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Sweden: The New Laboratory for a Six-Hour Work Day

By Uri Friedman

Corn-flake capitalism has come to Sweden.

In 1930, in the throes of the Great Depression, cereal magnate W.K. Kellogg decided to conduct an experiment. He replaced the three daily eight-hour shifts at his plant in Battle Creek, Michigan with four six-hour shifts. The results? The company [hired](#) hundreds of new people, production costs plummeted, and employees operated more efficiently, learning to prioritize leisure over work. Vestiges of the system remained in place until 1985.



W.K. Kellogg (Wikimedia Commons)

Now the Swedish city of Gothenburg is considering a similar experiment. The governing coalition [has proposed](#) a year-long trial that would divide some municipal workers into a test and control group at the same pay rate, with the test group working six-hour days and the control group working the traditional eight. (It's unclear how, or if, a lunch break will factor into the scheme.)

"We'll compare the two afterwards and see how they differ," Mats Pilhem, city councilor and Left Party member, told [The Local](#). "We hope to get the staff members taking fewer sick days and feeling better mentally and physically after they've worked shorter days." He added that increased efficiency at the workplace could create more jobs in Gothenburg. The opposition Moderate Party, for its part, has accused Sweden's crusading six-hourers of trying to drum up votes ahead of elections.

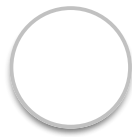
It's a debate that's playing out at the [national level](#) as well. Below, you can watch Swedish Prime

Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (Moderate Party) and Jonas Sjöstedt (Left Party) square off in January over the idea of a 35-hour work week. The Left Party's proposal, Reinfeldt argues, could cost Sweden more than a billion dollars and plunge its economy into recession.

"Modern nations shorten the week," his opponent retorts. Would the prime minister, Sjöstedt asks, be so bold as to return to the bygone era of 10-hour work days and six-day work weeks? (Swedish law now calls for [40-hour work weeks](#), though hours are often determined by collective agreements.)

Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt vs. Jonas Sjöstedt (about 6-hour work day)

By 1ntressant



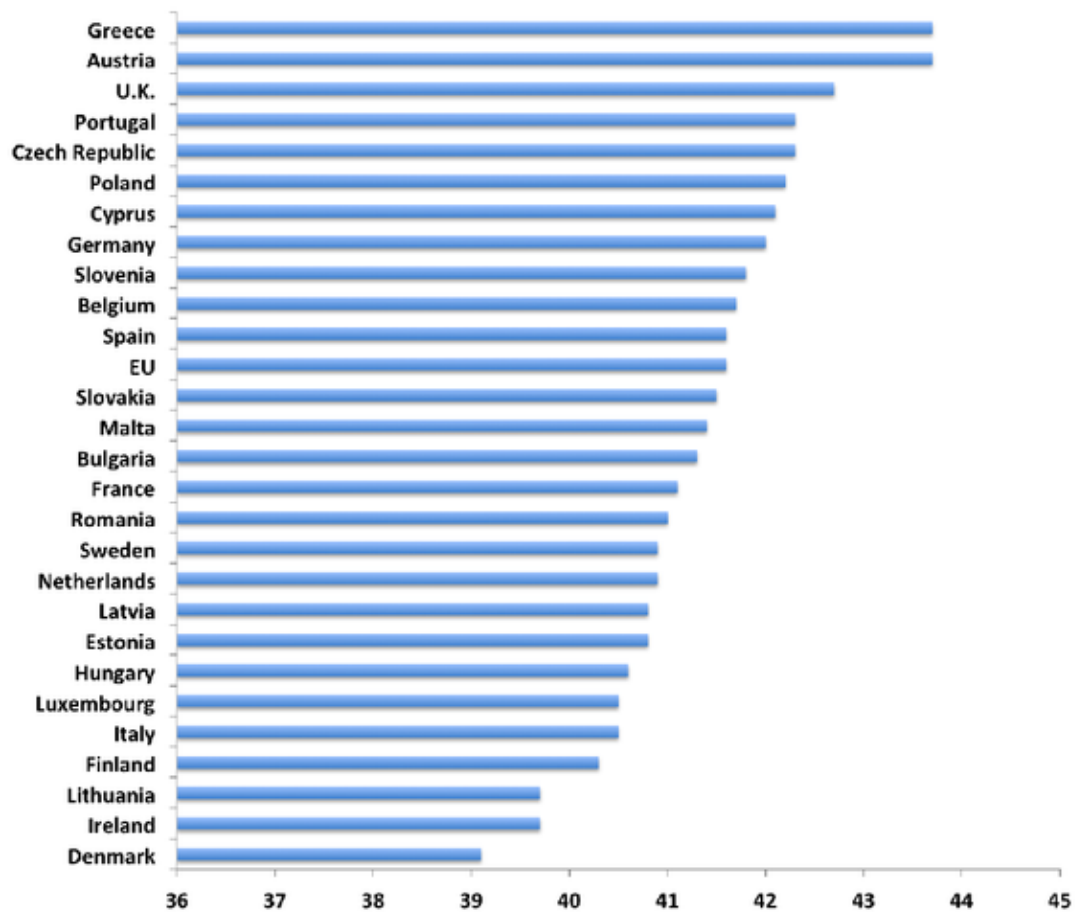
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The cult of the six-hour work day knows no bounds, stretching from [France](#) to [Venezuela](#), but the policy doesn't always work Kellogg-esque miracles. In Sweden itself, towns [have abandoned](#) the approach in the past when it proved costly and *detrimental* to workers' health (it turns out working non-stop for six hours isn't great for you, either).

This mixed record hints at a larger insight: The relationship between hours worked and productivity—let alone other variables like wealth and well-being—is incredibly complex. Spending more time at work doesn't necessarily make you more productive, and may make you less so. For evidence, just take a look at the [2009-2011 data](#) from Europe below. (Americans are [something of an exception](#); relative to other countries, we work long hours and are very productive.)

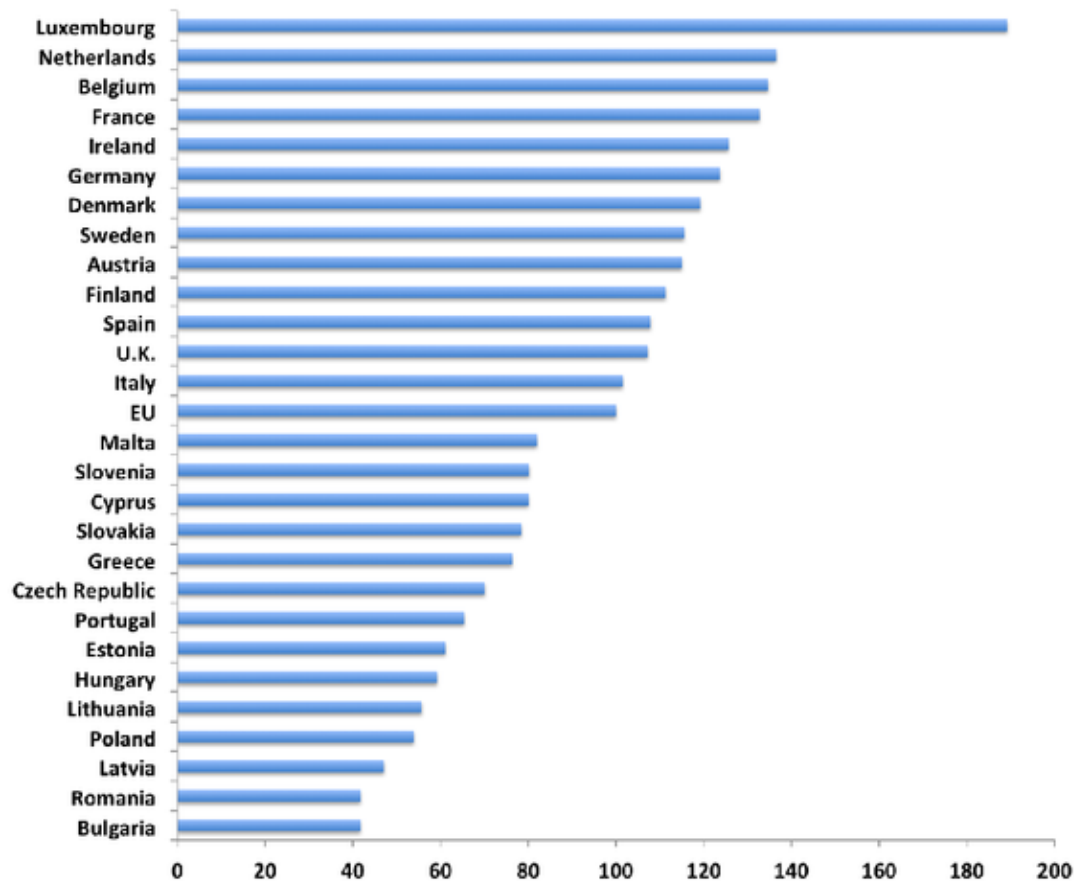
The first graph ranks countries by the average number of hours clocked per week by full-time workers. The second ranks countries by the [productivity](#) of workers per hour of labor (a score above 100 indicates that a country's productivity, measured as GDP per hour worked, is higher than the EU average). Greeks, to highlight one example, are some of Europe's [hardest workers](#), but they're not the most efficient ones.

Full-Time Hours Worked per Week



ONS/Eurostat

Productivity per Hour Worked



(ONS/Eurostat)

In a 2012 article for *Foreign Policy*, Charles Kenny [explored](#) the complicated connections between output and work hours:

The bottom line is that productivity -- driven by technology and well-functioning markets -- drives wealth far more than hours worked. And very few jobs in developed economies nowadays are classic assembly-line positions, where working 20 percent longer will mechanically produce 20 percent more widgets. Psychology plays a role here too: At least [40 years](#) of studies suggest that people work harder if you limit their time to complete a certain task. In some cases, working too hard can actually *reduce* output. Long working hours are also associated with [ill health](#), which means lost labor in the long term, as well as higher medical costs for employers and government.

As we transition to an economy dominated by [knowledge workers](#) rather than assembly-line workers, where productivity is [more difficult](#) to both measure and optimize, we haven't yet figured out the best formula for maximizing output—something that, in any event, will vary from region to region and sector to sector. Is the answer more hours? Fewer hours? Flextime? Technological solutions that have nothing to do with hours as units of labor?

Hence experiments like Gothenburg's. Consider that in the debate I highlighted above over the 35-hour work week, *both* Swedish politicians claim that their approach to the country's labor market is the more modern one.