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Does anyone want to work 5 days per week and 8 hours per day? Issues in R&D work efficiency

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Abstract

Social norms in regard to weekly and daily working times emerged more than a century ago. The nature of work and the means of doing work have, however, changed a lot over that time. Based on a survey among Estonian creative R&D employees, we sought to understand what types of employees prefer what types of work schedules. It appears that compared to men, women prefer a week where work is concentrated into 3–4 days, while men have a higher preference for a working week spread over 6–7 days. Those who sleep less than the usual 7–8 hours tend to prefer the latter working week arrangement as well. Moreover, general health, morning-types versus evening-types as well as educational level appear to have a significant impact on preferences about weekly and daily work schedules. The standard five-day working weeks and eight-hour working days may not be optimal for everyone. This is an important aspect that R&D employers and regulators should keep in mind when aiming to benefit from the full creative potential of their employees and maximising their individual wellbeing.

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Kes tahab töötada viis päeva nädalas ja kaheksa tundi päevas? T&A valdkonna töökorralduse tõhususest

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Kokkuvõte

Sotsiaalsed normid töötaja nädalasisesest ja päevasest jaotusest on üldjoontes tekkinud mitu sajandit tagasi. Vahepealsel ajal on oluliselt muutunud töö iseloom ning töötegemise võimalused. Seega tekib küsimus, kas ühiskonnas välja kujunenud arusaamad tööajakorraldusest vastavad tänapäeval töötajate soovidele ja vajadustele. Meie uurimuse sihtrühmaks on Eesti teadus- ja arendusvaldkonna töötajaid, kelle seas viisime aastatel 2015-2016 läbi kaheetapilise küsitlusuuringu. Muude uurimisküsimuste kõrval püüdsime välja selgitada, mis tüüpi töötajad millist töötaja jaotust eelistavad. Selgus, et naised eelistavad meestega võrreldes enam töönädalat, kus töö oleks jaotatud 3-4 päeva peale. Mehed aga eelistavad naistest enam 6-7 päeva peale jaotatud töönädalat. Tavapärasest 7-8 tunnist vähem magavad inimesed eelistavad suurema tõenäosusega 6-7-päevast töönädalat. Arvatavasti võimaldaks see nende jaoks une- ja töötaja jaotust parandada. Normaalse unetundidega inimesed aga eelistavad teistest suurema tõenäosusega tavapärasest viiepäevast töönädalat. Lisaks ilmneb olulisi erinevusi töötaja jaotuse eelistustes lähtuvalt töötaja üldtervislikust seisundist, hommikusest vs õhtusest tüübist ning haridustasemest. Seega ei pruugi ühetaoline tööajakorraldus ehk viis tundi nädalas ja kaheksa tundi päevas enamik töötajate jaoks optimaalne olla. Individuaalseid erisusi tööajakorralduse eelistustes peaksid silmas pidama ka tööandjad, tagamaks ühtaegu nii loovate T&A töötajate kõrgemat heaolu kui ka nende loova potentsiaali võimalikult tõhusat rakendamist.

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Working time – the requirements of the job or a tradition?

Why does the standard working day last 8 hours and the standard working week 5 days? The answers need to be sought from history rather than from the requirements of the job and people in the modern world. While it might have been economically important in the past to gather people together for work in the same place at the same time, such needs do not appear to exist in many jobs in the present day. Past research shows that mismatches between desired and actual working time arrangements may result in decreased work results (refer to Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Gaultney and Collins-McNeil, 2009), excessive turnover of employees (see for example Nabe-Nielsen et al, 2010), and adverse effects on individual well-being and health (see Bell et al., 2012). Rethinking the requirements of working time is therefore extremely necessary – for the purposes of better work, better health and better life.

There are evidently both preferences and needs for employers and employees that need to be taken into account when discussing changes to working time arrangements. An important aspect is the nature of the work being done, and its consequences on the requirements of working time. It would be difficult to imagine a bus driver, factory worker or an opera singer showing up at work at his or her discretion, while there is definitely some room for flexibility in these jobs as well. In other jobs – like that of an artist, poet or composer – there is a lot of time flexibility, and the standard duration of a working day and working week have little meaning. Many jobs remain somewhere in between full and (almost) no time flexibility.

Our research team, combining economists and medical researchers from Tallinn University of Technology and our partner universities, is interested in working time arrangements in a particular field of activity – creative research and development, meaning

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(applied) researchers, engineers, product and IT developers, and other knowledge employees in the R&D field. This is an increasingly important field of activity in modern knowledge intensive economies, although there is limited previous research on the rationale of working arrangements and its consequences in creative R&D jobs.

How would creative R&D employees like their working time to be arranged?

One of the questions of interest for our study among 153 Estonian creative R&D employees in 2015–2016 was how would they like their working day and working week to be arranged. In particular, we sought to understand what types of employees prefer what types of work schedules. Previous research has demonstrated that employees are often not in a position to choose the desired working time, leading to a conflict between preferred and actual working schedules (see e.g. Reynolds, 2003; Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2003; Böheim and Taylor, 2004).

It appears from our study that compared to men, women prefer a week where work is concentrated into 3–4 days, while men prefer a working week spread over 6–7 days. These gender-based differences in working time preferences may be related to the allocation of caregiving and household tasks in a family.

We find that those who sleep less than the average 7–8 hours tend to prefer the 6–7 day working week arrangement as well. In other words, those who do not sleep much (and who may thus be more tired and sleepy) would rather like shorter working days and more of them as opposed to long concentrated days. This may be related to the sleepiness and tiredness issues we identified under the same research project.

Moreover, general health, morning-types versus evening-types as well as educational level appear to have a significant impact on preferences about weekly and daily work schedules (details of these links will be discussed in the scientific research papers as an outcome of our project). The main message from the study is easy, yet surprisingly often ignored in work arrangements: people are different, and so are their desired working arrangements. It is particularly important to note that these are not just picky preferences, but at least partially the result of individual genetic differences that are very difficult for the individual to change.

The majority would prefer something other than standard work schedules

Our study suggests that just about one fifth of the creative R&D employees in the sample would like to work for 5 days per week, and it is also about one fifth of the sample who would prefer a working day with a fixed start and end time. The standard five-day working week and eight-hour working day may thus not be optimal for everyone. This is an important aspect that R&D employers and regulators should keep in mind when aiming to benefit from the full creative potential of their employees and maximising their individual wellbeing. More flexible weekly and daily schedules may lead to increased productivity as well as improved individual well-being, at least in creative R&D jobs.

Working time preferences is, however, one of the many issues in working time arrangements that our research project draws attention to, while distance work, the duration of employment contracts and the creative intensity of work are among some other important issues in R&D work design that warrant rethinking (see www.ttu.ee/ta2). Furthermore, this study is part of a larger effort by the research group to investigate the individual, institutional, financial and market driven aspects of development in R&D and knowledge intensive societies. We seek to heat up the public discussion of some little investigated issues of R&D efficiency, which may have considerable socio-economic development implications.

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