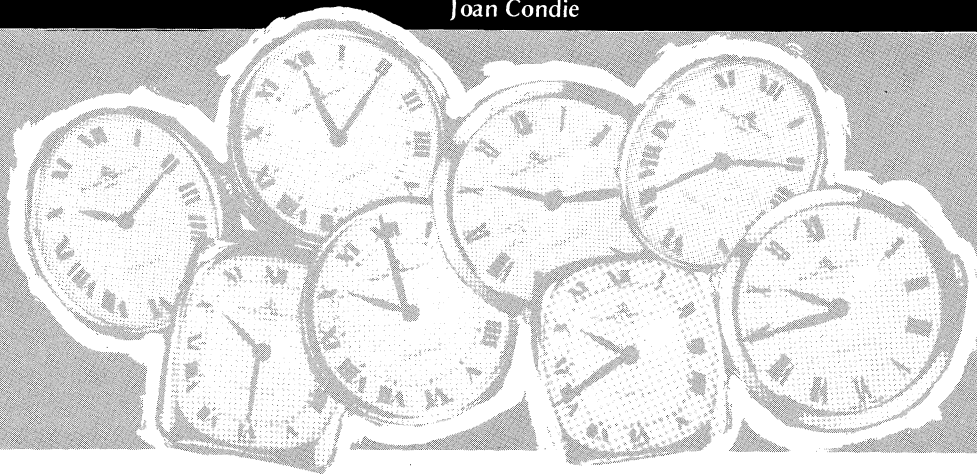


# The Potential Importance of Flexible Working Hours and Reduced Work Weeks to Working Women

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**Cet article fait le bilan du concept des heures flexibles et des heures réduites au travail et leur impact sur la vie des femmes.**

The rigidly scheduled forty-hour work week has been challenged frequently in recent years. Most prominent in the challenge have been the introduction and spreading use of flexible working hours. A second threat lies in the emergence of the reduced work week. Both flexible working hours (FWH) and reduced work weeks have been successfully introduced into numerous work settings and appear to be gaining in popularity. These innovations seem to be part of a trend towards individualized scheduling, making working hours a personal arrangement and decision rather than a predetermined system imposed on one and all. Although individualized scheduling could be viewed as a change for the better for most workers, it seems to offer especially exciting possibilities to women. These possibilities will be the focus of this paper.

First, however, one must understand just what FWH and reduced work weeks are, and realize why they are attractive to so many people.

Briefly, an FWH system requires employees to complete a certain number of hours each day, week, or month but allows them flexibility in the exact scheduling of those hours. Employees must be at work during peak hours (the core time) but may fill in the other hours any time they wish within a fairly broad range (the bandwidth, e.g., 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.).<sup>1</sup> Although FWH is a very recent innovation, it has become very popular in Europe and is gaining ground in North America.<sup>2</sup> The particularly attractive features of FWH are the allowance for individual differences in preferred working times, the opportunity to travel to and from work at less hectic times than rush hours, and the easier adjustment to work flow so that peaks and valleys can be smoothed out. Also in its favour is the fact that an FWH system is attractive to prospective employees and thereby provides an improved basis for recruiting. The benefits of the implementation of FWH can be very real and very tangible to employers. Some companies on FWH have reported increased productivity, decreased absenteeism and tardiness, less need for supervision, less turnover, and less overtime.<sup>3</sup> Of course, FWH do not work for everyone or for every company. Some employees may not be eligible for FWH because of the nature of their tasks and this may breed resentment. In management or in other jobs where

one's duties rotate to a great extent around other people, there may be pressure to work very long hours. People may feel that they should get in as early as their boss and stay as late or later in order to make a good impression. So much for the 'individualized' scheduling. In some occupations, one's working hours are dictated by the nature of the job and variation in the scheduling is simply not feasible. Nevertheless, FWH do present a potential boon to many workers.

Reduced work weeks alter the hours-per-day ration in order to decrease the number of days worked in a week but maintain the number of hours worked. For example, some people work four days a week at ten hours per day; others work for three days at twelve hours per day. These short-week arrangements offer advantages to both employees and employers. As with FWH, the employer may expect improved employee morale, an improved basis for recruiting, and possibly a decrease in turnover and absenteeism. In addition, the longer working day may mean greater utilization of equipment and allow more time to complete a particular job, thereby saving cost in start-up and close-down operations.<sup>4</sup> For the employee, the reduced work week means increased leisure time (e.g. the appealing three-day weekend), greater convenience in shopping, medical and dental appointments, etc., and less time and money spent in travelling (e.g., a saving of twenty percent when the work week is reduced from five days to four). Workers can often choose their 'day off'. Proponents of the reduced work week like to emphasize the increased leisure time. It is interesting to note, however, that a study of some workers on a four-day work week revealed that those workers spent no more time at leisure than do those on a five-day week. Instead, the workers spent more time at 'obligated' activities such as shopping and caring for children.<sup>5</sup>

Knowing exactly what FWH and reduced work weeks entail, one can understand how their implementation has given many people greater choice in the allocation and distribution of their time spent at work, at home, in leisure, with their families, etc. This added freedom in the scheduling of events is of great importance to women and men who wish to share the duties of raising a family, keeping a home, and fulfilling the financial needs of the family. It could make such sharing much more practicable.

Individualized scheduling, including both reduced work weeks and flexible work hours, offers the opportunity for both members of a couple to work, to do the necessary

household chores, and to look after the children in a shared manner which would be impossible in a regular Monday-to-Friday work week. For example, suppose a woman works Tuesday to Friday (ten hours a day) and her husband works Monday to Thursday (ten hours a day). This means that their children can be with both parents on the weekend, with their father only on one day, with their mother only on another, and in day care for three days. With such a set-up, both parents can enjoy caring for their children by themselves as well as with their mates, both can pursue careers and maintain outside interests and activities, two full-time pay cheques are coming in, and day care is a three-day expense instead of a five-day one. If both parents are on flexible working hours, they can cover for each other on day care days in the early morning and in the evening when the day care facilities are not open.

Besides the economic advantages, the above arrangement is attractive in that it offers both parents a variety of experiences and activities, locking neither one into a rigid role. The mother need not feel guilty about 'abandoning' her children. She is still caring for her children but simply sharing that caring with others just as capable (e.g., her husband). The work experience will probably make the woman a more satisfied and fulfilled person. She may be more interesting to her family, perhaps more appreciative of her family, and happier with her present and future roles. The father need not feel embarrassed over taking on a 'feminine' role. He will probably enjoy the experience and learn to value the importance and realize the difficulty of raising a child and keeping a home. Both parents will learn a great deal and have many interesting and varied experiences to share.

The above example is only one of many possibilities. If each parent worked a four-day week but only two of their work-days coincided, they could cut day care costs down to two days, each care for the children for two days and have one day for the family together. Or they could have four day care days and each have a day totally to themselves (to pursue a hobby, or take further education, etc.). Three-day work weeks or other configurations would allow for many other arrangements.

All of this sounds very good but it is far from realization and is perhaps unrealistic in some aspects. Individualized scheduling is still very rare. And it may never be possible to the extent described in the example, especially in certain occupations where there are scheduling demands out of the control of the incumbent. Even if both parents were on individualized scheduling, the optimal co-ordination of the two schedules might be impossible because of some restrictions. Although cutting day care costs down to only two or three days a week is an attractive proposition, it may not be feasible if most day care centres operate on a strict five-days-a-week basis. Working ten or twelve hours a day can be very tiring and, in fact, may make one too tired to carry out the normal everyday tasks when one gets home. Because of this, some may opt for the regular work week instead of a reduced version.

Even taking into consideration these cautions and doubts, the ideal of individualized scheduling is very provocative in its potential to working women. Many women are working outside the home today, some by choice, others through necessity. In the former case, it is realized that women can gain a great deal of satisfaction from their work experience, satisfaction which sometimes cannot be fully provided by being a homemaker. With respect to the latter case, where working is a necessity, it is important to note that many women are the sole or major supporters of their families. But even when there is an income provided by a father, it is often

necessary for the woman to earn an income as well so that the family can maintain its desired standard of living. Whether a woman is working by choice or through necessity, her entry into the work world probably was not accompanied by a relaxation of her 'duties' at home. Essentially, she is holding two full-time jobs: one in the home and one out of it. This leads to fatigue, stress, and frustration. The situation is undesirable and unfair. Because of this, many people advocate that men participate much more in the activities surrounding raising their families and keeping their homes. This sharing is not recommended only for the purpose of relieving the over-burdened women, however. Men's participation in household and family activities is important in its own right. Men can start to enjoy these things and experience the pains and pleasures previously denied them to a great extent by the traditional male role.

The arguments for sharing the fulfilment of both financial needs and family demands between partners are numerous. However, the actual execution of a sharing scheme is often very difficult to accomplish. The advent of individualized scheduling (through the widespread use of reduced work weeks and FWH) could make this task much easier. The difficulties of the implementation of individualized scheduling may some day be overcome, especially if its popularity forces others to accommodate to it. It may be possible only for some, but at least these people could draw the benefits.

The potential importance of FWH and reduced work weeks to couples in their plans of shared work and home duties seems to be quite obvious. Yet it is never mentioned by those who use or who advocate either system. This could be because most of the proponents are men and, as a result, have not realized (or do not want to realize) the possibilities. If recognition of the potential occurs, it may provide a further boost to the acceptance of these systems.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 S. Baum and W.M. Young, *A Practical Guide to Flexible Working Hours* (London: Kogan Page, 1973).  
H. Brown, 'Flexitime takes over in more and more Canadian companies', in *Canadian Insurance*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 1978, pp. 8-10.
- 2 About forty per cent of Swiss wage earners are on flexitime, thirty per cent of Swedish workers, and six per cent (or four million) in West Germany. In Canada, about 250 organizations are on flexitime, led by the insurance industry. See Brown, *ibid.* See also R. LaBerge, 'Personalized Work Schedules', in *The Labour Gazette*, 77, No 12, 1977, pp. 539-42.
- 3 Brown, *op. cit.* See also LaBerge, *op. cit.*
- 4 Canada, Department of Labour, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Concerning Proposed Changes in the Canada Labour Code, Part III, to Provide for a Modified Work Week of Less Than Five Days. Phase II, Amendment to the Code*, December 1972.
- 5 *The Labour Gazette*, May 1978, p. 171.