomenon for companies and for the economy and society as a whole. In our nursing case, the figure for the cost of turnover was assumed to be between $132,000 and $228,00 per nurse. This does not include the social costs of training professionals who leave the field, which in healthcare has become considerable. Turnover is also costly in other industries. Impacts on turnover and talent attraction have largely been ignored in debates on the economics of worktime reduction, which have focused more on productivity. The importance of these factors can be seen in one of the most highly researched 4DW cases in the literature–that of South Cambridgeshire, a local council in the UK. This case reflects many of the dynamics seen across the trials. Productivity was maintained or improved, as measured by nearly all their KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Turnover declined by more than 40% and they had a 120% increase in average applications for jobs. Because the council had been unable to raise salaries to compete with the private sector, they were paying large amounts in signing bonuses and for temporary employees, which they no longer had to do. With the shift to the 4DW they saved 400,000 pounds in the first year.

While the turnover effects from the 4DW trials have been dramatic, this is an effect which will decline over time if more companies adopt this schedule. In the phase of early adoption when 4DW jobs are scarce, the schedule offers a large competitive advantage to employers. If 4DW jobs become plentiful, of course, the schedule is no longer as compelling a reason for workers to stay. However, even with widespread availability of 4DW jobs, we can expect some turnover impact of this schedule, in comparison to the 5DW, as less burned out and stressed workers choose to stay on the job rather than exit the labor market, or remain in their current position because it is not eroding their well-being.

Amend the Fair Labor Standards Act: a 32 hour workweek

The path to a standard 4 day, 32 hour week requires federal legislation, in particular an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act. Such an amendment has been introduced in both the House and the Senate, however, it has not moved forward to passage. To achieve that goal, we suggest the following pathway.

First steps can be taken at the state level. Bills have been introduced in twelve states to date. These include amendments to State FLSAs for a 32 hour week and bills to run pilot programs similar to those discussed above. In the case of the amendments, some include amendments for small businesses. With the pilot bills , most include incentives for companies to try the 4DW. These incentives are financial, via the tax system and technical, to provide expertise for companies that are interested in adoption. To date none of these bills has been enacted, however, many of them are relatively low cost and with public pressure passage should be achievable. Positive results from the pilots will help build momentum for reducing the standard workweek for all employers. In addition, advocates and State governments can encourage voluntary adoption via public education and through the provision of technical support. Advocates are creating "communities of practice," that is, groups of companies who come together to share their experiences and interest in this model. Higher levels of voluntary adoption are an important first step, and replicate the historical experience of the shift to a 5DW in which employers had already begun the process before the state stepped in (Schor 2025, ch 8). We also call for the Federal government to follow the lead of other countries that have conducted national voluntary trials of companies. In some cases, such as the Spanish, the government offered wage subsidies for participating companies, covering the off day wages at a declining percentage over three years. Other trials have offered tax incentives and/or technical and research support. A large-scale, widely-publicized national trial with company incentives would provide a significant boost to adoption, especially if companies had successful results.

Government-sponsored trials are especially important to expand the 4DW to types of companies and workers that are under-represented in the voluntary trials and adoption trends. These include blue collar workers, lower paid workers, workers of color, men and workers with lower levels of education. It is important that the 4DW not become another axis of inequality between higher and lower paid workers. Only government action can prevent that from occurring. That action should be built in, not just in any eventual legislation, but in prior steps, such as trials and pilots.

For both state level and a national amendment to the FLSA, there should be a stepwise shift that occurs over a number of years. In the bill proposed by Senator Bernie Sanders in 2024, the shift would occur over four years, with a 2 hour reduction each year. Smaller reductions in hours are easier to achieve without loss of productivity, both because it is easier to find small efficiencies and because these reductions will be occurring alongside ongoing productivity growth. Sanders' bill has been endorsed by a number of large unions (UAW, SEIU) as well as the AFL-CIO. In fact, the UAW included a 32 hour week in its 2024 contract demands, and is likely to re-introduce it in their 2028 contract round.

We propose one change to the Sanders bill, which is that instead of requiring overtime pay at 32 hours, the law requires compensated time for the hours between 32 and 40. The reason for this is that the 40 hour workweek failed to achieve 40 hours for full-time employees for many decades, because firms opted to pay overtime premia instead. Many workers came to depend on and prefer overtime. One reason is that in the presence of ongoing overtime, employers have been shown to lower base wages. This "blowback" effect is also plausible for a shift to 32 hours. If employers are required to offer compensated time between 32 and 40 hours, workers will actually get the 32 hour week. Our proposal would leave overtime premia in effect for schedules over 40 hours.

While the idea of a nationwide shift to 32 hours over 4 days may seem unrealistic, there are already signs of an evolution in this direction. Above we noted reductions in business activity on Fridays. Other signs of this trend also include what are called 9 day fortnights–employers who offer every other Friday off. There is also a trend of Summer Fridays, which entail either early closing, half-day schedules or a full off-day. No meeting Fridays is another popular trend which allows employees more flexibility on that day, especially those who are working remotely. For employees who have control over their schedules, anecdotal evidence suggests a trend toward less work activity on Fridays.

A structured shift to a four day week is also apparent in school teaching. The pandemic exacerbated teacher shortages, especially in smaller school and rural areas. Like small businesses, many school districts are constrained in the amount of money they can spend on teacher salaries and began to offer a day off as an inducement. At present, 26 states offer some form of a 4DW, predominantly in rural areas. Schools that implement a four-day week see an increase in applications (Fortino, 2024; Walker, 2025; Sparks, 2026) and some reduction in turnover rates (Sparks, 2026).

Local governments are another group that has begun to experiment with both the 32 hour week and a compressed four day week. Like small businesses and school boards, they are less able to raise salaries. Furthermore, the growth of online services for local governments means in-person, on-demand responses are less imperative. The City of Golden, CO had outstanding success with shifting their police department to a 4DW, and experienced increased productivity and reduced resignation rates (Schor 2025). After their trial ended they planned to expand the 4DW schedule to all city employees. San Juan County in Washington has also shifted to a 4DW with no pay reduction in 2023, initially as a cost-saving measure. As in the South Cambridgeshire case, the shift has saved the county roughly $2 million, increased job applications by over 200%, reduced turnover by 28%, and maintained worker productivity.

More generally, in addition to these public sector workers, we anticipate that industries that will lead in adoption prior to national legislation will be those that are disproportionately represented in the 4DW trial population. These include professional services, non-profit organizations, and administration and IT. Additionally, as noted above, we expect more voluntary adoption by small and medium-sized businesses. Factors that influence adoption include high levels of employee burnout, high attrition and unfilled positions and inability to raise wages, which are inter-connected dynamics. Companies that have already achieved highly optimized production processes, are most internationally exposed to low-wage competition, have predominantly male workplaces and tend to have long hours are less likely to adopt this schedule without government regulation. Negotiations surrounding the UAW demand for a 32 hour week will likely be an important barometer of possibility for industries and companies that fit this profile.

AI and the Path to a Four Day Week

The 4DW is also likely to be propelled by the adoption of Artificial Intelligence technology. The introduction of Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT has introduced an x-factor into discussions of future trends in employment and unemployment, productivity, and by extension work schedules. There is a wide range of opinion and research on how disruptive these technologies will be, with some commentators predicting massive job loss and others foreseeing fairly moderate impacts on productivity and employment. The CEO of Anthropic predicted that half of all white-collar entry level jobs would be eliminated by LLMs. While work schedules have not been a prominent part of the debate, and there is almost no research predicting the impact of AI on hours, the 4DW has been a small part of the public conversation, with leading figures such as Bill Gates, Jamie Dimon, and Barack Obama predicting a future 4 or even a 3.5 day workweek.

A study by the Autonomy Institute in the UK (Garcia et al 2023) took a widely-used measure of AI exposure and calculated how productivity growth induced by the use of AI could enable, or "fund," worktime reduction if instead of laying off workers, employers reduced employee hours. They found that within ten years a 32 hour week could be achieved for 35 million workers, or 28% of the workforce. In addition, a total of 71% of all workers (or 128 million) could have at least a 10% (or 4.5 day) workweek over this time period. It seems clear that AI offers the possibility of funding worktime reduction via its productivity-enhancing effects. That leaves the question of how AI dynamics will actually play out.

For decades, economists had optimistic views about how labor-displacing technology would affect employment and incomes. However, recent empirical evidence is less optimistic. The work of Daron Acemoglu and colleagues casts doubt on earlier predictions. In addition to the original job loss and the creation of new jobs, Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo (2019) identify a process of reinstatement, which refers to the development of novel occupations in which labor has a distinct comparative advantage. They find that between 1947 and 1987, displacement and reinstatement effects were roughly equal but since then the US has witnessed high levels of displacement with low levels of reinstatement. Similarly, analysis of online job postings data finds evidence of AI-induced job loss (Acemoglu et al. 2022). Other analysts have found a decline in retail employment, likely due to technological change (Deming, Ong, and Summers 2025). In addition, the use of robots in manufacturing establishments has been shown to result in higher local unemployment

with most of the benefits going to company owners and managers, while workers have experienced negative outcomes (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2020). This more mixed, or even pessimistic view has become much more widespread in the profession for the case of AI.

For the issue of how AI will affect working hours, there are a number of unknown factors which are relevant to the future of working hours. First, how widespread will AI adoption be, and second, how much productivity growth will it lead to. On the first point, the first surveys of LLM adoption in the US are now available. Bick, Blandin and Deming (2025), relying on a series of national online labor market surveys of working age adults conducted in 2024, found that 26% of people use LLMs at work at all. An interesting feature of this data is that adoption rates are higher outside of work–at 33%. A more recent study (Hartley et al 2025) found 49.5% of workers were using LLMs at work by the summer of 2025.

Recent grey literature has identified worker resistance as an important factor in current adoption dynamics (Kyndryl 2025; Veit 2025). According to one survey, almost half of CEOs believe their workers are resistant or openly hostile to AI, and 50% of senior leadership believe that there is a "widespread fear of job displacement which is affecting employee engagement related to AI technology." This may help explain data suggesting that companies are failing to take advantage of AI tools (Challapally et al 2025). Other survey research suggests that 31% of American employees are "actively sabotaging" their company's use of AI tools. However, if the country committed to adopting a four day week in response to AI, it is likely that much of this resistance would decline, and beneficial productivity improvements could be realized and passed on to workers in the form of shorter working hours and also higher wages.

Some studies have found that impacts on productivity and job displacement have been small to date, which is not unexpected, given that uptake of AI has been uneven. A path-breaking study of LLMs published in *Science* examined actual tasks and found that only 1.8% of jobs could have over 50% of their current tasks affected by LLMs. However, these authors estimate that this share will eventually grow to 46% (Eloundou et al. 2024). A Federal Reserve Board of St. Louis study finds that between 2022 and 2025, occupations with the highest estimated exposure to AI experienced the largest increases in unemployment, whereas those with lower estimated AI exposure saw smaller increases (Ozkan and Sullivan 2025). The correlation is higher with actual AI adoption. Similarly, tasks with higher AI exposure have shown reduced labor demand (Hampole et al. 2025). On the other hand, some studies, such as Humlum and Vesterguard (2025) on the Danish labor market, show negligible impacts to date.

A recent study by Anthropic (Anthropic 2026a, 2026b) looked at use of their LLM tool, Claude AI, by industry. They find that 75% of computer programming tasks are completed using AI, high coverage of AI for customer service representatives through API automation, and for data entry keyers about 67% of tasks are automated. They also find that 30% of workers are not exposed to AI at all. They find that occupations with higher observed exposure are projected to grow less through 2034 by the BLS. Workers who are most exposed are more likely to be older, female, more educated, and higher-paid. There appears to be no systematic increase in unemployment for those highly exposed since late 2022; however, they find suggestive evidence that the hiring of younger workers (often in entry-level positions) has slowed in more exposed occupations. Comparing these results with the 4DW trial companies, we find demographic and similarities–

disproportionate rates of females, high educated and white collar occupations, as well as overlap by industry and sector.

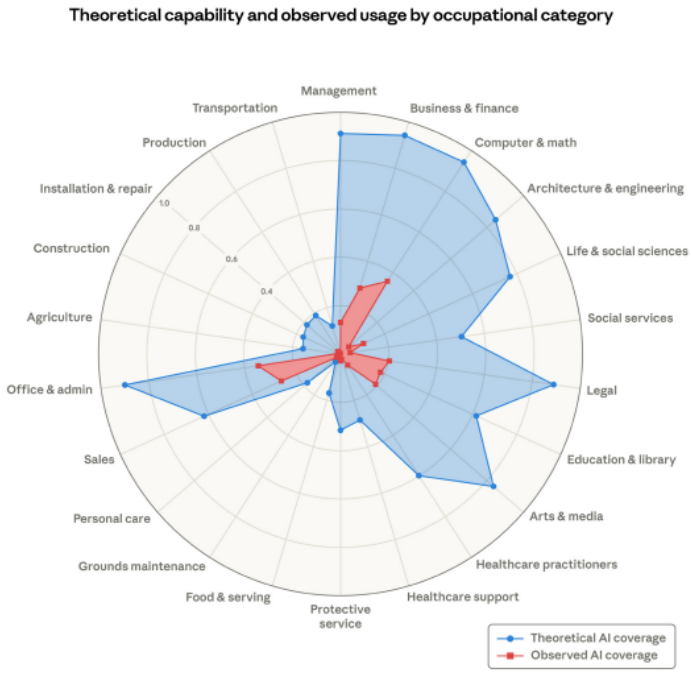

Figure 2: Theoretical capability and observed exposure by occupational category
This figure shows the share of job tasks that LLMs could theoretically perform (blue area) and our own job coverage measure derived from usage data (red area).

The ability of AI to fund hours reductions depends on its impact on productivity trends. Current estimates are uncertain, because they rely on measures of task exposure rather than data on how AI is actually used. Two recent studies suggest that the effects will be somewhat modest. Acemoglu (2025) predicts a rise in total factor productivity of about 0.66% over the next 10 years. In the subsequent decade, gains will be 0.53% annually. Using the same underlying data, Arnon (2025) predicts that AI will increase productivity and GDP by 1.5% by 2035, about 3% by 2055, and 3.7% by 2075. In line with other predictions, this analysis anticipates that occupations in the 80th earnings percentile will be most exposed, with about half of their work, on average, susceptible to AI automation. While these predictions do not support the dystopian future of mass unemployment that some have foreseen, they do represent significant productivity gains, which could be used to fund a transition to a 4DW. Furthermore, these predictions are based on static estimates of tasks, and do not incorporate the potential additional productivity gains available from working time reduction, as discussed above. The combination of a new, labor-saving technology with a four day week could yield major well-being benefits for workers, benefits for families and communities and help businesses transition seamlessly onto this new technology.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Annual Hours of Work

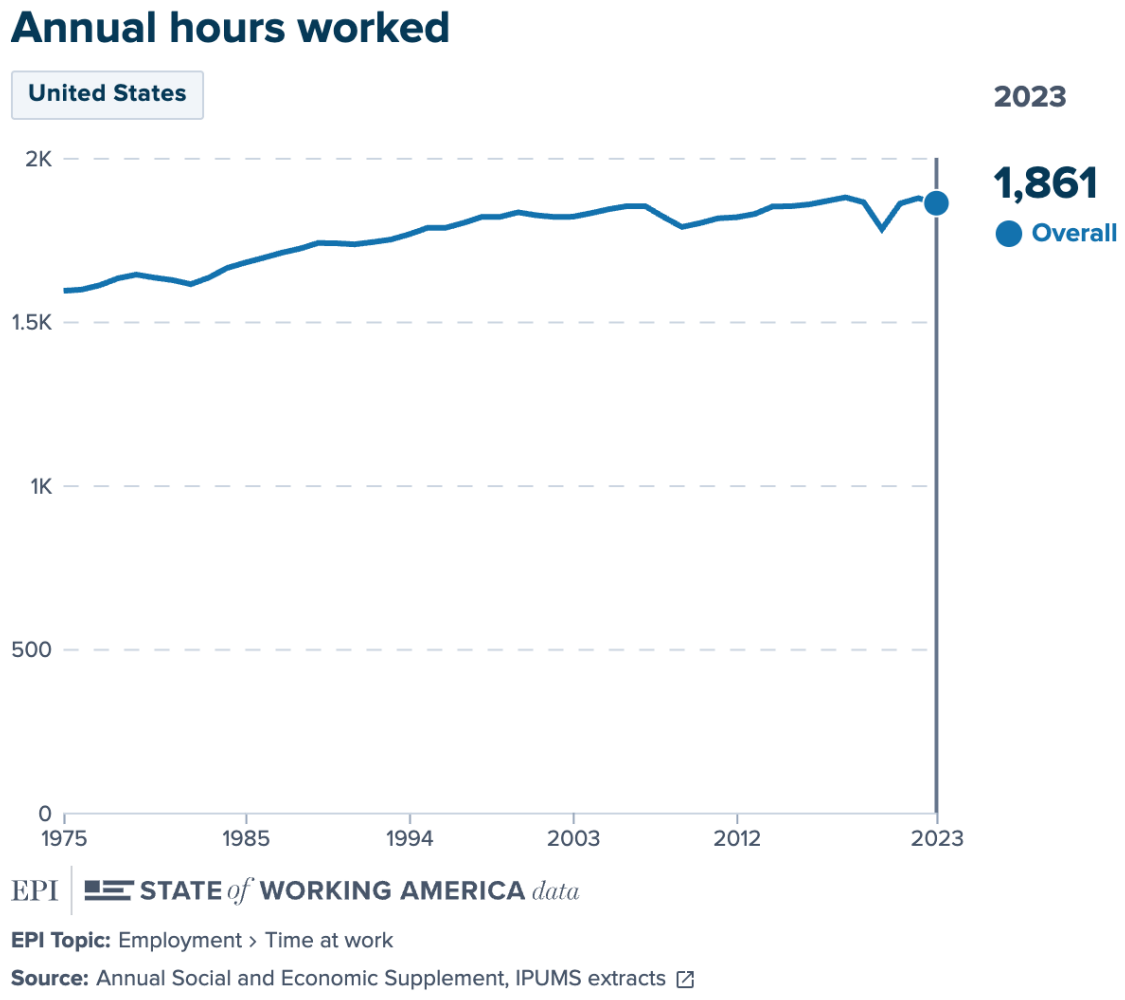
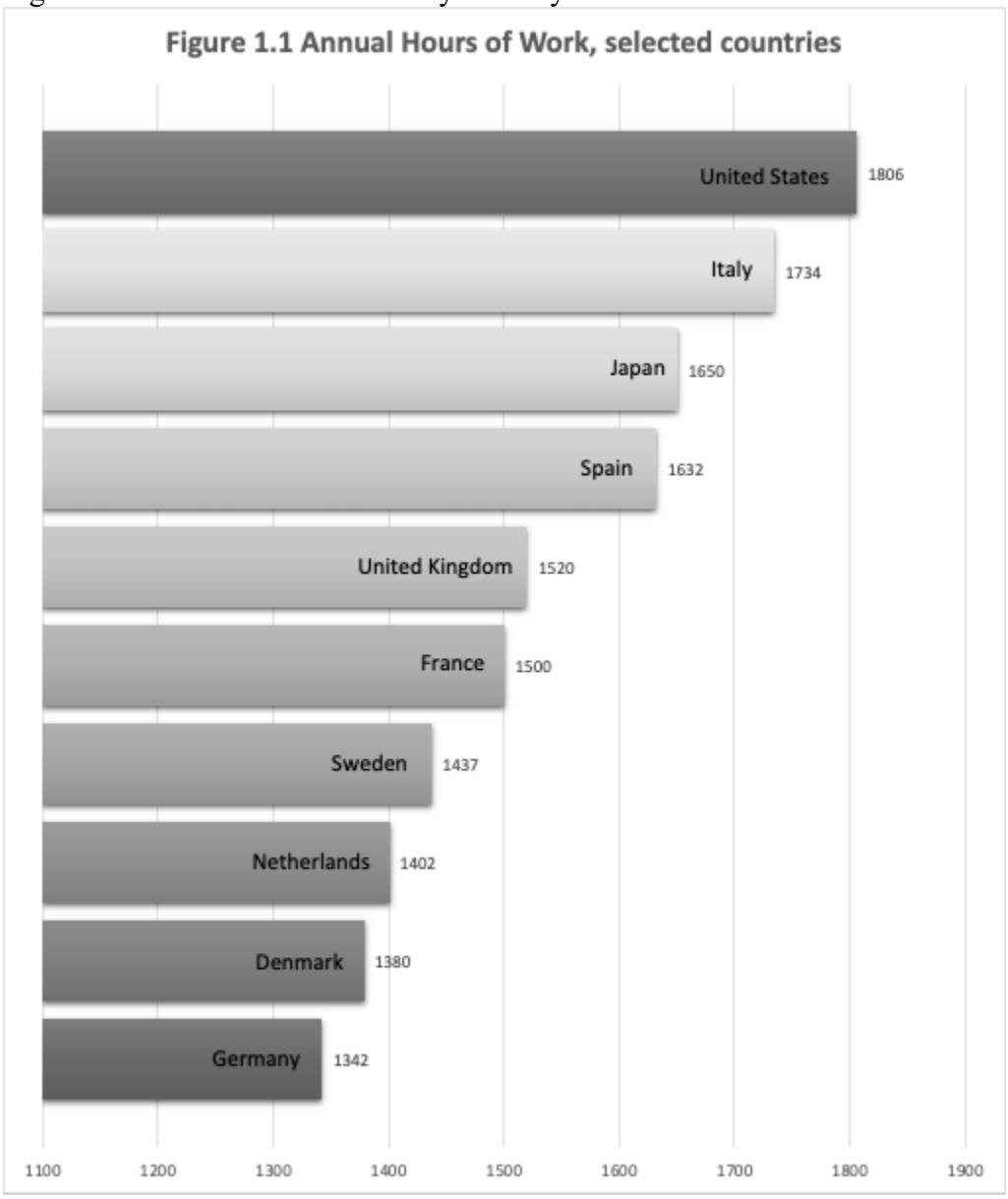


Figure 2. Annual Hours of Work by Country



Note. Average Annual Hours per Worker. 2023. Total Economy Database, The Conference Board.

Table 1. Cohorts of Trial Companies, by Time, Country, and Participation					
	Duration	Main Countries	Number of Participants at baseline	Number of companies	Number of respondents
Cohort I	Feb 2022 – July 2022	Ireland and US	618	16	327

Table 1. Cohorts of Trial Companies, by Time, Country, and Participation					
Cohort II	Apr 2022 – Sept 2022	US and Canada	300	18	187
Cohort III	Jun 2022 – Nov 2022	UK	2548	58	1264
Cohort IV	Aug 2022 – Jan 2023	Australia and New Zealand	758	27	405
Cohort V	Oct 2022 – Mar 2023	US and Canada	698	25	441
Cohort VI	Feb 2023 – July 2023	Mixed Europe and North America	739	13	369
Cohort VII	Mar 2023 – Aug 2023	South Africa	575	33	311
Cohort VIII	Self-paced in 2023 (started in Apr, May, Jun, Aug, and Sept)	US, Canada, and UK	849	18	482
Cohort IX	Oct 2023 – Mar 2024	US and Canada	1264	27	709
Cohort X	Mar 2024 – Sept 2024	Anglophone	981	29	429
		Totals	**9330**	**264**	**4924**
Notes:					

Table 2a. Company Characteristics from 4DW Trials		
Variable	**Categories**	**Percentage**
Country	U.S. and Canada	32%
	Australia and New Zealand	13%
	UK and Ireland	42%
	South Africa	5%
	Other	8%
Industry	Professional services and marketing	45%
	Civil and social services	18%
	Administration and IT	9%
	Other	6%
	Health care	5%
	Education	5%
	Finance and insurance	4%
	Manufacturing and construction	4%
	Retail	3%
Size	1-10	28%

Table 2a. Company Characteristics from 4DW Trials		
Variable	**Categories**	**Percentage**
	11-25	35%
	26-50	17%
	51-100	9%
	101+	11%
In-person vs. Remote	Fully in-person	5%
	Fully remote	25%
	Hybrid	69%
Notes…		

Table 2b. Demographic Characteristics from 4DW Trials		
Variable	**Categories**	**Percentage**
Gender	Male	34%
	Female	64%
	Other/Non-binary	2%
Race	White	72%
	Non-white	28%
Age	18-34	42%
	35-44	29%
	45+	29%
Educational attainment	Below college	27%
	Bachelor's degree	41%
	Postgraduate degree	32%
Notes…		

Table 3. Well-Being Metrics							
	Baseline	Endpoint	Change	Significance	% Decrease	% No change	% Increase
Work stress	3.2	2.9	-0.3	***	37%	48%	15%
Burnout	2.8	2.4	-0.4	***	67%	9%	24%
Job satisfaction	7.0	7.5	0.4	***	25%	29%	46%
Physical health	3.0	3.3	0.2	***	18%	47%	35%
Mental health	2.9	3.3	0.4	***	17%	42%	41%
Anxiety	2.4	2.1	-0.3	***	36%	47%	16%
Positive emotions	3.1	3.5	0.4	***	26%	12%	62%

Table 3. Well-Being Metrics							
	Baseline	Endpoint	Change	Significance	% Decrease	% No change	% Increase
Negative emotions	2.3	2.0	-0.3	***	53%	22%	24%
Work-family balance	2.8	3.5	0.7	***	12%	33%	55%
Work-Life balance	2.9	3.6	0.7	***	11%	33%	56%
Family-to-work conflict	1.5	1.2	-0.4	***	42%	45%	14%
Work-to-family conflict	2.1	1.6	-0.6	***	49%	41%	10%
Life satisfaction	6.7	7.4	0.8	***	20%	28%	52%
Satisfaction with household finances	6.1	6.6	0.5	***	27%	28%	46%
Satisfaction with relationships	7.2	7.7	0.5	***	24%	32%	44%
Satisfaction with time	5.3	7.2	1.9	***	14%	17%	69%
Fatigue	2.7	2.3	-0.4	***	42%	44%	14%
Sleep problems	2.3	2.0	-0.3	***	38%	46%	16%
Sleep hours	6.7	6.9	0.2	***	18%	49%	33%
Exercise frequency	2.4	2.7	0.3	***	19%	50%	32%

Notes: The measures are defined as follows, in order: frequency of work stress over the past four weeks, never to all the time (1-5); 7 items: exhaustion, frustration, “burnt out” from work, etc. never to always (1-5) over the past four week; not satisfied at all to completely satisfied (0-10); self-rated, poor to excellent in US and very bad to very good in Irish (1-5); self-rated, poor to excellent in US and very bad to very good in Irish (1-5); never to daily (1-4); 5 items: feeling cheerful, vigorous, interested, etc., scale of 1-5; 3 items: downhearted, lonely, tense, 1-5; ability to combine paid work with care responsibilities: very difficult to very easy (1-5); ability to combine paid work with social life: very difficult to very easy (1-5); difficulty concentrating on work due to family responsibilities: never to several times a week (0-3); too tired from work to do household jobs: never to several times a week (0-3); not satisfied at all to completely satisfied (0-10); not satisfied at all to completely satisfied (0-10); not satisfied at all to completely satisfied (0-10); not satisfied at all to completely satisfied (0-10) with the amount of time you have to do the things you like doing; overall fatigue, never to daily (1-4); insomnia or sleep difficulties, never to daily (1-4); number of hours slept per day; times per week, taking the mean of five categories, 0, (1-2)1.5, (3-4)3.5, (5-6)5.5, (7+)7.

Table 4a. Company Metrics		
	Baseline	Endpoint
New hire rate (per 100	3.2	2.6

Table 4a. Company Metrics		
	Baseline	Endpoint
employees per month)		
Sick and personal days (per employee per month)	1.0	0.8
Resignation rate (per 100 employees per month)	1.8	1.4
Notes:		

Table 4b. Company Metrics - Revenue					
	Weighted Change	Unweighted Change	% Increased	% No Change	% Decreased
Revenue (from start to end of trial)	9.8%	19.8%	55%	2%	43%
Notes:					

Figure 3 on Hours and Productivity Correlation

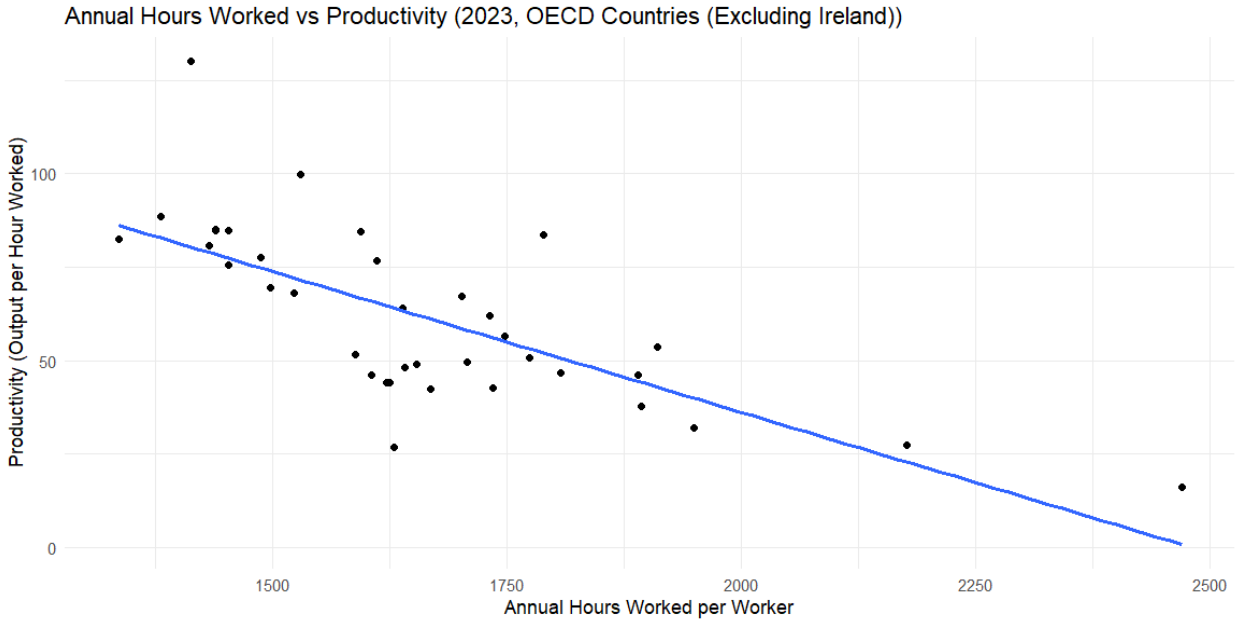


Table 5. Self-reported productivity and work intensity

	Baseline	Ending Point	Change	Significance	% Decrease	% No change	% Increase
Work smart	3.6	3.8	0.2	***	31%	20%	49%
Pace of work (self-rated)	7.4	7.5	0.2	***	30%	30%	40%
Workload (self-rated)	7.5	7.6	0.1		33%	31%	36%
Work intensity (self-rated)	7.3	7.4	0.1	+	33%	30%	37%
Productivity at work	7.3	8.0	0.7	***	16%	32%	52%
Current work ability	7.0	7.8	0.8	***	20%	26%	54%

Notes: The measures are defined as follows, in order: low to high (1-5) based on 4 items: prioritize tasks, clarify job responsibilities, improve efficiency, and question the criticality of tasks; very low to very high (0-10); very low to very high (0-10); very low to very high (0-10); self-rated, the least to the most productive (0-10); compared with lifetime best, worst to best (0-10).

Table 6. Willingness to Pay

Pay Increase Required	Fraction of Respondents
Less than 10% pay	4.9%
10-25%	45.1%
26-50%	27.7%
50%+	9.1%
No amount of money	13.2%

Figure 4. Log Wages by Firm Size

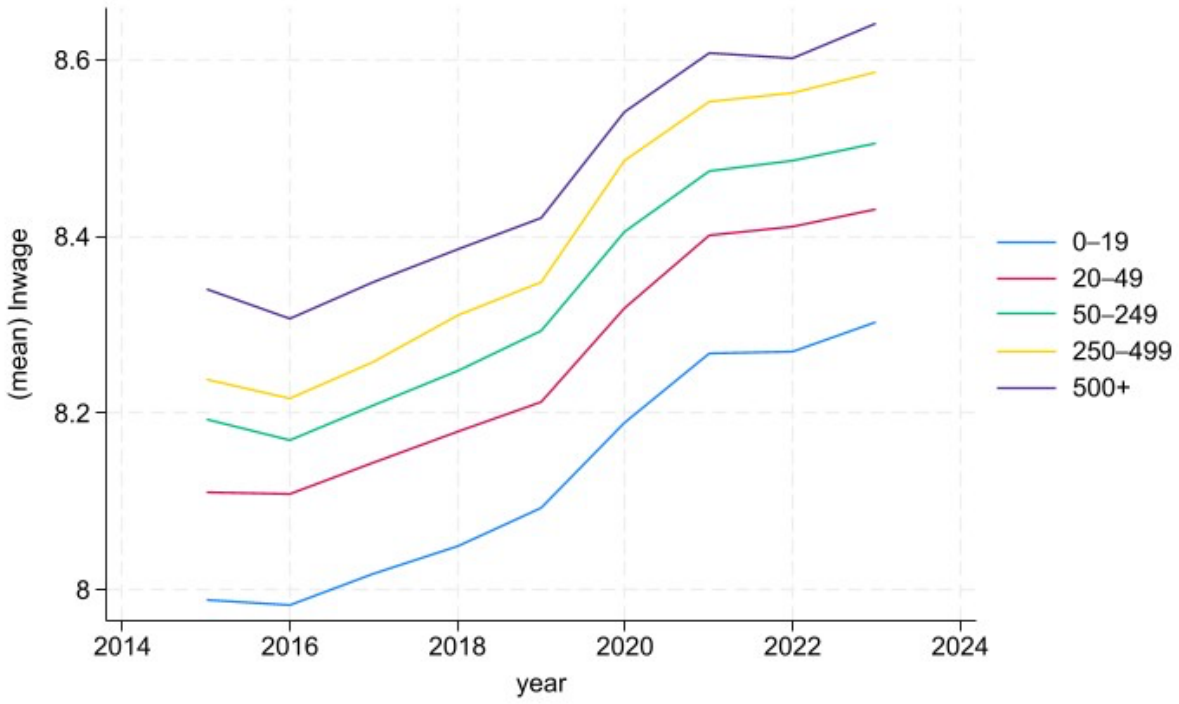


Figure 5. Unfilled positions by industry

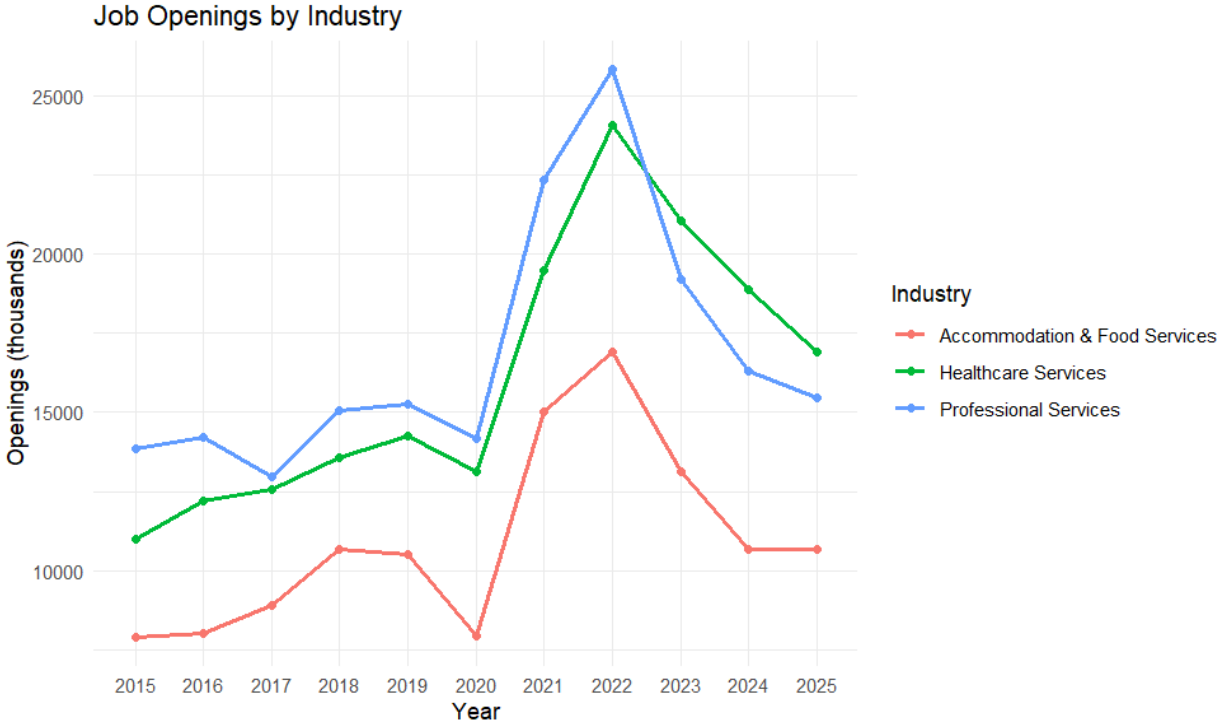


Figure 6. Quit Levels by Industry

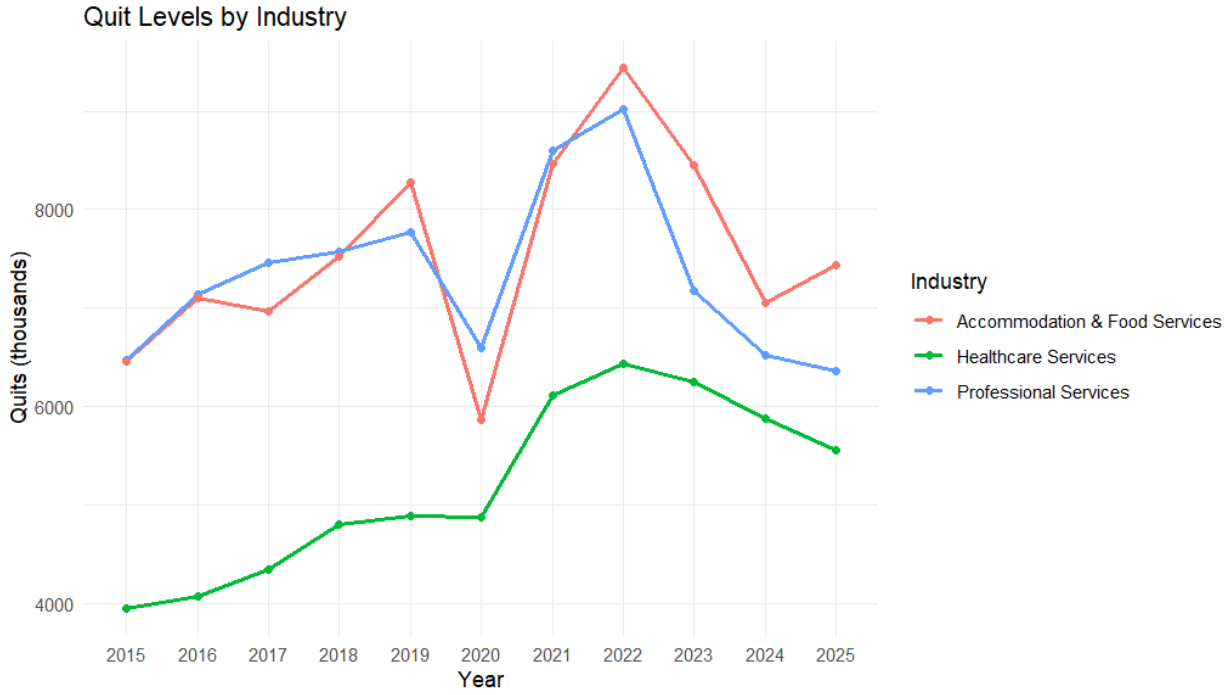
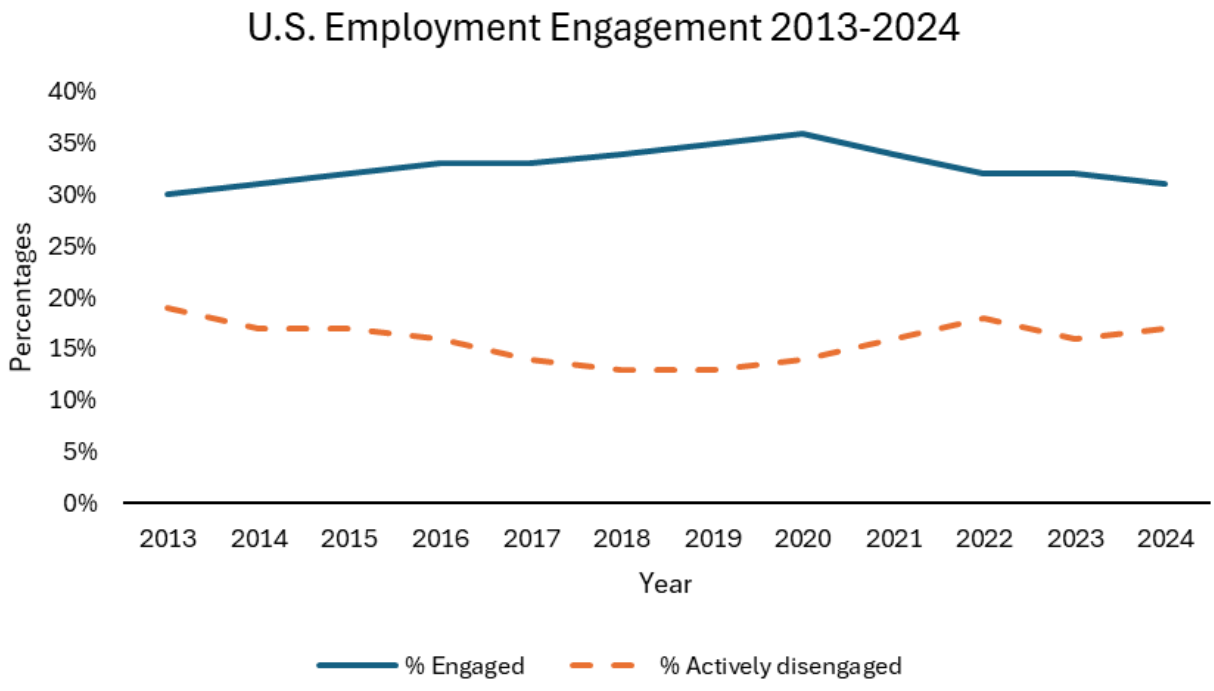



Figure 7. US Employment Engagement and Disengagement 2013-2024