

Fix America's Workaholic Culture: Make Every Weekend Three Days Long



By Alex Berezow, PhD — November 14, 2019



Credit: Dennis Jarvis/Wikipedia [1]

One of the things I don't understand about modern society is the sheer number of employers who insist on forcing workers to show up in an office. I'm thoroughly unproductive in an office.

Why? Because the day usually goes like this: Show up at 9 a.m. Fight sleepy eyes by wandering down to a coffee shop and then checking email until 10 a.m. Joke around with colleagues for a bit. Sit down and do some work. After a few hours, somebody bugs me to eat lunch. Come back around 2 p.m. Work for a couple more hours, then leave. And that's on a good day. On a bad day, we have a meeting.

How much actual work does the average person get done in an 8-hour workday in the office? Three hours? Four hours? It's certainly not eight. Worse, workers have to commute to and from the office, which may waste another hour or two of their precious time.

The reality is in 2019, a lot of "office work" can be done remotely because we have this thing called the internet. Why aren't more employers using it? Remote workers are likelier to be happy workers, and happier workers are more productive. That isn't just hypothetical. Microsoft Japan just proved it.

Three-Day Weekends Increase Worker Productivity by 40%

Japan is notorious for having a workaholic culture, far worse even than the United States. It is not uncommon for people to put in [60-hour weeks](#) [2]. The culture is so extreme, that there are photos of businesspeople sleeping on the street. They aren't homeless; they're just tired from working so hard.²

So, Microsoft Japan decided to try an experiment: Three-day weekends, every weekend. It might be reasonable to assume that productivity would fall in proportion to the number of hours lost, so a 20% drop. But that's not what happened. Microsoft observed a 40% increase in productivity.

Note that this increase in productivity is not simply due to completing the same amount of work in less time. The workers actually did *more* work in less time.³ Not only did productivity increase, but [according](#) [3] to NPR, meetings were cut from 60 minutes to 30 minutes, workers printed 60% fewer pages, and electricity costs fell 23%. Everybody wins.

What about those notoriously hard-working Germans? Well, they don't work that hard. Germans work about 1,356 hours per year compared to Americans' 1,780 hours. Yet, as measured by GDP per hour, the [Germans are more productive](#) [4].⁴

Time to Fix America's Workaholic Culture

When I was in grad school, one of my advisors told me that he worked 80 hours per week when he was in school. That was partly a humblebrag and partly meant to suggest to me, "Aren't you glad that I don't make you do that?"

Well, research suggests that he would have increased his productivity by reducing his hours and enjoying life. I guess the joke's on him.

Notes

(1) Most of the ACSH team works remotely.

(2) One wonders if this is partially to blame for some other problems in Japanese culture. Compared to the U.S., [Japan's population is shrinking](#) [5] and, compared to the U.S., it has a higher suicide rate and [fewer people having sex](#) [6].

(3) To see how, consider the following example. If an office produces 100 gizmos in a 5-day workweek, that is 20 gizmos per day. If an office produces 100 gizmos in a 4-day workweek, that is 25 gizmos per day. But 25 gizmos is only a 25% increase over 20 gizmos, which means the Microsoft team did even better than that. In our example, a 40% increase in productivity would translate to 28 gizmos per day.

(4) See chart.

Where Labor Productivity Is Highest

[7] You will find more infographics at [Statista](#) [8]

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Links

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office#/media/File:Romania-1578_-_Office_of_the_King_\(7625247110\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office#/media/File:Romania-1578_-_Office_of_the_King_(7625247110).jpg)

[2] https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/7xn5db/photos-of-japans-office-workers-during-their-60-hour-weeks

[3] <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/04/776163853/microsoft-japan-says-4-day-workweek-boosted-workers-productivity-by-40>

[4] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/02/05/where-labor-productivity-is-highest-infographic/#3d1af2fcea44>

[5] <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/21/679103541/japans-population-is-in-rapid-decline>

[6] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/japan-sex-problem-demographic-time-bomb-birth-rates-sex-robots-fertility-crisis-virgins-romance-porn-a7831041.html>

[7] <https://www.statista.com/chart/16905/gdp-per-hour-worked-across-the-total-economy/>

[8] <https://www.statista.com/chartoftheday/>