

# What a Four-Day Work Week Means for Productivity, Well-Being, and the Environment



The Ecology Action Centre, with staff pictured here, is one organization breaking from the status quo and implementing a four-day work week.

by **SARAH MOORE** /// EAC Staff

The concept of a four-day work week is not new.

Four years after the seminal 1973 work *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* by E.F. Schumacher was published, researchers Richard Hartman and Mark Weaver looked at factors that influence organizations to switch to a four-day work week.

They noted that American organized labour leader Walter Reuther bargained for a shortened work week in the 1950s, “yet it is only since 1970 that the current rapid increase in interest ... has emerged.”<sup>i</sup>

The idea didn’t gain further traction, remaining a radical departure in industrialized countries from the 40-hour status quo. That might not be the case for much longer.

Before the pandemic, shortened work weeks were becoming more common. Then COVID-19 disrupted many workplace practices altogether, and organizations adapted to remote work and hybrid events.<sup>ii</sup>

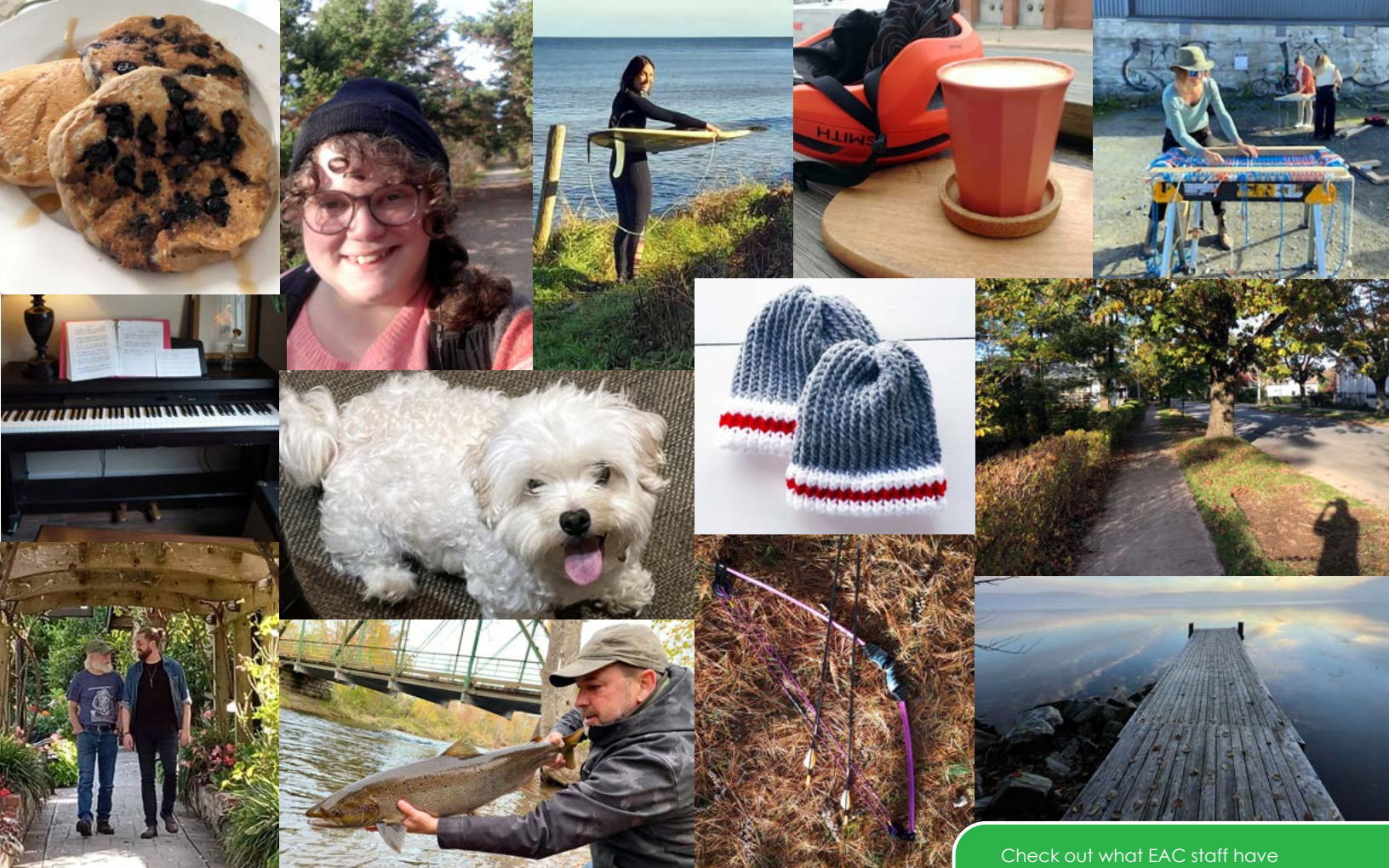
Now some are proactively changing the status quo. The Ecology Action Centre is one: on October 3, we launched a nine-month pilot of a four-day work week. So did the Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia, New Dawn Enterprises, and the Cape Breton Centre for Craft and Design.

## Productivity and environmental gains

In 1977, many firms reducing work hours actually “experienced a positive impact on productivity,” a fundamental reason to make the switch permanent, wrote Hartman and Weaver.

Today, a six-month pilot of a four-day work week in the UK has shown positive results at its halfway point. Of more than 70 companies taking part, 46 per cent said productivity has remained around the same level, while 49 per cent reported slight or significant improvement.<sup>iii</sup>





Check out what EAC staff have been up to on their Fridays!

Not only that, but 86 per cent said it is “extremely likely” or “likely” that they will continue the policy after the trial ends—which, with lower emissions from commuting and electricity use in offices, is good news for the planet.

One study estimated that cutting work hours by 25 per cent could result in reductions of ecological footprint, carbon footprint, and carbon dioxide emissions of 30.2 per cent, 36.6 per cent, and 10.5 per cent, respectively.<sup>iv</sup> Another analysis indicated that reducing working time by one per cent could reduce energy use by 0.7 per cent and greenhouse gas emissions by 0.8 per cent.<sup>v</sup>

These reductions may be offset by activities people do on that fifth day. Most of us are caught in an exhausting, relentless cycle of material growth: work more to earn more to buy more to be more. It’s not sustainable—for us or the planet.

## Slowing down

The good news is, there’s another way to do things. EAC staff shared what they were looking forward to in the new paradigm. Chief among them: more time—to rest, enjoy time with friends and family, volunteer, explore hobbies and creative opportunities, be outside, and, tellingly, “have an identity between workhorse and couchslug.”

As Christine Emba wrote in 2021, many such pursuits “are unlikely to be recognized as creating economic value. But they’re obviously rich in human value.”<sup>vi</sup>

A four-day work week, with intentions of degrowth and slowing down, carves out space for these worthwhile pursuits. Organizational productivity is just a bonus.

i. Hartman, R.I., Weaver, K.M. 1977. Four factors influencing conversion to a four-day work week. *Human resource management*, vol16, iss1, pp24-27, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930160104>

ii. "Is it Time for the Four-Day Work Week?" Torstar Syndication Services, a Division of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited, last modified Jun 13, 2022.

iii. Lockhart, C. 2022. UK Companies in 4 Day week Pilot Reach Landmark Halfway Point. <https://www.4dayweek.com/news-posts/uk-four-day-week-pilot-mid-results>

iv. Knight, K., Rosa, E.A., Schor, J.B. 2012. Reducing growth to achieve environmental sustainability: the role of work hours. *Microsoft Word - workingpaper\_cover\_TW* (umass.edu)

v. Nässén, J., Larsson, J. 2015. Would shorter working time reduce greenhouse gas emissions? An analysis of time use and consumption in Swedish households. *Environment and planning C: politics and space*, vol33 iss4 pp726-745. <https://doi.org/10.1068/c12239>

vi. Emba, C. 2021. A four-day work week will make us better humans. *Indianapolis business journal*, vol42 iss21 p9. <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/docview/2557266639?pq-origsite=primo>

**Sarah Moore** (she/her) is a communications officer at the Ecology Action Centre. Her writing has been published in CBC News, the National Observer, Maclean’s, and more.