

ENOUGH BY DESIGN · CHAPTER SEVEN

The Hours Keynes Promised

Chapter Seven of Enough by Design

Ammanuel Santa Anna

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THE LICENCE

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

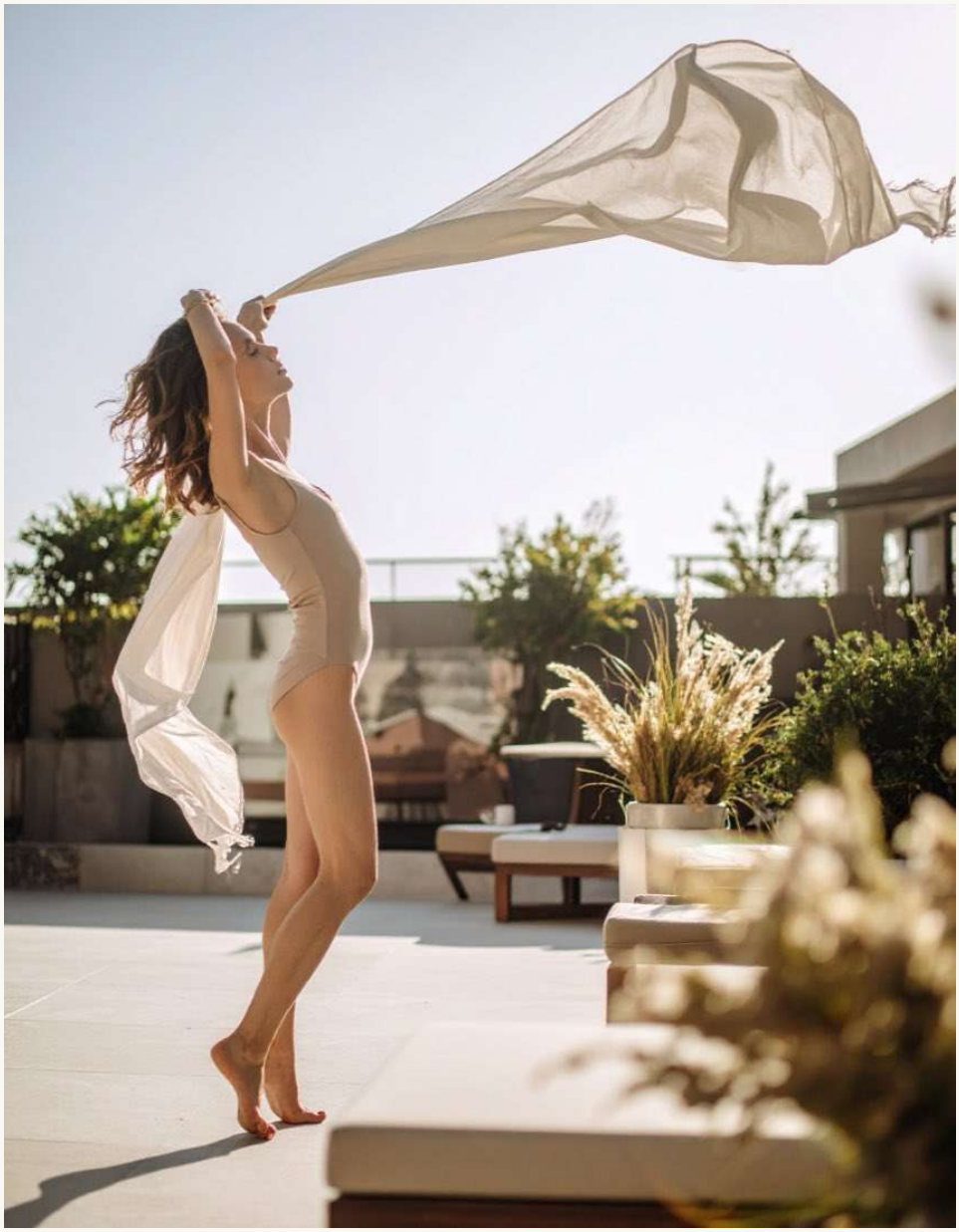
This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Chapter 2 read the passage carefully, and it is worth reading once more before the evidence arrives. Keynes did not predict that his grandchildren would work fifteen hours a week. He proposed short hours as a way through the problem he expected abundance to create: a people trained by necessity, suddenly without it, and unsure what to do with the time. "Three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may put off the problem for a great while," he wrote. The short week was a way of sharing out what work remained while everybody learned to live. So the question this chapter asks is not whether Keynes was right about the number. He was not, and he did not quite claim to be. The question is narrower and more useful to a person who runs something. When an organisation in a rich country deliberately shortens its working week, holding pay where it was, what actually happens to the work, to the people and to the accounts? And how much of the answer can the evidence bear?

CHAPTER SEVEN

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A remedy, not a forecast

Chapter 2 read the passage carefully, and it is worth reading once more before the evidence arrives. Keynes did not predict that his grandchildren would work fifteen hours a week. He proposed short hours as a way through the problem he expected abundance to create: a people trained by necessity, suddenly without it, and unsure what to do with the time. "Three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may put off the problem for a great while," he wrote.[65] The short week was a way of sharing out what work remained while everybody learned to live.

So the question this chapter asks is not whether Keynes was right about the number. He was not, and he did not quite claim to be. The question is narrower and more useful to a person who runs something. When an organisation in a rich country deliberately shortens its working week, holding pay where it was, what actually happens to the work, to the people and to the accounts? And how much of the answer can the evidence bear?

Two public cases are the best place to look. Between 2015 and 2019 the City of Reykjavík and the Icelandic national government ran trials of a shorter week in the public sector. In the second half of 2022, sixty-one organisations in the United Kingdom tried a four-day week for six months. Both produced long reports, written by people who wanted the trials to succeed, with figures that can be checked line by line. This chapter checks them, then names what they cannot show.

The long record, and where it stalled

Hours did fall, for a long time. Michael Huberman and Chris Minns rebuilt the record of days and hours of work across Europe and the settler economies of the New World from 1870 to 2000. The shape they found is a steep decline from the late nineteenth century into the middle of the twentieth, followed by a much slower one, with the New World, and the United States above all, working longer than Europe by the end.[66] Their title is a summary of the second half: "The times they are not changin'".

What their data show is a shape. What they cannot show, by themselves, is the reason the decline slowed. Several explanations compete. Some point to the relative needs Keynes himself named, the wants that rise as fast as income because their point is position. Some point to the fixed costs of employing a person, which make one long contract cheaper than two short ones. Some point to institutions: unions, tax systems, the length of a standard contract written into law. The record is consistent with all of these, and a chapter that picked one would be claiming more than the evidence gives.

The finer point for a leader is this. If the slowdown were simply the will of workers, nothing an employer did would move it. If part of it is designed, by contracts, by habits of scheduling, by the way a firm counts presence as output, then part of it can be redrawn. That is the claim of this book, set out in chapter 1, applied to the most personal resource a firm buys. The trials are tests of exactly that claim.



Reykjavík, March 2015

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Reykjavík, March 2015

The Icelandic trials are documented most fully in a report published in June 2021 by Alda, the Association for Democracy and Sustainability, and the British research organisation Autonomy, edited and compiled by Guðmundur D. Haraldsson. Both organisations had campaigned for shorter hours for years, and the report says so plainly. It is a careful document and also an advocate's one; it calls the trials "an incredible success story". A reader should hold both facts at once.[67]

The first trial began in Reykjavík in March 2015, after campaigning by the union confederation BSRB and grassroots groups. Two workplaces were chosen: a service centre for the eastern districts of Árbær and Grafarholt, and the Reykjavík Child Protection Service. Both were selected, the report says, "on account of the high levels of stress present in each workplace." Sixty-six members of staff took part. Their hours were shortened from 40 a week to 35 or 36, depending on the workplace. Salaries did not change. A third office was chosen as a control group, and its hours did not change either.[67]

The trial grew. Over the next few years it expanded, in the report's words, "almost thirty times in size", to around 2,500 participating staff, reaching playschools, city maintenance facilities, care homes for people with disabilities and the mayor's office. In its later stages workplaces could apply to join, and each had to explain in its application how it would keep a similar level of service on fewer staff hours, and which indicators it would use to judge its own performance.[67]

That application requirement is the quiet centre of the whole case. Nobody in Reykjavík was told to work less and hope. Each team was asked to redesign its own work before the hours came down, and to write down in advance how it would know whether the redesign had held. Chapter 9 calls this a prediction written before; Reykjavík called it an application form.

The government trial, April 2017

The second trial was national. In October 2015 the Icelandic government pledged to BSRB that it too would test shorter hours, again from 40 a week to 36 with no cut in pay. The trial began in April and May 2017. Seventeen workplaces applied and four were selected: the Directorate of Internal Revenue, the Directorate of Immigration, Registers Iceland, and a police station in the Westfjords that included shift workers. To be eligible a workplace needed at least 20 staff, at least 30 percent of them BSRB members, and 70 to 100 percent of staff working full time. Four other workplaces were chosen as control groups. At that point the trial covered around 440 staff, with 364 in the control workplaces. In 2018 the internal medicine department of a hospital in Akranes was added, to learn what happens where most staff work irregular hours.[67]

Taken together, the report says, the two trials came to encompass "more than 2,500 staff members working in over 100 workplaces", which it puts at around 1.3 percent of Iceland's total workforce.[67] The figure is often quoted as if it were a national experiment. It was a substantial public-sector trial in a small country, and that is impressive enough without enlargement.



What the Icelandic report found

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What the Icelandic report found

The report's central finding is that "productivity and service provision remained the same or improved across the majority of trial workplaces," and that worker wellbeing rose across a range of measures, "from perceived stress and burnout, to health and work-life balance."[67] It also states that the trials "remained revenue neutral for both the city council and the government." No extra money was spent to buy the shorter week.

The detail is more interesting than the summary, and more honest. At the Árbær and Grafarholt service centre, overtime rose slightly once hours were cut, by about three hours a month per staff member on average. The report notes that this "cut into the twenty hours that had been reduced", so staff still gained, on net, around seventeen hours a month. That is the kind of figure a sceptic should look for and seldom finds in advocacy. It shows the work did not simply vanish; some of it moved, and was counted.

The appendix of challenges is the most useful page in the document for a leader. It records that in a few workplaces some workers left after organisational changes they disliked. That shift workers found handovers harder once shifts were shorter. That managers in the Reykjavík trial felt the pace of work had increased, though staff did not complain. That some managers in the government trial could not shorten their own days even though their staff did. That training days and farewells became harder to schedule. And that uptake of the shorter hours, though generally high in Reykjavík, ranged from 61 percent in school services to 90 percent in care services.[67]

Read that list again and notice what it describes. It is not a failure of the idea. It is the friction of redesigning real work: the handover, the training day, the manager who absorbs what nobody else will. The shorter week is not free. Its cost is paid partly in attention to the design of the day, and partly, it seems, by the people in charge.

The Reykjavík trial ended on 1 September 2019, and staff went back to their previous hours. A few months later agreements were signed guaranteeing shorter hours. By June 2021, the report states, 86 percent of Iceland's working population were on contracts that had either moved them to shorter hours or gave them the right to negotiate them.[67] Some contracts give shorter hours to every member; others allow staff and their workplaces to negotiate. The 86 percent is a figure about contracts and rights, not about hours actually worked. It is not the same thing as 86 percent of people working less, and the report does not claim it is.

The United Kingdom, June to December 2022

The second case is private, and newer. In early 2022 the 4 Day Week Campaign, 4 Day Week Global and Autonomy began recruiting companies and non-profits for a six-month trial. The design gave participants two months of preparation, with workshops, coaching, mentoring and peer support, and asked each organisation for a small donation to defray costs. Independent researchers at Boston College, the University of Cambridge and Autonomy collected the data. The report, *The Results Are In: The UK's Four-Day Week Pilot*, was published in February 2023, with Juliet Schor leading the quantitative team at Boston College and Brendan Burchell and David Frayne among the qualitative team at Cambridge.[68]

Sixty-one organisations took part, with around 2,900 staff, from June to December 2022. The largest group came from marketing and advertising, eight firms; professional services came next with seven; charities and non-profits third. The rest were spread across healthcare, the arts, retail, construction and manufacturing.[68] That distribution matters later, and it is worth noticing now.



What the British report found

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What the British report found

On the organisations, the headline is continuation. "Of the 61 companies that took part, 56 report that they are continuing with the four-day week immediately following the pilot," 92 percent, and 18 of those said the policy was permanent. Of the five not continuing, two extended their trials and three paused.[68]

On revenue, the report gives two figures, and the difference between them is a lesson in reading. Across the 23 companies that supplied enough data, revenue from the start of the trial to its end "stayed broadly the same, rising by 1.4% on average, weighted by company size." Across a separate 24 companies that compared the trial months with a similar six months a year earlier, revenue rose by 34.5 percent, weighted by size, which the summary rounds to 35 percent.[68] The first figure tells you the shorter week did not visibly damage revenue in the firms that reported. The second tells you mostly that these were, on the whole, growing firms. Neither is evidence that the four-day week caused growth, and the report itself warns that

companies "remained susceptible to a range of exogenous factors," so that a reader "should be attentive first and foremost to broad tendencies."

On staff turnover, resignations fell from 2 per 100 employees in the comparison period to 0.8 during the trial, a fall of 57 percent. Sick and personal days fell from 2.0 per employee per month to 0.7. New hiring also fell, from 3.4 per hundred employees to 2.4. Then comes the sentence that the press coverage generally left out: "In part because of the small numbers in the sample, and in part because of labour market contingencies, we are unable to say that these three trends are statistically significant."[68] The resignation figure is the most quoted number in the report. Its own authors decline to call it significant.

On the employees, the survey data are stronger, because they compare the same people before and after. Average working time fell from 38 hours a week to 34. Seventy-one percent of the sample reported working fewer hours, 15 percent were working more and 13 percent saw no change. Average days worked went from 4.86 to 4.52. The authors note that many people still did some work on the fifth day, and that this was not a full reduction to 32 hours.[68]

Stress and burnout moved in the same direction. Thirty-nine percent of employees reported less stress, 13 percent more and 48 percent no change. Seventy-one percent reported lower burnout scores and 22 percent higher. Average job satisfaction rose from 7.12 to 7.69 on a scale of ten. And 15 percent of employees said no amount of money would persuade them to go back to a five-day schedule.[68]

That last figure is the closest either report comes to Keynes. A person who would refuse any sum to give back a day has decided, at least for now, that the marginal hour is worth more than the marginal pound. Keynes would have called it a relative need declining in importance. Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* names the same discovery from the side of the body: work is worth doing when it is worth "the irreplaceable hours of your life that you are investing in it."[69]



What neither trial can show

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What neither trial can show

Both reports are honest in their detail and enthusiastic in their summaries. A leader reading them needs to know the limits as clearly as the findings. There are five.

Self-selection. Every British organisation chose to join, paid a donation and spent two months preparing. Every Reykjavík workplace in the later stages applied and explained how it would cope. The organisations that tried a shorter week were, by construction, those that expected it to work and were willing to re-

design for it. Their results say what happens when such an organisation tries. They cannot say what would happen if a shorter week were imposed on an organisation that did not want one.

A missing comparison. Iceland used control workplaces, which is a real strength, though the report summarises rather than tabulates most of the comparisons, and the controls were few. The British pilot had no control group at all. Its company figures compare the trial with the firm's own past; its employee figures compare the same people before and after. Before-and-after designs cannot separate the effect of the shorter week from everything else that happened in the second half of 2022, including, as the report itself notes, a labour market in which quitting was unusually common.

Short duration. Six months is long enough for a novelty to wear off and short enough for a novelty to explain much. Reykjavík's four years are better, and the subsequent national contracts are the strongest evidence that the change survived contact with ordinary life. But neither report follows individual organisations long enough to show whether gains in wellbeing persist, fade or compound.

Who answered. In the British survey, 77 percent of employees answered at baseline, 67 percent at the midpoint and 58 percent at the end, and the before-and-after findings rely on the 70 percent of baseline respondents who also answered at the end.[68] People who left, or who were having a hard trial, may have been less likely to reply. The report calls the falling rate typical of panel surveys, which it is. Typical is not the same as harmless.

What kind of work. The British cohort leaned towards marketing, professional services and charities: knowledge work, often in small firms, where a day's output is hard to measure and easy to reorganise. Iceland included playschools, care homes, a police station and a hospital ward, which is a wider spread and a reason to take its results seriously. Even so, a reader who runs a factory, a warehouse or a retail floor should not assume the findings transfer without testing them.

Taken together, the honest reading is narrower than the headlines and still worth a great deal. In two different countries, in public and private organisations, deliberately shortening the week without cutting pay did not, on the evidence reported, damage service or revenue in the organisations that tried it, and the people working there reported less stress and burnout. That is not proof that a shorter week works everywhere. It is strong evidence that the forty-hour week is not a law of nature in the organisations that tested it. Some of its length was designed.

Hours as a designed scarcity

Return to the four kinds of scarcity in chapter 1: material, positional, designed and habitual. A firm's hours belong to all four. There are material limits: a ward needs a nurse at three in the morning, and no redesign removes that. There are positional ones: in many professions the long week is a signal of commitment, and the signal works only because others send it too. But the Icelandic application forms and the British pre-

paration months both point at the third and fourth kinds. A great deal of the working week is designed, by meetings, handovers, approvals and the habit of counting presence as contribution, and much of the rest is habit.

The Icelandic report's own explanation is that successful reductions "have been closely tied to changes in the organisation of work — whether through workers gaining greater autonomy over work processes, or changes in operating times and shift patterns."[67] Autonomy is the word Santa Anna's book reaches for too. When every hour is accounted for and every method mandated, he writes, work feels like compliance. "And compliance extracts without replenishing."[70]

The somatic reading in chapter 3 of his book is blunter still. Of the long, driven week he writes: "But this isn't sustainable energy. It's metabolic debt. Every hour of sympathetic-fueled productivity borrows from your body's reserves, and the bill eventually comes due as burnout, illness, or collapse."[71] The burnout scores in the British survey are a measurement of exactly that debt, taken twice, six months apart. They are self-reports and they have the limits named above. They point in the same direction as his sentence.

There is a business reading as well, and it does not depend on believing either report's summary. If an organisation can hold its output while its people work fewer hours, the hours it used to buy were not all producing. Some were absorbing the cost of a poorly designed day. The shorter week is one way to find that waste, because it forces the redesign that a longer week lets everyone postpone. Santa Anna's phrase for the principle underneath is that "vitality is the source of value, not an obstacle to it."[72] The trials are a modest, real test of that sentence in the hardest currency a firm has, which is time.

None of this requires a four-day week. Reykjavík cut four or five hours, not eight. Some British firms cut less than a full day. The decision for a leader is not a slogan. It is whether the hours inside the organisation have been designed on purpose, or inherited. takes up the related question of who gets to decide; this chapter's tool is about seeing the hours clearly first.

What a leader can take from the cases

Three practices follow directly from the two reports, and each is cheap.

The first is Reykjavík's application form. Before any team shortens its hours, it writes down how it will keep its service, and which few indicators will show whether it has. The form is the experiment. A team that cannot fill it in has learned where its day is badly designed, which is worth knowing whether or not the hours ever change.

The second is the British preparation period. Two months of redesign came before a single hour was cut. The trial was not a gift of time; it was a project to remove work that did not need doing, and then to give back the time it freed.

The third is the overtime line from Árbær and Grafarholt. Count what moves. If the hours come down on paper and come back as overtime, as work on the fifth day, as managers who cannot leave, the trial has relocated the work rather than redesigned it. Both reports, to their credit, counted it. Chapter 9 builds the measurement in full; chapter 8 places the trial in the twelve-week charter, chosen in week seven and run in weeks eight to eleven.

For a household the cases speak more quietly but no less clearly. The fifteen percent who would take no sum to give back their day are a reminder that the margin Keynes worried about can be recognised when it arrives, and chosen. Chapter 11 returns to it.

Keynes thought the grandchildren would need a long time to learn how to use their freedom. The trials suggest the learning can begin inside a single office, with a form, two months of preparation and an honest count of what moved. Ninety-five years after the essay, that is a smaller thing than he imagined, and a more practical one.



The Tool: The Hours Ledger

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The Tool: The Hours Ledger

A one-page instrument for a team, or a household, that wants to know which of its hours are material, which are designed and which are habit, before it changes any of them. It borrows Reykjavík's application form and the British preparation period. One page per team; one hour to fill in; review at the end of each month for three months.

1 · The baseline, as it is

Contracted hours per week:

Hours actually worked, average of the last four weeks (count, do not estimate):

Overtime, paid and unpaid, per person per month:

Work done on days off, rough hours per month:

Who absorbs the hours nobody else will (name roles, not people):

2 · Where the hours go

List the five largest regular uses of time, and mark each.

USE OF TIME	HOURS PER WEEK	MATERIAL (THE WORK REQUIRES IT) / POSITIONAL (IT SIGNALS) / DESIGNED (A RULE OR PROCESS MADE IT) / HABIT	COULD IT BE SHORTER, SHARED OR REMOVED?

3 · The application form

Written before any hours change.

The service or output that must be kept:

How it will be kept on fewer hours (the redesign, in a sentence):

Three indicators that will show whether it held: · ·

What would tell you to stop:

4 · What moves

Filled in monthly once the change begins.

Hours actually worked:

Overtime and work on days off:

Handover or coordination problems noticed:

- Whether the people in charge shortened their own hours: yes / no / partly

5 · How people are

Ask the same three questions before and after, of the same people, and record how many answer each time.

Stress, 1 (never) to 5 (all the time):

Tiredness at the end of the week, 1 to 5:

Would you go back to the old hours? yes / no / for what:

Response count, before and after: /

6 · The honest reading

What changed, and by how much:

What else changed in the same months that could explain it:

What this result cannot show:

Keep the page. Chapter 8 places it in the twelve-week charter, chapter 9 adds its predictions to the register, and the workbook at the back gathers it with every other tool.

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The Hours Keynes Promised

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