

# In Sweden, an experiment turns shorter workdays into bigger gains

By Liz Alderman

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Arturo Perez used to come home frazzled from his job as a caregiver at the Svartedalens nursing home. Eight-hour stretches of tending to residents with senility or Alzheimer's would leave him sapped with little time to spend with his three children.

But life changed when Svartedalens was selected for a Swedish experiment about the future of work. In a bid to improve well-being, employees were switched to a six-hour workday last year with no pay cut. Within a week, Mr. Perez was brimming with energy, and residents said the standard of care was higher.

"What's good is that we're happy," said Mr. Perez, a single father. "And a happy worker is a better worker."

Sweden has long been a laboratory for initiatives to strike a better work-life balance, part of a collective ideal that treating workers well is good for the bottom line. Many Swedish offices use a system of flexible work hours and parental leave and child-care policies are among the world's most generous.

The experiment at Svartedalens goes further by mandating a 30-hour week. An audit published in mid-April concluded that the program in its first year had sharply reduced absenteeism, and improved productivity and worker health.

"We've had 40 years of a 40-hour workweek, and now we're looking at a society with higher sick leaves and early retirement," said Daniel Bernmar, leader of the Left party on Gothenburg's City Council, which is running the trial and hopes to make it the standard. "We want a new discussion in Sweden about how work life should be to maintain a good welfare state for the next 40 years."

But a backlash has formed in some corners of this bustling city, with opponents warning that

the idea is a utopian folly. If Gothenburg, let alone Sweden, were to adopt a six-hour workday, they say, the economy would suffer from reduced competitiveness and strained finances.

"It's the type of economic thinking that has gotten other countries in Europe into trouble," said Maria Rydén, Gothenburg's deputy mayor and a member of the opposition Moderates party. She is leading a campaign to kill the trial, citing high taxpayer costs and arguments the government should not intrude in the workplace.

"We can't pay people to not work," she added.

A similar model has long ignited controversy in France, ever since a Socialist government made a 35-hour workweek mandatory in 2000. Companies complain it has reduced competitiveness and created billions in additional costs for hiring and social charges. Unions defend the law as shielding workers from employers who might otherwise return to excessively long work hours.

The measure is now riddled with so many loopholes that most employees currently work around 40 hours a week, on par with the European Union average. But President François Hollande is facing nationwide strikes as he seeks to further ease parts of the law.

Such concerns have not deterred a growing number of small businesses in Sweden from testing the concept. Many found that a shorter workday can reduce turnover, enhance employee creativity and lift productivity enough to offset the cost of hiring additional staff.

"We thought doing a shorter workweek would mean we'd have to hire more, but it hasn't resulted in that because everyone works more efficiently," said Maria Brath, who founded an Internet search optimization start-up in

Stockholm three years ago based on a six-hour day. The company, which has 20 employees, has doubled its revenue and profit each year.

“Since we work fewer hours, we are constantly figuring out ways to do more with our time,” Ms. Brath said.

Sitting inside their airy office, Brath’s employees checked off the ways. “We don’t send unnecessary emails or tie ourselves up in meetings,” said Thommy Ottinger, a pay-per-click specialist. “If you have only six hours to work, you don’t waste your time or other people’s time.”

“It’s kind of a life changer,” he said, adding that the environment inspired fierce staff loyalty.

At Gothenburg’s Sahlgrenska University Hospital, one of the biggest in Europe, officials have tried a similar approach to counter burnout and high absenteeism.

Last year, the orthopedics unit switched 89 nurses and doctors to a six-hour day. It hired 15 new staff members to make up for the lost time and extend operating room hours. At 1 million kroner (about \$123,000) a month, the experiment was expensive, said Anders Hyltander, the executive director. But since then, almost no one calls in sick, and nurses and doctors have been more efficient.

“I had reached a point where I could only work at 80 percent capacity,” said Gabrielle Tikman, a surgical nurse. “Now it’s easier to rest and I have time at home to sit and really talk with my children. I’ve got my power back.”

The unit is performing 20 percent more surgeries, generating additional business from treatments like hip replacements that would have gone to other hospitals. Surgery waiting times were cut to weeks from months, allowing patients to return to work faster and reducing sick leave elsewhere in the economy, Mr. Hyltander said.

“For years, we’ve been told that an eight-hour workday is optimal,” he said. “But I think we should let ourselves challenge that view and say, ‘Yes that’s the way it is now, but if you want to increase productivity, be open to new ideas.’”

The hospital was inspired by a nearby Toyota vehicle service center, which moved to a six-hour day 13 years ago to address employee stress and customer complaints about long waiting times. The new system keeps the garages open longer and reels in new business.

“What we can see today is that employees are at the very least doing the same amount in the six-hour workday, often more than they did in the eight-hour day,” said Martin Banck, the service center’s director. “It’s heavy work — drilling, building engine blocks — but they have stamina, and we have more profit and customers because cars get fixed faster.”

And employees say that more downtime makes them happier on the job. “Simply put, we work more efficiently,” said Matthias Larsson, 33. Thanks to his shorter hours, Mr. Larsson can care for his three children, cook, clean and shop while his wife is at work.

While a six-hour day may fit smaller organizations, larger Swedish companies have not rushed to embrace it. And other towns in Sweden that previously tested shorter workdays ultimately abandoned them. In the northern city of Kiruna, officials scrapped a six-hour day for 250 municipal employees after 16 years, citing high expenses and resentment among workers who were not part of the program.

Back at Svartedalens, Mr. Perez hopes the same fate will not befall him. “We never dreamed that there’d be a six-hour day,” he said. “You feel joy coming to work here.”

Ingrid Karlson, a 90-year-old tenant, nodded from her wheelchair. “The personnel are completely different,” she said. “They’re happier and we’re happier.”