






July 22, 2014, 7:04 a.m. EDT

A shorter workweek may make you a better worker

Billionaire Carlos Slim joins a long-running debate on the best work schedule

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Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim would like to put you on a 3-day workweek.

Working a shorter week would likely make most people feel happier and even more productive, experts say. But research suggests it may also help boost employment rates.

Mexican telecom billionaire Carlos Slim—the second-richest person in the world after Bill Gates—recently advocated a shorter workweek for the world’s corporate clock-watchers. “With three work days a week, we would have more time to relax, for quality of life,” Slim told a business conference in Asuncion, Paraguay, in remarks reported Monday by the Financial Times. Having four days off would also be a business opportunity for some, in that it would generate new leisure activities, he said.

But don’t go slacking just yet. Slim says people should work 10 or 11 hours a day in those three days. He also says retirement ages should rise to 70 or 75.

Still, Slim may be on to something with his idea, according to some experts. In fact, he’s just the latest to make headlines in a long-running debate on the length of the ideal workweek.

“Burnout is huge predictor of loss of productivity,” says Rana Florida, CEO of consulting and research company Creative Class Group and author of “Upgrade: Taking Your Life and Work from Ordinary to Extraordinary.” The 40-hour workweek in the U.S. is not some “magical number” for productivity, she says. “You don’t have to chain people to their desk.”

Shorter working hours make sense in particular for people in highly stressful jobs like emergency first responders, and those in creative fields, Florida says.

Most other countries have shorter workweeks than the U.S., according to recent analysis from the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#). And workplace productivity doesn’t increase with hours worked, [the OECD concluded](#). Workers in Greece clock 2,034 hours a year versus 1,397 in Germany, for example, but the latter’s productivity is 70% higher.

“Quality of life, stress reduction, and engagement in our work increase with shorter workweeks,” says Steve Langerud, a workplace consultant based in Grinnell, Iowa. That said, if income dropped with hours worked, shorter workweeks could create problems. The average household disposable income in Germany is also a lot higher (\$30,721 a year) than Greece (\$19,095).

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Countries with the largest reduction in work hours had the largest increase in employment rates since the Great Recession, says Dean Baker, co-director of the left-of-center Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. “Countries like Germany stand out,” he says. “It’s been remarkably successful.” The unemployment rate in Germany (5.2%) is down more than 4 percentage points since before the 2008 recession, while the U.S. unemployment rate (6.1%) is still more than 1.5 percentage points higher than it was before the recession.

Cutting the workweek roughly in half could help to address overwork, unemployment, overconsumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to simply to enjoy life, according to a report from the London-based, left-of-center think tank New Economics Foundation. “The deputy mayor of Gothenburg [in Sweden] is trialing a 30-hour week for some of his staff because he thinks that’s about the limit for productive time,” says Anna Coote, head of social policy at NEF.

A shorter workweek doesn't necessarily lead to happier employees, however. Long working hours might not be as negatively related to worker well-being as predicted by other studies, according to a study called ["Work Shorter, Be Happier?"](#) published last year in the Journal of Happiness Studies. While people welcomed the reduction in working hours, those reductions had no impact on job and life satisfaction, researcher Robert Rudolf, assistant professor in the Division of International Studies at Korea University, found.

Five-day workweeks may lead to exhaustion on Mondays and coasting on Fridays, but that's more likely if you don't like your job or feel engaged with your work, or if you don't believe that it has some higher purpose, says Rusty Rueff, career and workplace expert at career site Glassdoor. "We've all been in places where we've pulled all-nighters and we're going back to the pizza box for the second time and the pizza's cold," he says. "You sort of hate that you're there, but at the same time there's nowhere else you'd rather be."