

Six-hour workday boosts productivity, worker satisfaction

By Augusta Dwyer

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In recent years, some employers in Sweden began what many considered an audacious experiment: Local governments and privately owned companies in various cities put their staffs on a six-hour day.

The move went further than, for example, France's 35-hour workweek.

The results were somewhat surprising. Productivity and worker satisfaction were up, absenteeism and turnover were down. Employees interviewed by the media remarked on how they were more alert and focused during the workday, and they completed more work. Employees noted improved work-life balance. Some companies said they had more business and higher revenue.

So far, however, Canadian companies don't seem likely to try the Scandinavian model. For experts in organizational behaviour, what lies behind that is simply our cultural inertia.

Employees in North America believe they need to work extra hours to get ahead – and so do their managers.

While the Swedish results “have merit here as well, given the North American attitude toward work, it is not going to be an easy sell,” said Ronald Burke, professor emeritus of organizational behaviour and industrial relations at York University's Schulich School of Business.

On the contrary, recent studies show employees in managerial jobs working more hours per week than they did 20 years ago, he said. A 2015 survey also found that, in the United States, more than half of workers don't take all the vacation days owed them.

“I think managers would laugh at [the shorter workweek],” said Chris Higgins, a retired professor from the University of Western

Ontario's Ivey Business School. “They would say, ‘Are you kidding? I work 60 hours a week – why the heck would I let my employees work 36?’”

But for John Trougakos, professor of organizational behaviour and human resources management at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, “companies and employees have to get over the fact of eight-hour workdays.”

Forty-hour weeks and eight-hour days have been with us since the manufacturing heyday of the early 1900s, he pointed out, “but we don't do the same kind of work today. Most of the time, we have to bring a greater mental capacity to the work we are doing, and that can be tiring.

“You can't see the physical fatigue of it,” he added, “but you see the mental fatigue.”

That means people waste a lot of time when they are at work. More than half of employees in the United States waste one hour every day, while a quarter waste two hours, according to a 2014 survey by Salary.com, a compensation data and software company.

“A lot of companies use the term ‘face time,’” said Mr. Burke, “when people are physically there but they are not doing much productive, or are not as productive as they could be.”

Workers taking part in shorter-workweek schemes, meanwhile, said they wasted less time on social media, phone calls and meetings. One British firm, Liverpool-based Agent Marketing, cut its one-hour-weekly meeting to a mere eight minutes.

“What you are likely to find with the shorter workday is higher productivity,” said Mr. Higgins. “People are very good at working to deadlines. If they have a six-hour day they will tend to get everything done in the six hours.”

Other savings could be had as well.

“The saving on turnover, and on all these other things associated with stress and burnout, will prove to be beneficial in the end,” said Mr. Trougakos. This assumes, however, that “as a culture, we can adopt the mentality necessary to know that it is okay to actually have some more personal time as long as we get our work done in the hours that we have.”

A few years ago, the Canadian Mental Health Association estimated that companies were spending 20 per cent of their human resource costs on employee stress and other mental-health issues. “So if people are healthier, that is a big cost saving,” Mr. Trougakos said.

Another bonus would be a lessened, off-hours commute. “It can let people travel at times that minimize their commutes, which is often another big strain,” he said.

Flexibility is key, however, because in some roles, six hours is not enough time to finish a particular task, Mr. Higgins said.

“If you really want the best of both worlds,” he said, “give people flexible work hours. Allow them to balance their work and family at the same time, and their productivity will go through the roof.”

In some economic sectors, however, companies have had to hire more staff. That has been necessary in Sweden and other European countries and is the biggest source of opposition to the short-week trend.

But, Mr. Trougakos said, “This could be great for the economy because it could stimulate more jobs. That brings in more tax revenue and so, yes, companies are paying a bit more but they are improving the economy.

“We are using our skills base and improving productivity in general in our country. And that is an advantage that I think has not been fully talked about.”