

Time for some more time off

Cutting down the hours we work sounds appealing, but would we really benefit and is it at all feasible? **Michael Le Page** investigates

A GROWING movement wants to radically change how we live. The people behind it say it will make us healthier, happier and more productive. It will put a massive dent in carbon dioxide emissions and ease the pressure on nature. And it will make countries richer and more equal. But are we really ready for a four-day week?

In the UK, at least, the idea is gaining ground. Some trade unions have come out in support, the Labour party and the Scottish National party are discussing the idea and a few small firms are already trying it. The Wellcome

A 1% decrease in working hours could lead to a 0.8% drop in carbon emissions

Trust, a science charity with 800 staff, is also considering it.

The suggestion is that society moves away from typical working patterns of 40 hours over five days, a convention that has its roots in the 19th-century labour movement. Instead, campaigners want us to work no more than 32 hours over four days – but still get paid for all five.

“We are making the case for a reduction in working time without a reduction in pay,” says Aidan Harper of the New Economics Foundation, a UK think tank that backs the 4 Day Week Campaign.

A January report by the campaign lays out a huge body of evidence showing that working long hours is bad for physical and mental health. But many of those

studies looked at people working 50 to 60 hours a week rather than comparing five working days to four. And there is plenty of evidence that being unemployed or having little work is bad as well.

So how much work is too much? Huong Dinh at the Australian National University and her colleagues used survey data from 8000 individuals to try to figure out how many hours people can work before their mental health starts to decline (see graph, right). On average, the threshold is 39 hours – almost the same as a 40-hour week, although much less than the legal limit of 48 hours in many countries.

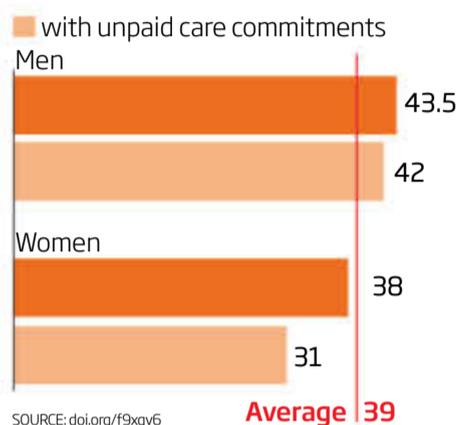
But the situation is very different for women with unpaid care commitments: their mental health begins to decline after just 31 hours of paid work. So the current system puts women at a big disadvantage.

Which leads to another reason for introducing a four-day week: to make society more equal. The idea is that it will help women compete on a more equal footing and increase employment as work is shared among more people.

There is still a massive gulf between the sexes. The gender pay gap is around 20 per cent in the UK, and women still do most of the childcare, housework and caring for relatives.

The argument is that more women could work full-time and more men could take on care responsibilities if everyone did a four-day week, with the entire economy profiting. There is some evidence that women do benefit when working hours are reduced: they report higher job satisfaction and are less likely to be forced to take part-time jobs.

The number of hours people can work before their mental health declines depends on personal circumstances



“A culture in which different uses of time are expected from women and men has been the single most important barrier to equal opportunity,” says Anna Coote, also of the New Economics Foundation. This hasn’t just been bad for women, she says. “Men have been cut off from their children and family life.”

A four-day week would make a tremendous difference, but our working culture needs to change, too, says Coote. “There’s no magic bullet here. It’s not going to happen overnight.”

Less work, more jobs

Would a shorter week create more well-paid jobs, reducing the gap between the haves and have-nots? Here economists point to what they call the lump of labour fallacy: there isn’t a fixed amount of work to be done, so cutting working hours doesn’t create an equivalent number of jobs.

Other researchers say this is true only in the narrow mathematical sense that working one day less won’t create exactly a fifth more jobs. There is plenty of evidence that if done in the right way, cutting hours can boost

employment. In 1933, for instance, president Franklin D. Roosevelt asked employers in the US to reduce the working week from the 40 to 35 hours typical at that time to 35 hours, while increasing wages. The voluntary scheme created 1.3 million jobs.

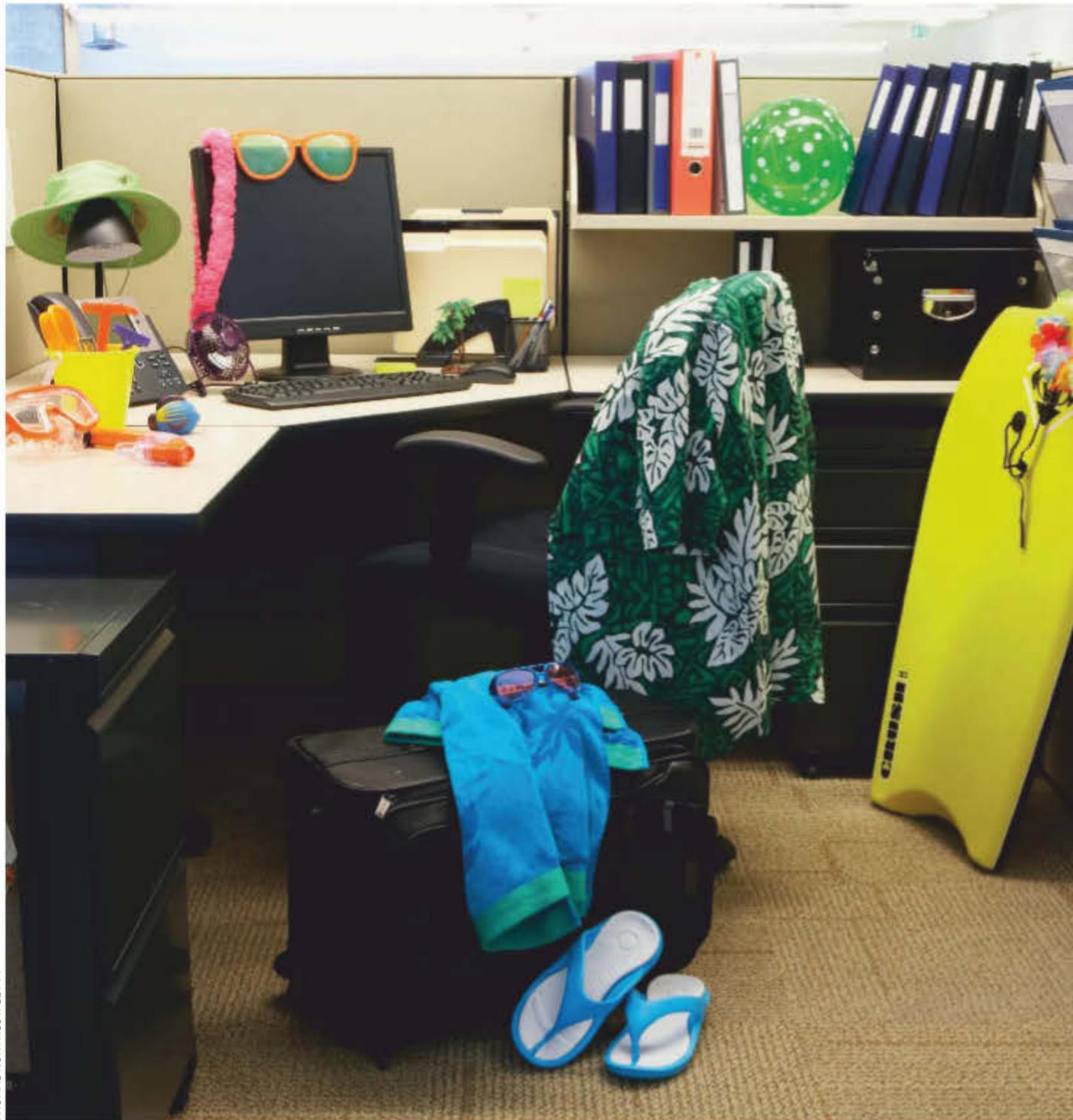
There is a more surprising reason for moving to a four-day week: it could limit further global warming. Numerous studies have shown a strong link between greenhouse emissions and working hours.

For instance, Jörgen Larsson and Jonas Nässén at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden found that a 1 per cent decrease in working hours leads to a 0.8 per cent drop in emissions. This has led to claims that introducing a four-day week could cut emissions by 16 per cent.

Unfortunately, the main reason is that people who earn less consume less. So while cutting out one day’s commute would help, emissions wouldn’t fall drastically if people keep the same salary. “You cannot have them both at the same time,” says Larsson.

For some, a move away from rampant consumerism and a focus on happiness rather than economic growth is exactly what is needed. But according to the UK’s Office for National Statistics, while a third of the nation’s 30 million workers want to work fewer hours, only 3.3 million would accept lower pay.

On the flip side, why should companies and countries pay people the same for doing less work? Some believe they don’t have to. According to a trial at a financial services company called Perpetual Guardian in New Zealand, not only can people



THOMAS NORTH/CUT/GETTY

do their job in four days instead of five, they can also do it better.

The firm's founder, Andrew Barnes, acknowledges that, say, healthcare services would have to employ more doctors or nurses if they switched to a four-day week, but he says staff would treat patients more efficiently and with better results.

"Would you rather be operated on by the doctor who is fresh or the one who has been working for

10 hours?" he says. "The four-day week is a discussion about productive outcomes as much as one about work-life balance."

On a larger scale, campaigners say countries where people work fewer hours tend to have stronger economies. Within Europe, working hours are lowest in countries with thriving economies such as Germany, the Netherlands and Norway, and highest in struggling Greece. Productivity in the UK is 25 per cent lower than in Germany, but 10 per cent higher than in Japan, which has a culture of working extreme hours.

However, Jon Boys at the

A four-day week would give us much more leisure time

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK isn't convinced. There are lots of anecdotal claims about increased productivity at companies, he says, but no large, rigorous studies to back this up.

Nor does Boys think you can draw any firm conclusions by comparing countries because there are so many other factors involved. That said, he is still in favour of a four-day week, although he thinks productivity has to improve first.

So where does all this leave us?

There is indeed plenty of evidence that shifting to a four-day week could have a range of benefits, but also that not all of those benefits can be maximised at the same time.

For instance, if people do five days' work in four, there will be no increase in jobs, so unemployment will remain unchanged. Forcing people to work more intensely to keep the same pay could increase stress, but earning less could also

A third of the UK's 30 million workers want to work fewer hours

be stressful for those on low pay.

"There seems to be no one-size-fits-all approach to working time reduction that would attain all objectives and perform well in all areas," cautions a report for the European Trade Union Institute.

Nevertheless, there is broad support for the idea from many sectors. "Working time on its own is not the one answer to climate change, but it can improve all of these other things too: the environment, unemployment, health," says Jared Fitzgerald of Boston College in Massachusetts, who, with his colleagues, has found a strong link between working hours and carbon emissions in the US. "As an overall sustainability issue, it can be pretty powerful."

Fitzgerald thinks there is no prospect of the US introducing a four-day week. The need for people to work a certain number of hours to get health insurance makes it a non-starter, he says.

However, a poll this January discovered that more than 60 per cent of people in the UK, Sweden and Finland support the idea. Harper thinks it could happen in just a few years. "Surely the aim should be to create the conditions in which we can live good lives," he says. ■

More than **60%** of people in the UK back a four-day week