

How three-day weekends can help save the world (and us too)

September 5 2016, by Alex Williams



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Almost everyone enjoys a bank holiday. A three-day weekend means more time to spend with family and friends, to go out and explore the world, and to relax from the pressures of working life. Imagine if, rather than a few times a year, we had a three-day weekend every week. This isn't just a nice idea. Beyond the possibilities for leisure, three-day

weekends might also be one of the easiest steps we could take to radically reduce our environmental impact – and future-proof our economy.

A reduction in working hours generally correlates with marked reductions in [energy consumption](#), as economists David Rosnick and Mark Weisbrot have [argued](#). In fact, if Americans simply followed European levels of working hours, for example, they would see an estimated 20% reduction in energy use – and hence in carbon emissions.

With a four-day week, huge amounts of commuting to and from work could be avoided, as well as the energy outputs from running workplaces. At a point when we need to massively cut back our carbon outputs, instituting a three-day weekend could be the simplest and most elegant way to [make our economy more environmentally friendly](#).

It's happened before. For example, [in 2007](#) the US state of Utah redefined the working week for state employees, with extended hours on Monday to Thursday meaning it could eliminate Fridays entirely. In its first ten months, the move saved the state at least US\$1.8m (£1.36m) in energy costs. Fewer working days meant less office lighting, less air conditioning and less time spent running computers and other equipment – all without even reducing the total number of hours worked.

For one day a week, thousands of commuters were able to stay at home. If the reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions from travel were included, the state estimated a saving of more than 12,000 tons of CO₂ each year.

Utah abandoned the experiment in 2011 after residents complained they were [unable to access services](#) on Fridays. It seems this sort of change has to be accompanied by a shift in our expectations so that Friday becomes a "third weekend" rather than simply a weekday without work.

What Utah does show is that, replicated across an entire country, a four day week would see substantial progress towards an economy that does less damage to the environment.

Yet there would be other benefits too. Working less would improve the elusive "work/life balance", and help to [restore our mental health](#) and physical well-being. It would also give us more time to spend on social activities, to care for children and the elderly, and to engage with our communities. Experiments with reduced working hours at select workplaces in [Sweden in 2015](#) reduced sickness and even increased productivity.

Directing gains in economic efficiency towards increased free time and reduced energy consumption, rather than making more stuff, could create a better and more environmentally safe world.

An obvious objection might be: "How could we afford this?" But there are serious economic and technological reasons for why governments, political parties, think tanks and social movements should all start to think about advocating for the implementation of three-day weekends.

As anthropologist David Graeber has recently [contended](#), many of us work jobs that, at least partially, seem pointless. Indeed, economists have long been aware of the redundant hours contained in many working days, with employees effectively [under-utilised](#) in their workplaces, yet unable to leave due to the persistent issue of "[presenteeism](#)" – where workers are valued by managers for hours logged in the office rather than productivity. Rather than work longer hours for little productive benefit, we could embrace a shorter working week and help save our planet and our own well-being.

Looking more into the long-term, a new wave of workplace automation featuring advanced robotics and machine learning systems is predicted to

replace 47% of current jobs [in the US](#) in coming decades, and 54% [in Europe](#). In these circumstances, where there will be significantly less work available, instituting policies such as three-day weekends becomes essential to make life liveable under these changed economic conditions.

As Nick Srnicek and I have argued in our book [Inventing the Future](#), automation will soon offer us the prospect of a very different world of work. More automation would make many production processes more efficient, using less energy and less human labour until, eventually, we are largely freed from work.

The key to capturing the benefits of automation without drastic social dislocation depends in part on developing policies which work to share the gains. This means a reduced working week thanks to an extended weekend, together with a [universal basic income](#).

None of this will happen overnight. But, if you're in the UK and are lucky enough to have Monday off, don't forget that extra day at home or in the park is not only fun but will help fight climate change.

Provided by City University London

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