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## SCIENCE MATTERS

By: David Suzuki



Long work hours don't work for people or the planet

In 1926, U.S. automaker Henry Ford reduced his employees' workweek from six eight-hour days to five, with no pay cuts. It's something workers and labour unions had been calling for, and it followed previous reductions in work schedules that had been as high as 84 to 100 hours over seven days a week.

Ford wasn't responding to worker demands; he was being a businessman. He expected increased productivity and knew workers with more time and money would buy and use the products they were making. It was a way of spurring consumerism and productivity to increase profits — and it succeeded. Ford, then one of America's largest employers, was ahead of his time — most workers in North America and elsewhere didn't get a 40-hour workweek until after the Second World War.

Since standardization of the 40-hour workweek in the mid-20th century, everything has changed but the hours. If anything, many people are working even longer hours, especially in North America. This has severe repercussions for human health and well-being, as well as the environment.

Until the Second World War, it was common for one person in a household, usually the oldest male, to do wage work full time. Now women make up 42 per cent of Canada's full-time workforce. Technology has made a lot of work redundant, with computers and robots doing many tasks previously performed by humans. People get money from bank machines, scan groceries at automated checkouts and book travel online. Many people now spend

most or all of their workdays in front of a computer.

Well into the 21st century, we continue to work the same long hours as 20th century labourers, depleting ever more of Earth's resources to produce more goods that we must keep working to buy, use and replace in a seemingly endless cycle of toil and consumerism.

It's time to pause and consider better ways to live.

Like shifting from fossil-fuelled lifestyles, with which our consumer-based workweeks are connected, it would have been easier to change had we done so gradually. In 1930, renowned economist John Maynard Keynes predicted people would be working 15-hour weeks within 100 years. We're clearly not on track to achieve that. As we reach the combined tipping points of overpopulation, resource over-exploitation, environmental degradation and climate change, we may no longer have the luxury of taking our time to make necessary changes.

Rather than reducing work hours to spur consumerism, as Henry Ford did, we must reduce both. We have to get beyond outdated notions and habits like planned obsolescence, excessive packaging and production of too many unnecessary goods.

The U.K. think tank New Economics Foundation argues that a standard 21-hour workweek would address a number of interconnected problems: "overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each

other, and simply to enjoy life." It points out that "the logic of industrial time is out of step with today's conditions, where instant communications and mobile technologies bring new risks and pressures, as well as opportunities."

Economist David Rosnick, author of a 2013 Center for Economic and Policy Research study on work hours and climate change, argues that reducing average annual hours by just 0.5 per cent per year through shorter workweeks and increased vacation would "likely mitigate one-quarter to one-half, if not more, of any warming which is not yet locked-in."

Beyond helping break the cycle of constant consumption and allowing people to focus on things that matter — like friends, family and time in nature — a shorter workweek would also reduce rush-hour traffic and gridlock, which contribute to pollution and climate change. It could help reduce stress and the health problems that come from modern work practices, such as sitting for long hours at computers. And it would give people more options for family care. (David Suzuki Foundation employees enjoy a four-day workweek.)

A transition won't necessarily be easy, but it's time we stopped applying 20th century concepts and methods to 21st century life. Economic systems that require constant growth on a finite planet don't make sense. The fact that the world's richest 62 people now have more wealth than the poorest half of the world's population is absurd and tragic.

It's time for a paradigm shift in our economic thinking.

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