

The Advantage Of Being A Little Underemployed

May 17, 2017 by *Morgan Housel*

Before 1900 the average American worker worked more than 60 hours a week.

A standard schedule was ten-hour days, six days a week.

You stopped working when it was too dark to see or to go to church. It was exhausting. It was often fatal.

Unions helped turn this around. In 1916, railroad unions demanded an eight-hour work day, largely because work after that point correlated with a rise in accidents and death. The railroads declined. So workers went on strike. America's rail system nearly came to a halt.

President Woodrow Wilson, desperate to get the trains moving, asked congress to write an eight-hour railroad work day into law ASA The Adamson Act.

Twenty years later, the New Deal pushed for broader workers' rights.

**It used the Adamson Act as a template,
as no one wanted to favor one field over
another. The eight-hour, five-day workday
was standardized for all industries.**

Which is crazy.

The biggest employment change of the last century is the number of careers that shifted from physically exhausting to mentally exhausting.

From doing stuff with your arms to doing stuff with your head.

Every person I've worked with comes back from vacation saying some variation of the same thing:

“Now that I had some time to think, I've realized ...”

“With a few days to clear my mind, I figured out ...”

“While I was away I got this great idea ...”

The irony is that people can get some of their most important work done outside of work, when they're free to think and ponder. The struggle is that we take time off maybe once a year, without realizing that time to think is a key element of many jobs, and one that a traditional work schedule doesn't accommodate very well.

we're set on the idea that a typical work day should be eight uninterrupted hours seated at your desk. Tell your boss you found a trick that will make you more creative and productive, and they ask what you're waiting for.

Tell them that your trick is taking a 90-minute walk in the middle of the day, and they say no, you need to work. Another way to put this is that a lot of workers have thought jobs without much time to think.

The “larger questions” often can’t be tackled at work, because creativity and critical thinking require uninterrupted focus – like going for a walk or sitting quietly on a couch by yourself. Or a bike ride. Or talking to someone outside your field.

The traditional eight-hour work schedule is great if your job is repetitive, customer-facing, or physically constraining. But for the large and growing number of “knowledge jobs,” it might not be.

You might be better off taking two hours in the morning to stay at home thinking about some big problem.

Or go for a long mid-day walk to ponder why something isn't working.

Or leaving at 3pm and spend the rest of the day envisioning a new strategy.

There's never going to be an Adamson Act for knowledge workers who need time to think. It's up to you to figure it out.

The first step is realizing that taking time in the middle of your day to do stuff that doesn't look like work is the most important part of your work day.