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COMMENTARY

The power of flexibility

Allison Halpin, Anna Meerson, Cailey Schmitt, and Khang Doan

Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, USA
Corresponding author: Cailey Schmitt; Email: caileyschmitt@gmail.com

Introduction

In this commentary, we expand on Kaplan's (2025) discussion by addressing how organizations can access the benefits that Keynes predicted would occur via a 3-day work week without needing to change standard work week hours at all: adopting policies like those in European countries that better support employee well-being. First, we describe employee benefits and flexible work arrangements currently in practice in other countries that could be used to support an emphasis on well-being and leisure in the United States. Then we address differences between the U.S. and those countries to acknowledge cultural nuances that are likely to influence the adoption of these supportive policies. We also analyze flexibility and work–life balance by recognizing the benefits it offers employees and how changes to the nature of work have affected traditional work weeks. Finally, we address flexibility stigma and how this might impact employee decisions regarding time off and remote work. Overall, we believe that although a shift to a 3-day work week would indeed be revolutionary, we may not need to make such a drastic shift (and face unknowable negative consequences) to enjoy the benefits of work–life balance and leisure.

Workplace benefits for flexibility and work–life balance

Following Keynes and Kaplan's suggestions, instigating societal changes in working laws and patterns can allow for more work–life balance and flexibility. A core difference between the corporations in the United States and other developed countries is the workplace benefits offered, specifically, the number of paid time off days a company provides for employees. Multiple factors go into the amount of time a worker can take off from work such as seniority and position. However, in general workers in the U.S. have fewer days off than in other developed countries such as France and Germany. These counties have more days off in almost every category, more vacation days, more paid sick leave, longer parental leave, and more flexibility with schedules, allowing for more work–life balance (Davison & Blackburn, 2023). Some of these policies such as vacation days are a cultural component supported by corporations. Other aspects such as paid sick leave (short and long term) are government mandated (Heyman et al., 2010). This government support helps ensure employees have the opportunity and flexibility to stay at home if needed, whereas in countries like the U.S. with no official paid sick leave policies, employees are left with little flexibility and choice when they are unwell. Not every corporation in the U.S. guarantees paid sick leave; it is estimated that at least 40% of the private sector workforce does not have paid sick leave (Heyman et al., 2010). This is forcing workers to show up to work or not get paid. If this benefit was provided, workers might feel like they have more control and flexibility over their work. These policies are just examples of policy changes that would allow for more freedom of work schedule and encourage a work–life balance by ensuring employees have the security and

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resources to have time away from work. This paid time off benefits the employees' well-being while also helping the company by improving job satisfaction and productivity (Davison & Blackburn, 2023). This perspective suggests that the work weeks do not need to be reduced to 15 hours as predicted by Keynes, but the U.S. could adopt more policies and work benefits that allow for more freedom and work–life balance without jeopardizing the organization.

Differing culture and economic climate

There are some key cultural and economic differences between the U.S. and other countries with more of a balanced and flexible work schedule that might make these types of workplace changes difficult to adopt. Economic climate significantly contributes to the disparity in benefits and work–life balance between working classes. A key aspect of this difference can be seen in the varying tax rates between the U.S. and European countries. Consumption tax rates in Europe vary from 15% to 24% compared to the U.S. much lower 7.5% rate (Prescott, 2004). This suggests that people spend more when taxes are lower, which aligns with the culture of consumerism in the U.S. This could also promote the need for people to work more to spend more. Another example is the European Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance system, which varies from 22% to 33% compared to 10% in the U.S. (Prescott, 2004). Because of the much lower retirement benefits, individuals in the U.S. feel pressure to work more and retire later to maximize social security benefits.

Culture also plays a huge role in the workforce dynamic as well, with different levels of meaning and identity being tied to one's work across cultures. For instance, in U.S. culture, displaying one's full schedule and lack of leisure time portrays an image of competence, ambition, and desire in the job market (Bellezza et al., 2017). The reverse exists in European countries. For example, Italians view working more as a necessity or forced by circumstances. Whereas many Americans value being so busy that there is no leisure time, many Western Europeans view lack of leisure time as a lack of important choice in one's life (Bellezza, 2017). When job hunting, flexibility and work–life balance are priorities. It would then be reasonable to assume that because workers value leisure time, organizations would have to consider policies and worker benefits trending towards that sentiment. The U.S. seems to want and need longer working hours, which does not stimulate organizations to change their policies.

Stimulating organizations to change their policies seems to be a higher priority in Europe than the United States. Union coverage does not exceed 20% in the U.S. compared with over 80% in major European countries like Germany, France, and Sweden (Alesina et. al., 2005). This is in part due to historical differences in the labor market. In France, for instance, unemployment rates rose sharply in the 1960s to 1970s, leading to unions pursuing policy to reduce working hours while keeping wages the same (Alesina et. al., 2005). The belief was that because the total amount of work performed is a fixed amount, sharing it with more individuals would help increase employment while keeping workers happy (Alesina et. al., 2005). This mentality resonated though most of Europe, and unions across the continent used it as their core message. As mentioned above, European unions also advocate for generous welfare systems (i.e. public pension schemes) and early retirement policies (Alesina et. al., 2005). These factors led European countries toward the same view: less work, more leisure.

Given these cultural and economic climate differences, it makes sense that there may be no one-size-fits-all approach. Different cultures may benefit from different policies, and European practices might not necessarily translate to the U.S. in a way that mimics their impact in Europe. So, the question arises: If Americans continue to favor long working hours, should we then focus on enhancing flexibility?

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An analysis on flexibility in the workplace

The effects of flexible work options and working time in relation to productivity have been widely studied for many years. With recent changes to the workplace, we have seen an increase in flexible work options such as hybrid work, remote work, and self-determined hours. A study on flexibility in the workplace found that up to "84 percent of workers indicated that flexible work options are 'important' to them" (Work-Family Development, 2006 as cited in Golden, 2012). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, this statistic has likely changed as more companies have begun to offer flexible work options. Studies have shown that companies that utilize flextime work options seem to have increased productivity and employee happiness as employees can have more time for life outside of work and can schedule their days to accommodate for other responsibilities such as personal or family matters (Golden, 2012). Five-day work weeks are made easier by flexible work benefits such as remote work, reduced commute times, and access to AI. Employees are able to retain full-time employee benefits within the comfort of their homes while better managing their work–life balance.

However, although studies have shown positive impacts associated with flexible work options, many companies and individuals still choose to follow a more traditional work structure. From an individual standpoint, this may be because many individuals perceive the amount of time spent working to be related to success and work accomplishment. Other individuals may choose more traditional hours to reduce spillover or utilize in-person resources such as technology and direct access to supervisors, or their job may not allow for flexible work options due to the type of work. Technology has been an important part of any person's job, with it constantly being innovated, tools like AI are being utilized more at work. Working 5 days a week is now easier without the burden of simple issues taking time and stress to resolve like it used to allowing to maintain a traditional work schedule. Educating companies on the positive success of flexible work options and implementing the use of more technology and AI may not lead to a complete reduction in hours, as Keynes predicted to be 15 hours per week, but it can aid in allowing employees to have more time for life outside of work or a reduction in stress related to work hours not accommodating responsibilities outside of work.

Challenges with implementing flexibility in the workplace

The possibility of flexible work options sounds like a great solution for work–life balance and leisure for U.S. employees. However, there are many reasons why employees may refrain from seeking out flexible work options or using the ones that exist within their organization. One of the reasons employees are discouraged from seeking out flexible schedules and leave is the "flexibility stigma," or the negative social and normative pressures associating leave use (Perrigino et al., 2018). When employees use flexible work options and take more time off, they may be perceived as a less reliable worker (Bornstein, 2013). This bias can cause employees to avoid and turn down flexible work options so they won't be judged negatively by their peers. The flexibility stigma also brings up an important conversation that flexible work options can impact employees differently based on gender and class (Bornstein, 2013). In a country like the US, where your career is highly valued and most people are expected to work full time, the flexibility stigma could have a huge impact on whether employees utilize flexible work options. It is also important to consider the positive and negative consequences of remote or hybrid work environments, also known as the "telecommuting paradox" (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). This paradox points out possible benefits of remote work for employees such as more work–life balance and lower stress, and the negative impact it can also have on work relationships and career advancement (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). This paradox is important to consider at an employee level because it points out that the effects are never one sided. By using flexible work options, employees are missing out on certain aspects of the traditional work

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schedule such as workplace relationships and collaboration in favor of more autonomy and flexibility.

Conclusion

Overall, this commentary focused on details briefly touched on in Kaplan discussion. We explored the differences in work between the U.S. and European countries to identify overseen differences in culture and policies. Despite the nature of some jobs, for example workplace environments not allowing for workplace flexibility, and negative stigmas associated with flexibility, we believe that many workplaces could benefit from flexible work solutions such as more time off benefits, having the option to work from home, and using advanced technology such as AI to handle easier tasks, to improve work–life balance and employee happiness.

Competing interests. We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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