The 4-day work-week: the new leisure society?

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Abstract

Current campaigns for a four-day, 32-hour standard working week to replace the five-day, 40-hour model have attracted the attention of employers, trade unions, political parties, governments and the communications media but, seemingly, not of leisure scholars. This is in contrast to the leisure society concept of the 1960s/1970s, some versions of which anticipated a 30-hour working week. This paper examines the 4-day work-week proposition from a leisure point of view. It summarises: some of the antecedent twentieth century calls for shorter working weeks; the twenty-first century advocacy literature for the 4-day week; and the growing list of live trials of the concept. An analysis is offered of the goals of the 4-day week proposition and its proponents' response to anticipated opposition. It is concluded that, in the interests of social relevance, there is a role for leisure scholars to play in critically evaluating the 4-day work-week proposition, in general and in regard to its implications for leisure.

Introduction

The idea of a possible future 'society of leisure' was current in Western industrial countries in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the trend towards a shorter work-week stalled in the last third of the twentieth century and the leisure society prospect faded from view. It was even claimed that working hours had increased (Schor, 1991), particularly in the USA, although this was challenged (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Recently, however, proposals for a 4-day, 32-hour work-week have emerged, promoted by enthusiasts and based on a number of trials. Attention has been heightened by responses to the disruptions and innovations to working arrangements arising from the 2020-22 COVID-19 pandemic. Could the 4-day week be seen as a modern version of the leisure society – perhaps destined to be similarly evanescent?

The leisure society was only loosely defined, if at all, by its original proponents. While some commentators suggested that the concept implied a *workless* future, the typical vision was of a modest *work-reduced* future involving a full-time work-week of about 30 hours, typically projected for the year 2000 (Veal, 2019, p.128). This is close to the 32-hours of the currently proposed 4-day week. The two concepts therefore offer similar work-leisure scenarios. However, while a few exponents of the leisure society idea anticipated a hard-fought campaign, most seemed to expect it would emerge as a result of the continued operation of the same technological, economic and industrial processes which had delivered work-time reductions in the first two thirds of the twentieth century. The focus of leisure studies scholars was therefore not on the underlying processes themselves but on their effects in bringing about the 'growth of leisure'. By contrast, the 4-day week is being campaigned for by enthusiasts who emphasise workplace reform processes and broad work-life issues, giving relatively little attention to likely leisure outcomes.

Leisure scholars often reflect on the need to engage with wider social debates (e.g., Shaw, 2000; Roberts, 2021), but it is notable that the 4-day week has not, to date, attracted such engagement. This may be due to the speculative nature of the proposition, although it is arguably no more speculative than the leisure society idea. Despite the speculative nature of the latter, critical leisure theorists were nevertheless active in critiquing it from the 1980s onwards (Veal, 2013), but no comparable appraisal has been forthcoming in the case of the 4-day week. Arguably, the neglect seems likely to be due to the general decline of interest among leisure scholars in the work-leisure nexus (see Roberts, 2018; Veal, 2020). The

question nevertheless arises as to whether greater engagement is merited and, if so, in what form. The purpose of this paper is to address this challenge. It involves four main parts: an historical examination of proposals for reductions in working hours; an overview of the recent literature on the 4-day work-week idea and its leisure content and/or links; discussion of a number of general themes and issues arising from the 4-day week proposition; and an examination of implications for leisure and leisure studies.

In this paper, following Bird (2010, p.1063), the current 'standard' full-time paid work-week of five 8-hour days is referred to as a *5/40 week*; the proposed 4-day week, comprising four 8-hour work-days is referred to as a *4/32 week* or just *4/32*. A work-week of four 10-hour days, sometimes termed a 'compressed' week, is referred to as a *4/40 week*. Unless otherwise stated, the proposed innovatory models assume no loss of weekly wages on the part of workers.

While the demands of unpaid work demand attention in any analysis of time use, the main focus of the paper is on paid work in the formal economy because this is the focus of the 4/32 week debate (and it was, of course, the assumed context of the leisure society). Furthermore, while part-time working is a significant feature of the labour market, the focus here is on the 'full-time work-week' since this still accounts for some 80% of the labour force (OECD, nd). This does not of course preclude consideration of part-time work in further, more detailed, analyses.

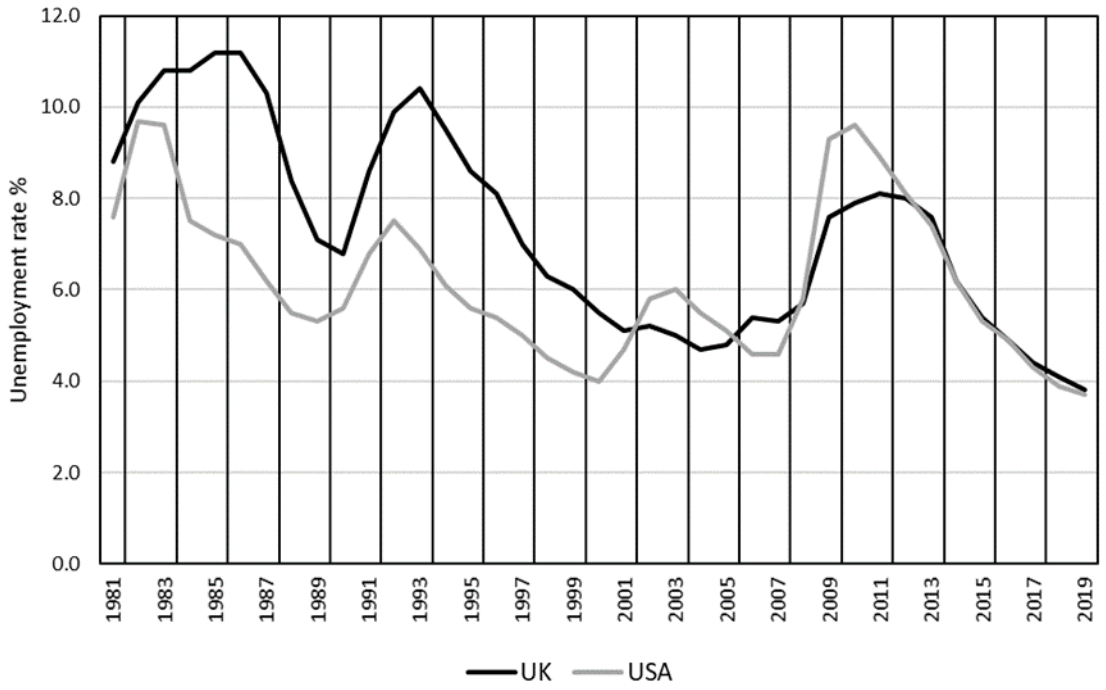
History of proposals for reductions in working hours

The campaign for a 4/32 week can be seen as the latest version of a long tradition of campaigns to reduce working hours in industrial economies. Reflected in the mid-nineteenth century workers' slogan: '8 hours sleep, 8 hours work and 8 hours for what we will' (McEvinney, 2020; Rosenzweig, 1983), campaigns were initially focussed on the length of the working day. This began with pressure for the 10-hour day, resulting in a 6/60 week, and then the 8-hour day (6/48 week). The 5/40 week was subsequently achieved by stages, at different dates in different countries (Cross, 1989; Hunnicutt, 1988). While most changes occurred around the middle of the twentieth century, Beaven (2020) indicates that the reduction from a 6-day week to a 5½-day (5½/44) week (Saturday afternoons off) first emerged in some areas of Britain in the late nineteenth century as a trade-off made by industrialists to eliminate the unregulated and unpredictable 'Saint Monday' (Reid, 1976). The 5-day week was famously introduced in the USA in 1926 by car-manufacturer Henry Ford (Crowther, 1926) but only became a legislated standard with the passing of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 (Grossman, nd). The pros and cons of moving to a 5-day week were debated in the UK in the 1930s in a similar fashion to the 4-day week today, complete with accounts of claimed successful trials (e.g., *Economist*, 1934).

The compressed or 4/40 week, which can be seen as an early version of current proposals, appeared initially in the USA in the early 1970s. Riva Poor (1970) described the experience of USA firms which had experimented with this model, later including case studies from Britain and Australia (Poor, 1972, 1973, 2010). The idea was initiated not by workers but by employers in the interests of boosting productivity and was subject to evaluative research, including examination of leisure outcomes (e.g., Poor & Steele, 1972; Seltzer & Wilson, 1980). However, it failed to become widely adopted (Bird, 2020).

The *leisure society* concept of the 1960s and 1970s was not a real-world change in working hours, not even an experiment, but merely an idea. A 30-hour work-week by the year 2000 did not seem an unreasonable prospect, given the reductions in working hours which had

been achieved in previous decades. Such positive speculation was, however, effectively brought to an end by the oil-price induced economic crises of the mid-1970s and early 1980s and subsequent economic crises and intense business cycles involving significant fluctuations in unemployment in Western economies (see Figure 1). Coinciding with recessions, a number of authors used various colourful terms to describe what were perceived as newly emerging characteristics of industrial nations, including: 'the collapse of work' (Jenkins & Sherman, 1979); the 'jobless future' (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994); the 'end of work' (Rifkin, 1995); and 'post-work' (Aronowitz, et al., 1998). Shorter work-weeks often featured among the prescriptions offered to address these perceived crises. These included proposals for: a work-week of three 8-hour days from Jenkins and Sherman (1979, p.165); a 'thirty and even twenty hour' work-week from Rifkin (1995, p.222); a 'thirty-hour week and a six-hour day' from Aronowitz et al. (1988, pp.73-74); and a 20-hour week from Australian politician Barry Jones (1995, p.209) and French sociologist André Gorz (1999, p.94). In the early 1980s, the French government legislated the introduction of a 35-hour standard work-week to boost jobs, but weak enforcement and lack of employer cooperation resulted in failure (Jallade, 1991; Hunt, 1998; Ashkenazy, 2007; Estevao & Sa, 2008). While these proposals can all be seen as pre-cursors to the 4-day week idea, they clearly did not attract sufficient attention or support for any concerted campaign of support to emerge. Furthermore, while each increase in unemployment seems to have prompted a new crop of publications arguing that the rise was permanent and structural, conditions typically returned their traditional cyclical pattern. This does not, of course, imply that such instability is a satisfactory state of affairs or that it will continue indefinitely, but it took the wind out of the sails of the would-be futurists.



Source: Author's graphic using data from: OECD: https://data.oecd.org/unemp/unemployment-rate.htm

Figure 1. Unemployment rate, USA, UK: 1981-2019

4-day week proposals

The 4/32 week idea is essentially a twenty-first century phenomenon. A miscellany of books and reports on proposals, analysis and trials have been identified. They can be divided into four groups: academic proposals which pre-date the current 4/32 movement; academic

proposals which can be seen as part of the 4/32 movement; proposals emanating from think-tanks; and an 'other' category, including a single entrepreneur and a USA legislator. This list of proposals has not been assembled from a formal review of the literature, but by a 'snowball' process, involving books and (rare) academic articles, but also think tank reports, news media articles, company press releases, political manifestos and a draft piece of legislation.

Academic proposals pre-dating 4/32

A number of academic calls for reduced working hours emerged in the first decade or so of the twenty-first century, but before the current 4/32 campaign got underway. They were mainly from economists, but also from sociologists, feminists and an environmentalist/ historian.

American sociologists Jacobs and Gerson (2004, p.183) proposed a 35-hour week as part of a suite of reforms to 'promote more family-supportive, gender-equitable, and occupationally inclusive working policies'. The key problem identified was the 'time-squeeze' experienced by dual-career households with dependent children, particularly professionals but also lowly paid blue-collar workers (p.39). Another American sociologist, Kathi Weeks (2011), brought a Marxist-feminist perspective to bear, declaring that the effects of time pressure arise more on a day-to-day than a weekly basis, so she called for a six-hour work-day (pp.152, 172) – in effect a 5/30 week proposal. Her message was addressed to the feminist movement and the need to establish a 'post-work politics' (p.228).

Australian economist Robert LaJeunesse (2009, p.239) proposed a 4/32 week, also as part of a suite of reforms mainly related to the inefficiencies of the current USA labour market. American economist Juliet Schor, well-known to leisure scholars for her book *The Overworked American* (1991), focussed in later writings (Schor, 2010, 2013), on the impact of continuous economic growth and consumption on the environment in industrial countries and proposed a reduced work-week to slow this trend. British economics and philosophy duo Skidelsky and Skidelsky, in *How much is Enough?* (2012), also proposed a shortened work-week for similar environmental reasons. Environmental concerns were also behind Dutch historian Rutger Bregman's (2016) best-selling *Utopia for Realists*, in which he proposed a 15-hour work-week.

4/32 week: Academic proposals

A number of economists have explicitly embraced the 4/32 model, typically on the grounds that current arrangements are sub-optimal.

Robert Grosse, in *The Four-day Workweek* (2018), presents an extensive overview of the 4/32 week idea in the context of the history of the shortening work-week generally. While the international dimension is not ignored, his perspective is very much USA-focussed. Thus he concludes that the US government cannot be relied upon to act to produce change and trade unions seem to be out of the picture, so reliance should be placed on 'unilateral company moves', in the tradition of Ford's historic institution of the 5/40 work-week in 1926 (pp.93-107). Grosse is unusual among 4-day week advocates in devoting a whole chapter to consideration of how workers might spend their additional free time, as discussed in the final section below.

In *Friday is the New Saturday*, British economist Pedro Gomes (2021) presents a number of reasons for implementing a four-day week, including: fuelling the economy through increased consumer demand; raising productivity; unleashing innovation; reducing technological unemployment; raising wages; and giving people 'more freedom to choose how

to spend their time'. The latter discusses not leisure directly, but the need for flexibility work-time scheduling. While leisure is mentioned at various points in the book, it is not addressed in any detail.

Australian economist John Quiggin (2022) proposes a 4-day week to be achieved in stages, beginning with a 'nine-day fortnight' with no reduction in hours, which is, in effect, a 4½/38 week (the Australian standard full-time work-week is already at 38 hours).

4/32 week: think-tank proposals

The third group of contributions emanates from think tanks, with funding coming from a variety of mostly non-government sources. One review was sponsored by a European trade union and Netherlands-based think tank (De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017), indicating an interest in the phenomenon in mainland Europe. The rest are associated with a UK-based campaign led by two linked British think tanks: the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and Autonomy. The development of the campaign has been marked by a series of publications and announcements.

- 2009: *The Great Transition* was a broad-ranging programme for economic and social change in Britain, one component of which was the transition to a 4/32 week (Spratt, Simms, Neitzert, & Ryan-Collins, 2009, p.42).
- 2010: *21 Hours: Why a shorter working week can help us all to flourish in the 21st century* was focussed specifically on a 21 hour work-week (NEF, 2010). It attracted a negative response from another think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), in which Niemietz (2010) characterised it as 'paternalism meets bogus economics'.
- 2013: *Time on Our Side: Why we all need a shorter working week*, comprised the papers from an NEF-sponsored symposium involving 16 speakers (Coote & Franklin, 2013), among them Juliet Schor and Robert Skidelsky (see above).
- 2019: *The Shorter Working Week: A radical and pragmatic proposal*, marked the entry of Autonomy into the campaign (Stronge & Harper, 2019). The report included endorsements from three Labour MPs, including the Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, and trade union officials.
- 2019: *How to Achieve Shorter Working Hours* was a report commissioned by the Labour Party from Lord Robert Skidelsky (2019), which also attracted a negative IEA evaluation, referring to it as 'a blast from the past' (Shackleton, 2019).
- 2019: Arising from the Skidelsky report, the Labour Party included the commitment to 4-day week trials in its general election manifesto (Islam, 2019). It attracted the derision of ruling Conservatives, with the leader, Boris Johnson, labelling it a 'crackpot idea' (Bosotti, 2019).[1] Labour subsequently lost the election.
- 2020: *Time for Change: The four-day week as a strategy for unemployment*, is an Autonomy report proposing the gradual implementation of a 4-day week as a means of exiting from the government-funded COVID-19-related furlough scheme (Frey et al., 2020).
- 2020: *The Day After Tomorrow: Stress tests, affordability and the roadmap to the four day week*, from Autonomy, analyses the likely effect on the profitability of UK firms of a 4/32 week without loss of pay (Calvert Jump & Stronge, 2020). It also suggests initially increasing public holidays as part of a 'gradualist' approach to 4/32, implicitly indicating the precedent of past workplace bargaining starting the move towards a 4-day week with paid public holidays (resulting in about ten 4-day weeks a year) and annual holidays (four 'zero-day weeks' a year in many countries).
- 2021: *The Case for a Four-day Week* is a commercially published book summarising the views of NEF authors Coote, Harper and Stirling (2021).

- 2022: *A Future Fit for Wales: The roadmap to a shorter working week*, was commissioned from Autonomy (2022b) by the Welsh government's Future Generations Commissioner. It proposes the implementation of a 4-day week for the whole of Wales (population 3.2 million), with separate costings presented for the public sector and private sector workforces.

4/32 week: Proposals from other sources

- Andrew Barnes, a New Zealand-based businessman, might perhaps be seen as the Henry Ford of the current era, except for the fact that his company, where he has successfully implemented a 4/32 work-week, is an insurance company with 250 employees rather than an industrial behemoth employing tens of thousands. However, on the basis of this experience, he has taken it upon himself to campaign for the adoption of the 4-day week in Western economies generally. His book, *The 4-day Week*, is part personal memoir, part research report and part manifesto (Barnes, 2020). It contains ten chapters, one of which is devoted to summarising results from a before-and-after study of a trial, conducted in Barnes's own company (discussed below). As with Grosse, Barnes sees wider implementation of the 4/32 week as resting with voluntary adoption by individual companies. While Barnes is clear that a manager/owner planning for a move to 4/32 course will need to gain the agreement and trust of employees, he does not indicate any role for trade unions, but suggests that governments could facilitate change by modifying some restrictive labour laws.
- The Henley Business School (2019) at the University of Reading advocates a four-day week as a means of catering to the lifestyle preferences of different generations of workers in the same institution. While the 4-day week is the focus, a specific model is not specified, but it seems that a compressed week (4/40) is assumed in the models discussed. Results from UK surveys, one of 500 firms and one of 2000 employees, explore the benefits and costs of more flexibility for individual workers and firms, projected for the whole country.
- In 2021, Mark Takano, a California representative in the United States House of Representatives, tabled in Congress a draft bill to 'amend the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to reduce the standard workweek from 40 hours per week to 32 hours per week' (USA Congress, 2021). There is no evidence that the bill is likely to progress in the legislature. A similar initiative in 1979 was debated, but 'died in Congress' (Gomes, 2021, p.138).

4/32: Trials/experiments

The 4/32 week idea is being progressed by a series of trials by individual employers or groups of employers.

- In a rare peer-reviewed study, but with no explicit connection to the current 4/32-week movement, Åkerstedt et al. (2001) reported on an experiment with a group of Swedish workers in child, disability and geriatric care. Weekly working hours were reduced from 39 to 30 hours, with no reduction in pay or in daily work-load (additional staff were employed to cover the shortfall). 'Before' and (one-year) 'after' questionnaires, were used to compare changes in workers' self-reported health and well-being and leisure activity.
- The Andrew Barnes (2020) manifesto, noted above, reports on a 4/32 week trial of 240 finance sector employees which involved a post-trial survey undertaken by academics in March 2018. While the results are not presented in formal academic style, they appear to provide convincing evidence of success in reducing working hours while maintaining output and wages.

- The Japanese office of the global software company Microsoft conducted a short trial of a 4/32 week over a five-week period in 2019, without loss of pay. Press reports indicated that the outcomes were: more efficient meetings; happier workers; and a 40 per cent increase in productivity (Kari, 2019). Any subsequent developments appear not to have been publicly reported.
- Between 2019 and 2021, a trial of reduced working hours was conducted by the Reykjavík City Council and the Icelandic Government involving 2500 workers in 66 workplaces. A study of the trial (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021) reported a high degree of satisfaction among workers and managers and no adverse effect on productivity. Subsequent country-wide agreements between unions and employers made reductions in working hours permanent. While press coverage of the trial portrayed this as a 4-day week experiment (e.g., BBC, 2021; CNBC, 2021), it was in practice a much more modest exercise (Veal, 2021). The reduction in hours in 61 of 66 work-places was between 1 and 3 hours. The subsequent union agreements provided for a weekly reduction in work-time of only 35 minutes in the private sector and 65 minutes in the public sector.
- In a newspaper report Soojung-Kim Pang (2020) describes the experience of two contrasting US firms. The first, Tower Paddle Boards, which sells surf boards, moved successfully to a 5-hour day, or a 5/25 week by: 'concentrating on important tasks', 'cutting out distractions' and using technology to make routine tasks easier. The story of this company inspired the second firm, Blue Street Capital, provider of finance for the IT industry, which also successfully implemented the 5/25 model.

The above five trials were complete at the time of writing. All were evaluated, with varying degrees of formality and rigour. They were typically judged successful, particularly in terms of worker satisfaction. However, only the first listed was peer-reviewed. The trials listed below are all on-going.

- Unilever New Zealand announced a twelve-month trial of the 4/32 week model in December 2020. Its press release (Unilever NZ, 2020) indicates that the move was inspired by Andrew Barnes. While the company is a multinational manufacturing company with 150,000 employees worldwide, the New Zealand operation is a sales and distribution branch with just 80 office-based staff. The trial is being subject to evaluation by an academic project.
- Four Day Week Ireland (2022) is a campaign run by a coalition of 'trade unions, businesses, environmentalists, women's rights and civil society organisations, academics, health practitioners and global advocates'. The most recent press release on its website (5 October, 2021) indicates that 17 companies had signed up for a trial programme.
- As noted above, the NEF/Autonomy campaign was, in effect, endorsed by the UK Labour Party for its unsuccessful 2019 general election campaign. The political route has also been adopted in Spain and Scotland:
    - In Spain, the left-wing party Más País (More Country) proposed a 4/32 week trial as part of its 2019 election manifesto. Más País is one of a number of smaller parties providing support for the minority socialist government, which has therefore agreed to support the three-year trial. This is expected to involve some 200 companies with a total of up to 6000 workers and 'no loss of salary or jobs'. Firms' costs are being partially met by government subsidy (Kassam, 2021).
    - In the 2020 general election for the Scottish parliament, the ruling Scottish National Party promised to institute trials of a 4-day week (SNP, 2021). Having successfully retained power the SNP government announced the launch of a programme involving a number of employers in trial schemes (Statham & Smith, 2021).

- Following the failure of the Labour Party's 2019 initiative, Autonomy, with collaborators from Cambridge University, announced a 4-day week pilot programme involving some 30 participating UK firms (Autonomy, 2022a).

The long-term success or otherwise of the 4-day week proposition hinges on the success of these trials and the possibility of success inspiring wider adoption. However, firms' participation in the trials is voluntary. Managers of the firms involved will have assessed the likely impact of the 4/32 model in advance. Only those which deemed it viable are likely to have signed up. They are therefore a biased sample. Furthermore, in some cases trials have involved government subsidy which raises questions concerning long-term viability in the absence of such subsidies.

Themes and issues

A criticism which can be made of leisure studies scholars' engagement with the 1960s/70s leisure society idea is that it was too narrowly focussed on leisure and paid insufficient attention to the wider industrial and social processes bringing the leisure society into being. To avoid a similar criticism, a leisure-focussed analysis of the 4-day week proposition would need to be located within a critical appraisal of the proposition as a whole. The existing literature, being overwhelmingly committed to the 4-day week idea, does not provide such a critical framework. A comprehensive assessment of the viability of the 4-day week proposition cannot be provided here. Rather, some preliminary themes and issues are identified for consideration. Two features are addressed: the overall goals of the 4/32 proposition and the main arguments against the proposition.

Goals

Among the numerous goals advanced for the 4-day week proposition (see Gomes (2021) and Coote et al. (2020, pp.17-44) for typical lists), the main ones seem to be: correcting of labour market imbalances; job creation; environmental benefits; and time-use benefits.

The *labour market imbalances* which 4-day week proponents seek to correct concern long working hours and gender.

The *long working hours* issue is the belief that too large a proportion of employees work an excessive number of hours per week over and above the 'standard' work-week. These workers comprise three groups (Kodz., 2003, p.222): managers and professionals; skilled or highly paid manual workers with overtime work at attractive rates; and low-paid workers who are forced to work long hours, often for multiple employers, to secure a living wage. The first two groups seem unlikely be much affected by implementation of a 4-day week. Some expositions have recommended placing legal limits on overtime hours (see LaJeunesse, 2009, p.237). However, such limitations would be almost impossible to police, particularly among professional and salaried workers. Some 4-day week expositions assume that the third group, low paid workers, would benefit from the new full-time, higher-paid jobs created by the 4-day week policy – which depends on the job-creation mechanism discussed below. The question also arises as to what would happen to the part-time jobs vacated.

Gender issues arising from the labour market are in the form of time pressure currently experienced by many women, who continued to bear the major responsibility for child and aged care and domestic work, even as they have increasingly entered the paid workforce (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2019). When the solution is for one parent to work part-time, this invariably falls on the mother in a heterosexual partnership. Some proponents suggest that the 4/32 week would reduce the difference between full-time and part-time working schedules,

enabling a more equal sharing of domestic responsibilities – an idea discussed in the 1970s in Sweden (Ottosson & Rosengren, 2016).

Job creation as an outcome of the 4/32 week is based on the proposition that the 8-hours a week of labour time lost for every full-time employee will be replaced by the employment of additional workers, thereby increasing the numbers employed by 25%. However, this is contradicted by a claimed feature of the 4/32 model which is that the reduction in labour time will be offset by productivity gains, thus negating the need to employ additional workers. This is discussed further below.

These considerations draw attention to the financial features of the 4/32 proposition. Under the typical scheme, the wages bill for the original labour force would be unaltered, so the hourly wage rate of existing workers would rise by 20%. If there are no productivity gains, the replacement labour force, also paid at the new hourly rate, would add 25% to the overall wage-bill. Employers might be reluctant to absorb this extra cost from profits, or to increase prices. The outcome would depend on the proportion of total costs attributable to labour, which can vary considerably (Autonomy, 2022b).

Environmental benefits are expected to arise as a result of workers accepting increased free time rather than increased wages, thus having less to spend on consumption, with less environmental impact (Schor, 2005), than might otherwise have been the case (Coote et al., 2021, pp.34-42). This is the traditional trade-off seen over the first two thirds of the twentieth century. In conditions of increasing productivity, workers in industrial societies enjoyed both increased leisure time *and* increased wages, with 60% of the workers' share of increases in productivity being taken in the form of increased wages and 40% in the form or reduced working hours (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966, p.13). However, the question of actual or potential wage increases do not generally feature in typical 4/32 expositions. If the wage-bill for the original work-force is assumed to be unchanged in the move from 5/40 to 4/32, and productivity increases maintain output levels, there is no change to environmental impacts. If, however, additional labour is hired, this will result in a corresponding increase in the wage-bill and hence in consumption and environmental impact. If the newly engaged staff were previously unemployed or in low-wage employment, the difference would be determined by their *increase* in income. Another form of environmental benefit is typically presented as arising from the fact that workers would make one less journey to work each week. However, this would also be negated if additional staff were employed.

Time use benefits relate to the beneficial uses of the non-paid-work time gained by the 4/32 worker. In quantitative terms, the weekly gain is eight hours plus saved travel time. It also be viewed as a whole day gained from the paid-work commitment. While this is recognised as a benefit in the extant 4-day week literature, only limited attention has been given to its analysis. Being of particular interest to the leisure scholar, this is discussed in a separate section below.

Arguments against the 4-day week

There has been little direct published criticism of the 4-day week proposition, the three critical sources identified above being quite narrowly focussed (Hammermesh, 2009; Niemietz, 2020; Shackleton, 2019) and it has not been countered by proponents. The main argument raised against the 4/32 proposition has, however, been anticipated by proponents: namely that it will be seen as too costly for employers. A second argument, raised by economists, is the *lump of labour fallacy*. These are discussed in turn below.

The main defence against the cost argument is that additional costs will be, or can be, offset by increases in productivity (output per worker per hour worked). Workers would simply

produce as much output in 32 hours as they previously did in 40 hours. This is explained by workers being aware that they should complete five days' work in four days, so they work in a more concentrated fashion. However, the long-term sustainability of this heightened state of work-intensity is not known. It is also claimed that the employer may even save on heating, cooling and lighting costs with premises open for four days rather than five. This is the basic model which is advocated, and successfully achieved, by leading proponent Andrew Barnes (2020), as discussed above. Productivity is therefore a key issue.

Productivity increases of 25%, would be necessary for workers in 4/32 conditions to achieve the same output as under 5/40 conditions. This would imply that the workplace concerned had a certain amount of 'slack' under 5/40 conditions. For more than a century 'scientific management', associated with Frederick Taylor, has sought to improve the ergonomics of manufacturing workplaces to maximise efficiency and reduce such 'slack'. Some routine service occupations have similar characteristics to manufacturing, for example, supermarkets now have computerised supply chains and ergonomically designed checkout stations and automated self-service options. However, less routine workplaces face more challenges in regard to measuring and increasing productivity. At the extreme lie the traditional performing arts; as Baumol and Bowen (1968, p.164) observed: 'it requires about as many minutes for Richard II to tell his "sad stories of the death of kings" as it did on the stage of the Globe Theatre' in sixteenth century London. It has always been the case that certain industry sectors have, at any one time, been able to achieve rapid productivity increases, along with growth and profitability, enabling them to accede to worker demands for improved conditions. In some cases totally new firms or industries set the pace. Other sectors, in order to retain and attract labour and avoid industrial unrest, must then 'play catch-up' in regard to conditions, and meet the resultant costs by seeking to improve their own productivity and/or by raising prices. Thus some sectors, such as the performing arts and much of the public sector and personal services, unavoidably suffer from what Baumol (2012) terms a chronic 'cost disease'.

It cannot therefore be assumed that all organisations, if required to switch from 5/40 to 4/32 conditions, would be able to achieve the required productivity. In a 'first' for the pro-4/32 movement, the Autonomy (2022, p.125) report on Wales recognises this in presenting a public sector scenario in which a productivity increase of only 2.5% is assumed. The rest of the loss of output is translated into job-creation, with the cost being met by the employer, in this case the state. In the case of the private sector, based on Calvert Jump and Stronge's (2020) calculations, the report argues that most firms would be able to absorb any additional costs because they would generally be only a small proportion of profits. There is no discussion of the politics of this scenario, in which public funds are devoted to increasing public sector employment and reducing working hours for public employees, while the private sector, which has spent decades with a 'cost reduction' mindset, is expected to absorb increased labour costs.

Economists point to a flaw in the job creation capability of the 4-day week proposition, which they label the *lump of labour fallacy* (e.g. LaJeunesse, 2009, p.194; Gomes, 2021, p.128).[2] This is the assumption that the amount and characteristics of labour demanded in a given economy is static. However, it is argued, this is unjustified since, if the price of labour rises, as it would under 4/32, there is an added incentive for employers/managers to find ways of saving on labour costs. For example, it could become economic to introduce new forms of labour-saving equipment because the potential value of any labour saved would have increased. The resultant higher levels of productivity from installing the equipment could wholly or partially off-set the additional costs of introducing the 4-day week. It could even

result in a *reduction* in labour requirements. However, in some conditions a further result could be a significant reduction in the price of the product/service and a boom in sales leading to a net *increase* in labour requirements. It is therefore impossible to generalise from the experience of a single firm or type of firm.

At the macro/economy-wide level, while increasing wage rates would have the effect of encouraging investment in labour-saving measures, this would be in the context of a complex and dynamic jigsaw in which the introduction of a 4-day week would be just one source of ambient change, along with such matters as technological developments, the emergence of whole new industries and the decline of others, population growth or decline, 'off-shoring' of production and changes in skill levels of the workforce. Of course, these and other factors were at work while changes in working hours arrangements were taking place in the first half of the twentieth century. However, typical single changes in labour costs resulting from reductions in work-time were in the order of about two per cent (e.g., an hour off the standard week or an additional week's holiday), totalling falls of some 3-4 hours per decade. The 20 per cent reduction involved in the 4-day week proposition is of a different order.

The work-related measures implemented to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a change towards flexible and 'hybrid' working arrangements, which raises the question as to whether the '4-day week' is a misnomer. It implies that, current office workers typically attend the office for five 8-hour days (Monday to Friday), and the 4-day week would change this to four 8-hour days (Monday to Thursday). But if the starting point is, for example, a hybrid arrangement involving a 40-hour week with office attendance for three 7-hour days (e.g., Tuesday to Thursday) and the remaining 19 hours unspecified, the 4-day week proposition becomes simply a 32-hour week proposition. The spatial and temporal patterns of working would be infinitely variable within and across organisations. Of course, many industries, especially non-office-based ones, already operate schedules which approximate to this but without the personal flexibility, notably those with 7-day, and sometimes 24-hour, operations staffed through shift arrangements. One implication of this breakdown of the four fixed 8-hour day pattern is therefore that a 32-hour week would not necessarily have to be achieved in one 8-hour lump, but could be staged (see, e.g., Calvert Jump & Stronge, 2020; Quiggin, 2022), for example in one-hour annual reductions over eight years.

The success of the 4/32 proposition depends to a considerable degree on increases in labour productivity. It is clear that employers have in the past been willing to make wage and work-time concessions in periods when productivity, sales and profits are increasing (Roche, 1991, p.95), when labour markets were tight and prices could be raised with impunity. Labour was also in a position to bargain to take advantage of the conditions. All these conditions have become precarious in recent decades. However, in the initial stages at least, much of the drive behind the 4/32 week proposition is coming from individual firms, so it remains to be seen whether the traditional drivers and constraints apply.

The above discussion is primarily theoretical. The possibility of empirical exploration is limited by the small scale of the five known completed trials identified and their geographical distribution over four continents. Most of the evaluations of these trials are 'in-house' rather than independent and are limited to within-firm considerations, ignoring the wider societal and economic impacts which are part of the 4/32 proposition. Some of the on-going trials listed above are on larger scale and may involve more independent and broadly-based evaluations.

Leisure perspectives

How might the effects of an additional eight hours of non-paid work time per week be examined from a leisure perspective? Some speculation and a certain amount of empirical evidence is presented in the existing 4-day week literature.

Grosse (2018, pp.45-62) devotes a whole speculative chapter to addressing the question: 'What will people do with more time free from work?' He concludes that the average 4/32-week worker would treat the additional day as an additional weekend day, resulting in increased demand for associated goods and services related to 'lawn and garden care, home maintenance, social activities and sports' (p.52). However, if this is the case, assessment of the net effect would need to be take account of the fact that, with no increase in pay, the additional spending would be at the expense of reductions elsewhere.

Some speculation on time use in 4-day week reports should more accurately be described as exhortation or wishful thinking, particularly in relation to the possibility of increased time being devoted to environmentally sustainable activity. For example, the NEF (2010) report declared:

> We could grow, prepare, preserve, and cook more of our own food, repair things more often rather than replace them, travel more by foot and bicycle, learn practical skills and make clothes and furnishings, use leisure time for activities that require little or no commodified equipment, such as making music, art and theatre, gardening, walking and playing games. We could do things with and for each other that we might otherwise have to buy. (p.31)

Stronge and Harper (2019, p.50) and Coote et al. (2021, pp.46-47) similarly speculate on the environmental benefits of reduced working hours enabling less emissions-intensive leisure activities. However, Niemiet (2010) has argued that this sort of change would be sub-optimal in terms of human welfare.

These contemporary positive, and hoped for, expectations on workers' likely use of additional time reflect the views of leisure scholars from the 1930s onwards, who naively expected workers with increased time on their hands to engage in 'creative' activity (Veal, 2020). Similar commentary arose among futurists in the 1970s and 1980s (Veal, 2019, pp.172-75). In practice, the major new leisure activity which emerged in the post-World War II era was television-viewing, which became, and remains, universally the most time-consuming single leisure activity (Fisher & Robinson, 2010).

Evidence

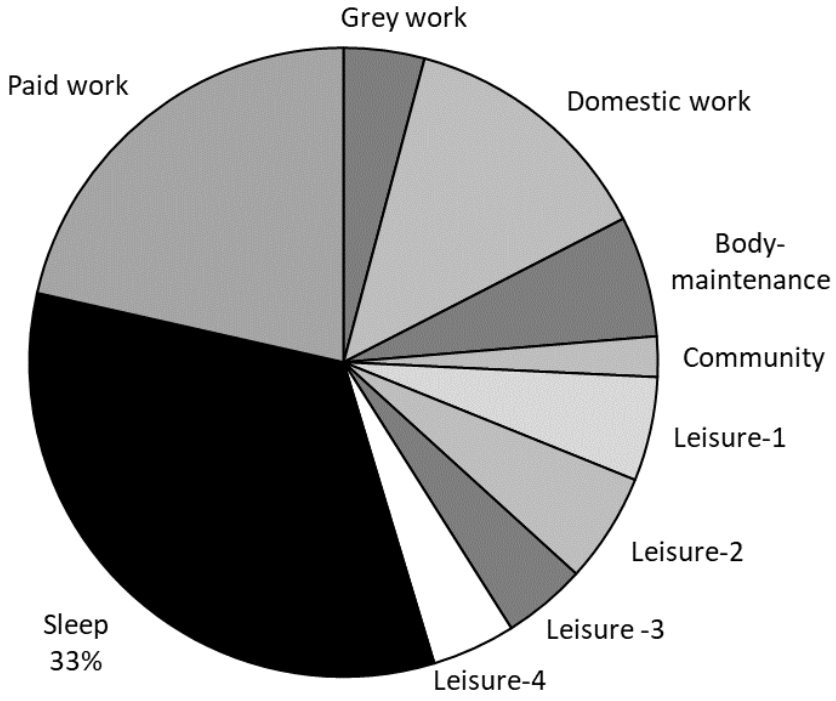
Among the completed trials listed above:

- The 'before-and-after' worker survey in the Swedish experiment (Åkerstedt et al., 2001) found the most significant changes in time-use were in the amount of leisure time devoted to 'family/friends' and 'social activity'.
- The New Zealand trial reported by Barnes (2020) included a qualitative component which indicated that employees used their additional non-work time to: accomplish tasks in personal life; participate in family life; 'restore and reconnect'; 'learn to contribute'; and 'explore and imagine' (pp.90, 203-206).
- Media reports on the Microsoft Japan worker survey indicated 'happier workers' but provided no information on time use (Kari, 2019).
- The Reykjavík, Iceland, trial involved a number of evaluative exercises, including focus groups and surveys and a control group. The English summary (Haraldsson & Kellam,

2021, pp.40-46) reported: marked work-life balance benefits, including more time spent with families, in home duties, exercising and in 'time for oneself'.

- The media report on the two USA trials (Soojung-Kim Pang, 2020) indicate only informal evaluations among small staff numbers.

While these survey results are generally not quantified or generalizable to other contexts, they suggest that increased non-paid-work time gained from a 4/32 week is likely to be used in a variety of ways, not just in leisure activity. To bring a leisure/time-use analysis perspective to bear: in addition to paid work, time-use can be divided into at least nine activity types, including four types of leisure, as shown in Figure 2. This shows an indicative pattern for a full-time worker, but the distribution would differ for workers in different domestic situations and with differing age, gender, health, income, work-type and personality profiles. A fall in paid work time could be spread across any number of the nine non-paid-work activity categories, with varying levels of impact on leisure, consumption, family and community life and the environment.



Source: Based on Veal (2019, Fig. 2.4). Grey work = unpaid aspects of the job – e.g., travel to and from work and dealing with work-messages in 'down time'. NB. Size of segments variable.

Leisure categories (overlapping): 1. Rest/recuperation; 2. Diversion/entertainment; 3. Family; 4. Other.

Figure 2. Weekly time-use (full-time 5/40 worker)

Conclusions

The 4-day week proposition is being promoted by vigorous campaigns and is being tested in small-scale trials in a number of countries. It is receiving support from political parties, trade unions, some employers and the general public/workers (Autonomy, 2020; Ipsos, 2021). Consequently, it also attracts attention from the mass media. Given the limited number and scale of trails to date, the phenomenon has not been subject to rigorous and independent

evaluative research. In this paper it is suggested that the proposition has considerable implications for leisure, but these have not been considered in any detail by either 4-day week proponents or leisure scholars. In contrast, in the 1960s and 1970s, the ill-fated leisure society idea was championed by leisure scholars, although not by as many, or with as much rigour, as is sometimes assumed (Veal, 2019, p.135). While it is not suggested that leisure scholars should necessarily champion the cause of the 4-day week, it is posited that, in the interest of community relevance, the critical lens of leisure scholars should focus attention on the leisure implications of the phenomenon.

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Notes

[1] However, in 2020 there was a move among some Conservative members of Parliament to adopt the 4-day week as policy (Ryle, 2020).

[2] Curiously, one economist, Hammermesh (2019, p.187), dismisses a 32-hour week on the grounds of lost GDP, while ignoring both productivity change and the 'lump of labour' fallacy, but he is an exception.