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The New Three-Day Weekend

People who like having three-day weekends might be happy to learn that shortened workweeks are becoming more popular in America. Private businesses, states, and municipalities usually write work policies that revolve around the familiar five-day workweek model. The federal government does not mandate the five-day workweek; therefore, private and public sectors have the power to change their respective schedules. Shortened workweeks are not new concepts in the private sector. However, the public sector has been recently experimenting with shorter workweeks that consist of four ten-hour workdays and a three-day weekend. Shortening the workweek has become popular in the past two years based on the premise that if people came to work one less day, the workplace would use fewer costly utilities. The schedule caters to non-emergency and administrative jobs that do not require twenty-four hour services to the public. There is not enough data to show the long-term effects of a shortened workweek, but places in the United States that have converted to the new schedule are starting to save energy and increase productivity. Since the results are generally positive so far, the public sector should continue to experiment with shortening the official workweek.

Knowing the difference between the private and public sector is important to understanding why the public sector is the primary focus. The private sector is “that part of the economy, industry, etc., which is privately owned and free from direct state

control” (“Private Sector”). Citizens own business entities such as doctor offices and grocery stores. Although many businesses conform to the five-day workweek, some also use alternative schedules to stay competitive and fit operational needs. Because customer satisfaction is essential to making profits, flexible work schedules in the private sector do not affect the community as drastically as the public sector could. The public sector is “part of a country’s economy which is controlled by the State” (“Public Sector”). Public sector entities provide public services such as vehicle registrations, fire departments, and other interests by using taxpayer money. Since state and local governments have strict budgets, public sectors need to be careful with managing their expenses. Mismanaging budgets can discontinue vital services and affect thousands of people. Because of rising energy expenses, states and municipalities are looking at shortening the workweek to cut costs.

Although cost benefits have not been meeting expectations in some places, enough energy is being saved to warrant more cities and states to try a shortened workweek. According to Jenny Brundin of *NPR (National Public Radio)*, Utah was the first state “to mandate a four-day workweek for state employees.” Brundin found that Utah expected to save twenty percent of its energy after the implementation, but the state has only saved thirteen percent so far. Even though the savings were small, there was still a positive reduction in energy to continue the four-day workweek in Utah and inspire areas such as South Florida to follow suit in 2009. Since South Florida experimented with a shorter workweek, Jennifer Gollan of the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* newspaper reported, “[Proponents] cite savings on electric bills, building maintenance, and gas, ranging from \$120,000 annually in Lauderhill to \$200,000 a year in Pembroke Pines.”

Over time, energy savings could continue to increase if some localities elect to resolve some technical issues.

States and municipalities may have more successful energy savings if they consider the technical aspects of how buildings use electricity and other utilities. Engineers need to come up with ways to improve the energy efficiency of buildings when offices are closed. Not all buildings can simply be turned off at the end of the day. Utilities run for extended periods and require complicated shutdown procedures. Jenny Brundin of *NPR* explains that in Utah, “State energy managers have to figure out how to turn everything off on Fridays—especially the massive heating and air conditioning units.” David Rivera, the city manager for Coconut Creek, Florida, notes similar issues saying, “There’s not a great savings because you are still running your air conditioning forty hours per week and employees are still driving ten hours a day” (qtd. in Gollan). Investments are being made to increase the efficiencies of buildings. According to *State News Service*, “In total, the US DOE [United States Department of Energy] has awarded more than seventy-six million dollars for fifty-eight advanced energy-efficient building technologies and commercial building training programs throughout the United States.” New designs to buildings and utilities will save energy, but implementing plans will cost millions of dollars, which may defeat the purpose of saving money. Some areas have to decide whether the energy savings are worth changing the schedule for without improving building efficiencies. Nevertheless, shorter workweeks remain popular among employees.

Shorter workweeks give some public sector employees the opportunity to take care of their personal affairs; therefore, employees increase their productivity at work. By having an extra day added to the weekend, many employees will not have to leave work early to take care

of private matters. Many people like the new schedule because of this benefit. Bryan Walsh of *Time* magazine says, “Eighty-two percent of [Utah] workers say they want to keep the new schedule.” Since most employees are happy, the workplace is benefiting from having employees stay at work when they are supposed to. In South Florida, “Proponents of the shorter workweek say employees call in sick less frequently, work less overtime, and schedule medical appointments on their day off” (Gollan). It is important to reiterate at this point that only employees from administrative and non-emergency services with structured schedules are able to benefit from having an added day to the weekend. Not all public sector jobs are able to use the four-day work schedule because they provide twenty-four hour services.

A shortened workweek is not without flaws and criticisms. Critics say that fatigue sets in with extended work hours. This is a valid observation and should be studied as more cities begin to change their schedules. Even though an extra day off helps people relax from a long week at work, the extended hours of each workday can cause people to stress out by not having enough time to recover between shifts. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) says, “When there is a choice, managers should limit the use of extended shifts and increase the number of days employees work. Working shifts longer than eight hours will generally result in reduced productivity and alertness.” In the future, OSHA may need to take initiatives to ensure the safety of employees. For example, if there is an increase in accidents during rush hour traffic, OSHA needs to determine if employees who work extended hours cause the accidents. If so, OSHA or other agencies within the Department of Labor may need to step in and regulate work hours for the safety of employees.

Some areas of the private sector had recently reverted to the standard five-day workweek partly because of fatigue factors. This year, Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding changed their schedule after having a four-day workweek since 2004. April M. Havens and Dan Murtaugh of the *Mobile Press Register* newspaper said, “ In [Northrop Grumman’s] weekly newsletter to employees, leaders said the new schedule would improve ‘quality, productivity, and safety by allowing more effective workforce management and by reducing the fatigue factor from long hours with little time to recuperate each evening’ ” (A, 1). Even though shipbuilders may have more stressful and physically demanding jobs than those who work in government offices, fatigue can happen in any occupation. If the public sector continues to enact shorter workweeks, they still need to monitor the effects on employees over a longer period. If fatigue starts to be a problem, reverting to a five-day workweek should be considered.

The effects of a shortened workweek on a grand scale have yet to be evaluated enough to see the long-term benefits. The short-term results are still promising for energy savings and employee satisfaction. The new schedule may not always work for every city. Energy costs differ for each area, and employee safety should remain a top priority. Therefore, each city should make its own determination whether or not to enact the schedule change. As time passes, a shortened workweek may continue to show benefits and give people long three-day weekends.

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