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COMMENTARY

Implications of Keynes' prediction for low-wage workers

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Introduction

Kaplan et al. (2025) describe the negative impacts associated with Keynes' (1930) prediction of a 15-hour workweek: a loss of the sense of purpose and flow, a lack of productivity, and worsening health and well-being. In this commentary, I expand on the implications of this change for non-white-collar workers, whose occupations are already understudied and often overlooked. We must acknowledge how a change to the standard workweek may only benefit workers currently employed full time, at a regular 40-hour-a-week, 9–5 job in wealthier, developed countries, following assumptions made by the focal article. Below, I describe additional implications of these changes for workers whose current pay structures are beholden to the current 40-hour workweek: considerable labor demand shifts and the resulting risk of work overload, the detrimental restructuring of tipped and piecework workers, and the downfall of small businesses that are tailored to the schedule of white-collar workers.

Implications for entertainment and demand-based jobs

Keynes' arguments suggest that the time in people's lives that was formerly filled with work will now be filled with other activities that are equally as fulfilling as work would be. For instance, if a working parent now only works 2 days a week, the family has much more time to socialize, go on vacation, engage in hobbies, etc. On the one hand, nonprofit organizations may finally have enough volunteers for their efforts. On the other hand, huge consequences may fall onto low-wage workers in more entertainment-based, hospitality, and tourism industries that comprise more than 15 million workers in the United States (New American Economy, 2022). Suddenly, the theme park employee is scheduled on the "slow days," which aren't so slow anymore. The craft store associate can't keep up with the extra rush of new hobbyists, and the store manager now has much more pressure to maintain staffing and product orders. The minimum-wage worker at the movie theater now has twice as much popcorn to sweep off the floors. Minimum-wage workers are now working harder for the same hourly pay, without the promise of a shortened workweek. Although it is possible that the passage of time will help to restore equilibrium within this labor sector, the job insecurity they face while such changes are underway is in itself likely to harm employee well-being (Shoss, 2017). We do not yet understand the full extent of the impact these disparities may have on work climate and worker well-being, but for these workers facing role overload, seeing others enjoy their new 2-day workweek may be enough to inspire feelings of resentment and counterproductive work behaviors.

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Implications for un-salaried workers

Hourly workers currently following a 9–5 schedule may also be negatively impacted by the reduced workweek due to their pay being tied to the number of hours they work. Although salaried workers may benefit from adjusting to a shorter working day, many other workers will have to face significant restructuring of their pay systems to experience similar benefits. Workers who make bonuses through commissions may also face a considerable loss of income if they are not still available from 9 to 5. Additionally, workers who may be paid per piece, or through productivity, will face a huge loss if their work hours are constricted over time. If they are relying on this income, they will be forced to continue working a 9–5 (or longer) while watching others go home early. This could encourage feelings of injustice, which may in turn support counterproductive work behaviors and increased occupational stress (Fox et al., 2001). Unfortunately, the only way to combat these types of issues is a series of significant societal, cultural, and organizational shifts, which would take considerable time while also leaving many workers behind.

Implications for businesses relying on the 9–5

Finally, some small businesses may experience a crisis due to the loss of customers that they enjoyed due to the current work system, similar to the distinct drop in business that local dry-cleaning organizations have faced in response to the current work-from-home trend (Kharif & Yang, 2020). Places that rely on the white-collar worker's typical 9–5 schedule may be unable to sustain their practice if their typical customer no longer works every weekday or is only working a few hours a week. For instance, organizations such as daycare centers, Uber and other ride-sharing options, gas stations, and potentially even fast food/coffee shops may lose a significant portion of their business if their white-collar clientele requires their services less often. Theoretically, these businesses would also shorten their working hours to save on labor costs, but that doesn't stop the rent and supply chain prices from increasing. In many cases, these are small, local businesses that are especially vulnerable to such profit loss. This could be hugely detrimental to the economy, with an estimated 44% of economic profit generation in the United States derived from the activity of small businesses (Office of Advocacy, 2019).

Conclusion

Ultimately, low-wage workers will feel the greatest negative impact of a change to a shorter workweek, whereas salaried workers with standard work schedules will benefit. Automation and technological advancements are making major changes to the structure of work (Sackett et al., 2024), but recent observations suggest that this, too, creates disproportionate repercussions for low-wage workers (Acemoglu & Restrepro, 2022). Ultimately, although time may mitigate the acute consequences of the shift in work structure for these workers, the damage to the workers' trust in themselves and their industry may be irreversible. Additionally, history suggests that even with shifts in demand, the low-wage employees are still overlooked—since 2009, the federal minimum wage has remained at $7.25 an hour (or $2.13 an hour for tipped workers) despite wide variations in industry demand (Payne-Patterson & Maye, 2023). This may suggest that workplace issues prevalent today will only worsen at the cost of workers who are most vulnerable to these changes.

Importantly, none of this is meant to argue in support for a 40-hour workweek remaining standard—especially not if there is strong evidence that a shorter workweek improves work–life balance. However, the costs for low-wage and non-white-collar workers must be fully considered. Restructuring of pay systems, work attitudes, norms, and even minimum-wage laws will likely be necessary in conjunction with further technological advancements and occupational well-being efforts to see as significant of a change as Keynes envisioned. Industrial-organizational

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psychologists should be sure to consider these potential ramifications. We must continue working to understand the ways that major shifts to work systems will impact not only those whose socioeconomic status resembles ours, but also those more vulnerable workers for whom our consideration and advocacy could make a big difference.

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