

Working hours

Nice work if you can get it

Britons are getting more leisure time. That may not always be a good thing

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GLOBALISATION has not been kind to Britons' work-life balance. Foreign competition has increased, encouraging people to work harder. British businesses must meet demands from customers based in different timezones. The internet allows people to check in with work colleagues at any time. Professional types, with legal and financial skills in demand across the globe, have in recent decades come under the greatest pressure to slog.



Some data suggest that the long-term decline in British working hours, from at least the end of the nineteenth century (when the average working week was 60 hours), was slowing or even reversing by the 1990s. Newspapers talk fearfully of the emergence of a “cult of overwork”, driven by new technology. The latest evidence seems to show that such worries are justified. Since 2011 the average number of hours that people spend at work has risen by 3%, according to data from the Office for National Statistics.

Yet interpreting recent trends is complicated by the financial crisis. The number of hours worked slumped during the recession: firms won fewer contracts and bartenders were offered shorter shifts. As the economic recovery took hold, it is hardly surprising that hours rose a little. Over a slightly longer time-frame, however, the notion that Britons are working ever harder does not stand up. The average full-timer now spends an hour less working per week than they did in the 1990s. (The data take into account extra work that people do at home—checking e-mail first thing in the morning, for instance—since they are based on surveys of what people say they do, not what employers reckon.)

In addition, the number of Britons putting in long shifts is falling. In the early 2000s about a

quarter of workers laboured for more than 45 hours a week, but by 2015 this had dropped to about a fifth. Even highly skilled people, those most likely to be in high-pressure jobs, may be feeling a little calmer. Between 2000 and 2015 the proportion of workers with a degree above a bachelor's who worked more than 60 hours a week fell from 7% to 5%.

All this may reflect a shift in employers' attitudes towards work. Some bosses are acting on a body of econometric evidence suggesting that working fewer hours makes people more productive, both on a per-hour basis and over a full week. Goldman Sachs, a bank, recently told its young charges that they need not work on Saturdays. On two days a week, those working at Agent Marketing, a firm based in Liverpool, now work for just six hours. "We cut through a lot of the admin which takes up time, to focus on actual project delivery," says Paul Corcoran, the managing director.

Improved technology may force some people to check e-mails in bed, but it can liberate others. In recent years the rate of home-working has risen—about 14% of workers are based at home, up from 11% in 2000. People working on a laptop from the kitchen take things easier than they would if they were in an office.

Legal changes also play a role. The working-time directive (WTD), a European Union plan to limit the working week to 48 hours that was introduced in Britain in 1998, may have reduced time spent at work, according to a government report from 2014. The WTD may also have encouraged workers to take more holiday, the report finds. Survey data suggest that there are fewer workers than in the early 2000s who work more than they would like to. All this may be having a positive impact on health: the incidence of work-related stress has fallen by a tenth in the past decade.

However, the fall in working hours may have a dark side. Despite six years of post-recession growth (and a record low jobless rate of about 5%), underemployment—particularly of those with low skills—is a problem. According to David Blanchflower of Dartmouth College and David Bell of Stirling University, the number of hours people say they would like to work is higher than the number they actually do. The gap between the two is likely to have risen further in the first quarter of 2016, as fears over Brexit cause the economy to slow. Some Britons may be taking a more enlightened approach to working hours, but others may simply be struggling to make ends meet.

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