

Shorter Work Weeks

Alex Pang: [00:00:01] Across a wide range of industries, it turns out that shortening hours increases productivity, increases happiness, recruitment and retention, and even in places where you would expect there to be a really significant hit in terms of your labor costs. There are benefits that help make up for that. That was Dr Alex Pang on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Diana Hill: [00:00:34] We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:00:42] I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado.

Diana Hill: [00:00:46] I'm Dr. Diana Hill, practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:00:50] From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: [00:00:56] And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, director of the Center for Stress and Anxiety Management.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:01:02] We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Diana Hill: [00:01:05] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:01:07] Hi everyone. We are happy to be partnering with Praxis Continuing Education. Praxis is a great source of workshops and online courses you can take. You can look at Praxis for cutting-edge therapy approaches and to get some of your continuing education credits taken care of. Uh, if you'd like to find out more, just go to our webpage off the clock, psych.com. And go through the sponsor page and click through to Praxis and you can find out more there and get a promo code for \$50 off your registration. This is Debbie. Today I'm bringing you an interview with Dr Alex Pang about his new book. Yael, you've interviewed him before about his previous book. He came on to talk about rest in episode number 45 and you did the interview.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:01:58] Yeah, I think he was actually my first official interview as a host on Psychologists Off the Clock and what a great interview to start with because he's such a nice guy. I'm a huge fan of his both. As a reader and just personally since the interview, he and I have maintained a relationship and he's become my unofficial mentor in my writing work, and he's just been so helpful and kind and has gone out of his way.

So huge shout out to Alex as a human being, as well as a prolific and brilliant writer who kind of revolutionizes the way that we look at this idea of what it means to work and what it means to rest and how we can do both more wisely. In my previous interview with him, we talked a lot about the value of rest versus overwork and how resting strategically actually helps us to be more productive, more creative, happier.

And what's so cool is that the interview that you did about his new book is really a continuation and sort of a globalization of some of his ideas that he takes from

his earlier work.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:03:03] That's right. It's a little counterintuitive cause he actually argues, I think in both books, that rest actually makes us more refreshed and productive in the long run. And in this new book, it's about. Shorter workweeks and basically instead of blaming the victim for not being resilient enough, he really focuses on how to change the culture, like to look at them more, the org organizational level, the cultural level, and he really promotes a total shift in how we think about our work week and what actually really is the most sustainable and productive for people.

And it's not always what you think.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:03:40] Yeah. For me, that's so powerful because if even as an individual, you recognize the value of working a little bit less. If you work for a company. Any that expects it or demands it, you're in trouble. And especially, and he talks a bit about this in all of his work, especially as a woman, as a parent, that, that can really come with a lot of judgment and a lot of negative consequences.

And so for his new book, he really talks about the importance of this. Growing movement at a systems level. And what's so fun, just as his book is starting, is about to hit the market, is that I'm starting to see this in the media all over the place where I'm like on NPR. Recently I heard an interview with a CEO of a company that had recently taken on shorter work weeks, and they were talking about how it's enhanced the work culture, the productivity, the creativity, the sustainability, and in all these ways, it.

It's counterintuitive, but shorter work weeks resting more is good for companies. It's good for their bottom line, which is kind of wild and it's good for workers, happiness and and balance in the long run.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:04:46] Yes. I think you'll find this episode validating if you've experienced this yourself. I know, I sure did. Um, it feels almost a little revolutionary to, to think in this way, so please open up your mind and take a listen. We hope you enjoy it.

I am welcoming dr Alex Pang back to the podcast. He's joined us before a previous episode number 45 with my cohost Yel Schoenbrunn on, and that was episode 45 on his book rest. Why you get more done when you work less.

Welcome back, Alex, we're so happy that you're joining us again.

Alex Pang: [00:05:25] Great to be with you

Debbie Sorensen: [00:05:26] Yeah. Last time you talked about some of our assumptions that overwork equals better.

Right? And you talked a lot about the benefits of rest and of deliberately taking time to rest. And I listened to the episode again. I had listened to it. You know, a while ago, and I think you make some really important points that dovetail into our interview today about how rest isn't the enemy of productivity.

It actually really helps us be more productive and creative and avoid burnout.

Alex Pang: [00:05:55] Yes. So, and I think that we, you know, we, we live in a world that, Does a fabulous job of convincing us that overwork is both or of necessary and inevitable and inescapable. Right? That's, you know, we see what of, we see our peers doing it. we hear stories of incredibly successful people who work Herculean hours and therefore become, you know, or of hedge fund

billionaires or tech Titans.

And we are surrounded by these messages that about hustle culture or, you know, that, uh, that tell us that the way to. Yeah. The way to become a success is through, um, enormous amounts of, labor constantly. We also, of course, live in a technical environment, uh, environment in which you, we now carry our offices around in our pockets.

And these. And as a result, you know, we have both the technical ability to always be connected to the office, which has turned into a kind of almost sort of moralistic demand that we. Always be connected to the office. And so I think would between, and so there were, there were all kinds of things that encourage us subtly and overtly to treat work and rest as competitors or to treat rest as not a necessity, but either.

Now a luxury or even a sign of weakness. And so my work in the last few years has been an effort to make the case for the value of rest, for really everybody, whether you are, you know, or of a school bus driver or a school teacher, or you are a, uh, a musician or software developer. and. More recently to explain how it is that organizations have started to take rest more seriously and to give people more time for rest by short, mainly by shortening their working hours.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:08:18] Right. And this leads to your current work, your new book just coming out, which is called *Shorter: Work, Better, Smarter, and Less. Here's How*. And this is what we're here to talk about today. Um. Yeah, and I'm so interested in this because I love that you're taking this approach of looking at it at the organizational level, because I talk a lot with people about burnout.

In my job, in my work as a therapist, I have a so many clients, I've experienced it myself, and often what I find is that people will come in for therapy, for instance, to address burnout, and they'll tell me. You know that they want to get some treatment, some help with it. They want to learn mindfulness skills or stress management skills.

But then they described their work setting and it sounds just very, really toxic to me. And I, part of me is like, you know, this isn't you. It's the environment that you're in. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit, because you've done so much research on this, what is it about our modern workplace culture that can be so problematic for people.

Alex Pang: [00:09:22] Well, I think in this context, the actually, that toxic metaphor is a really good one, right? And the, the, in a sense, no matter where we work, no matter the industry, or of the particularities of our own situations, we are. We work in a time that tells us that if we are, you know, working at, you know, in a radioactive or toxic job site, what we need to do is develop resilience and mindfulness and you know, and essentially solve this problem ourselves.

we have managed to privatize solutions to what are organizational and structural problems. We're trying to use mindfulness to solve basic challenges in modern capitalism. There's some recent research done recently looking at, , social workers in the UK, for example, studying their attitudes towards resilience, right? What are they understand by resilience? You know, what does it mean for them? How do they, how do they, uh, how do they try to develop it and make use of it? But also. Looking a little, looking a little higher and asking what role kind of rhetorical role does resilience play in the fighting responsibility for, , for good and

bad things in workplaces?

What they found was that the language of resilience is used both to describe a set of things that individuals need to develop for themselves, but also to absolve to absolve institutions and governments of responsibility for doing things like increasing workloads while cutting budgets. And placing new demands on people, on clients who often are in, are in desperate situations.

And effectively saying to people on the front lines to social workers, it is your personal responsibility to deal with all this stuff that we're throwing at you. Right. And I think that this is, that it is emblematic of a bigger problem that we have today, that there is, there is in a sense of kind of downside to.

The language we've developed around mindfulness and resilience and kind of self-help, those of us who've written about this, and you know, I have an, I think of Rest in a way, my previous book, was about the role of rest in the lives of very creative and prolific individuals.

And I think that these, you know, books like this have the benefit of reminding us that we know that

we have a capacity to to meet these kinds of challenges, , and at their best. Help us think through how we can do that, you know? But.

They have also been read in ways that, give bad management, toxic workplaces, slashed budgets.

They take all of that and they say, that stuff doesn't matter, right? What you need to do. Is come up with your own solutions to, to these problems. The other problem that it has had is that it personalizes what are often collective issues. So I think that, so for example, strategies for, or policy for, for flexible work.

Often push are well-meaning, but you know, they are designed to allow, particularly, you know, professionals and working mothers to remain in workplaces and to work full time while still caring for children. But what they also end up doing. Unintentionally is pushing responsibility for managing both one's presence in the home ones, or of professional reputation, one's visibility to coworkers and managers entirely onto or onto the workers themselves.

And so, one of the reasons that flexible work. Policies have not been as successful as we all expected was that they've ended up creating a situation in which essentially women are expected to work as if they don't have children. Um, raise children as if they don't have jobs to do both to some impossibly high, but nebulously defined standards.

And finally, to put the responsibility on them. If they feel like they fail. And so even though you have

large numbers of parents in the workplace who are struggling with these, with these issues, we've tended to see this as entirely personal problems. These are things that we have that every single one of us has to work out for ourselves.

And one of the things that the companies that I've been looking at, teach is that we really. We can deal with these things much more effectively if we recognize the structural and collective dimension of them and we, we solve them together by, you know, and by doing so, not only do we solve them more effectively, not only do we make workplaces happier places, we actually can make companies more productive and leaner and better run as a result.

So, um, end of rant.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:14:52] Yes. I mean, it's a, it's a win-win, and I think what you're pointing to is that we often blame the individual for something that's really a systems issue. And I can really relate to what you're saying here, which is that you kind of take it on as your own problem and you always feel this sense of, Oh, I'm, I'm not good enough.

I'm not keeping up enough. And it's so built into the cultural and the systems and there's something I love about your book. You really question why things are the way they are. And I think you did this in your other book too, and in this one you, we might just accept the way that current work environments are because that's the way they've been but you questioned that you questioned some really fundamental things.

You don't just buy into these kinds of assumptions and you think a little bit outside the box. How do you think we got here to this being the default about overwork and the just current modern workweek the way it is. And I think of some particular environments like corporate law or medicine or something where it's just like, it's been this way forever and it's really hard to change it.

Well, how did we get here?

Alex Pang: [00:15:58] So I think broadly speaking, um. The macro economic story is that working hours from world war II actually were falling fairly steadily until about the mid 1970s and then that flattened out. so for everybody since roughly, or of the recession in the 1970s and the oil, the oil shocks, Working hours have not gone down.

Now this has happened despite enormous increases in individual productivity, company productivity, the stunning growth of economies in the West, in Japan, China, Korea, et cetera. Since then, um. So what accounts for this disconnect? Well, one of the things that's happened is that we've had, um, a decline in the power of organizations that previously had advocated for shorter working hours, specifically labor unions.

Right? one of the great challenges of unions was to shorten. They're short and working hours through the 19th century, and they did actually a really good job of that. Right.

So. We've got some structural issues like, , the decline of order of labor unions and order bargaining power that made, policies around shorter work weeks, uh, shorter working hours and over time, the norm before the 1970s and 1980s.

Another thing I think is that, We have had the rise of industries and career types, particularly finance and sort of the high tech industries that have pioneered a career model that said, the way to be successful, the way to get rich is not to join a company in, you know, right out of college.

Climb the ladder, wait your turn, and then eventually become a S, you know, become a success. At one time in the 1950s both General Electric and General Motors were run by guys named Charlie Wilson, both of whom had Literately started in the mail room and worked their way up the company. By the 1980s. That was for stupid people. The way that you got rich was, you know, you start a company at 19 like, you know Steve Jobs and Wazniak, or you go to Wall Street, you work a hundred hour weeks, and within five years you're either a billionaire

or you've burned out. That became a template for how we, you know, how we become rich and successful. technology has also played, you know, a nontrivial role. The fact that we are able now to, to work anywhere, anytime means that we are now supposed to work anywhere, anytime. And then finally, I think that there's, there has been this cultural shift.

toward long hours as we've moved mainly from an economy that is, you know, one base around manufacturing and manufacturing and agriculture that have kind of natural rhythms and limits. Right? You don't continue to plow a field after the sun has gone down or after the factory bell goes off.

But. In knowledge work, it's harder to manage people. There were less clear standards about what constitutes success. You always think you can do a little bit more. Um, you know, and as a consequence, it becomes harder to switch off.

And that, I think in the last couple of decades has gone from being. Part of the challenge that we've tried or have tried to manage to being something that, or of companies have consciously sought to exploit.

So I think that's why we've gotten into this situation. Um, all of those things together have served to make overwork seem like not just.

Okay. You know, something that we have to kind of accept as the price of living in the modern world, but as a kind of fundamental condition. It's something that, you know, we simply, you know, that everybody does.

And you know, if you want to survive and thrive, you've got to do it too.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:20:12] Right? There's this social pressure almost the sense of if your your clients emailing it you, you at 11:00 PM and and your boss is, and the expectation is that you'll respond. Then it just keeps it going.

Alex Pang: [00:20:25] yes. And it's, you know, you see this even in industries where that kind of response really is not necessary. and I have, you know, my wife is a teacher and her school has had to deal with the challenge of, you know, parents emailing late at night, you know, with, you know.

Six quick questions and getting mad because they don't get a response half an hour later. And this is, you know, and these are not immersed, you know, these are not emergencies. And you know, w but, but. Thanks to the speed with which it's possible to communicate with, you know, or have, uh, with teachers, with doctors or whoever.

Um, we now expect quick responses because we can send quick responses. And so I think that the, that, um, uh, that. The pace of technology, the pace of communication has itself helped reinforce expectations that because we are able to communicate apparently quickly and effortlessly, that, um, you know, that, uh, that people should respond to us at that same speed.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:21:41] Right, and we all get caught up in it. What, what? You've interviewed a lot of people and talked to a lot of people. What are you think are some of the negative impacts of this, this culture on people, on individuals? How does it affect us?

Alex Pang: [00:21:54] Well, you know, I mean, other than, you know, sort of shortening careers, increasing risk of, you know, chronic illnesses ranging from, you know, depression to heart disease. or of impacting families, setting a bad example for children, increasing our carbon and energy footprints. There really

are no downsides.

Um,

Debbie Sorensen: [00:22:17] Just those, just those minor

Alex Pang: [00:22:18] yeah. Just those, but I think that the, you know, Overwork is one of these things that turns out to have enormous unaccounted for consequences for people, for families, and for economies. Right. You know, there was, there are companies like general motors now spend more on healthcare costs than they spend, , you know, bending steel and making automobiles. and part of the reason that companies. Spend so much on these things is that, um, we have organized workplaces and set expectations in ways that are, you know, physically and mentally demanding

unnecessarily. and I think that the good news is we are beginning to develop, the accounting and the language to explain how it is that this stuff actually is counterproductive, expensive, bad for companies, for people and professions. And to explain and also to understand that there are alternatives that we can put into practice that allow us to do the work that we want to do. To be as often as productive and profitable as we have been in the past. Um, while actually, working far fewer hours and, also, having better lives and better family lives.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:23:41] Well, and I'd like to get into some, some of your thoughts about those benefits here in a second. But first, just to quickly kind of highlights. You've alluded to a couple of times, which is about how hardworking in these inflexible systems can be for parents and especially for women because we, women tend to take on so much of the child care and domestic work. And I just, this was so validating to me, Alex. I went part time when I had my kids. And you know, you write in the book that working part time sounds good in theory, but that it really. Is stressful. Your income is cut by quite a lot. And I personally, I don't really regret it cause I think it's been great in a lot of ways. But I also think that that it is stressful for people. And.

That part time or flexible work isn't really necessarily the solution. It's kind of has its own set of problems. Can you talk a little bit about that? About why going in that direction of part time and flexible work isn't really going to solve this for us?

Alex Pang: [00:24:43] Yeah. Well, I, th the, what the research has indicated is that, Part-time and flexible policies have several unintended consequences, right? I mean, for one thing, they set up a dichotomy between full time workers who are in the office, who are, you know, visible to each other and to their bosses.

And. Other people. and what this does is it puts people who are working from home, who are working flexibly, who are working part time at both a short term and long term disadvantage. the long term disadvantage is that you are less likely to be promoted with your peers. Because you're less likely to be, given, or significant responsibilities or put on high profile projects because most managers are challenged to to believe that people who are working remotely or flexibly or a part time are capable, you know, are as engaged and committed.

As workers who were there. we are in a sense, incentivizing the wrong thing. It turns out, you know, anybody can sit in a chair in an office for 12 hours a day, but

we think that that's a sign of dedication. You know, in fact, it's not. One of the other challenges I think is that it, in most workplaces, they also raise, You know, working flexibly raises questions about how dedicated you truly are.

At the same time working flexibly places upon the person who is, you know, who's working flexibly, the burden of remaining visible to colleagues and to managers. juggling on a day by day basis or sometimes hour by hour basis. The multiple demands of, you know, of home life and work life often in a way that. Increases rather than decreases the challenges and the stresses of doing both satisfactorily and, so what all of this means is that if you are. If you find yourself in the situation where you are, working part time or working flexibly, you are just as productive or more so than you are in the office. but you also have to do extra work in order for that labor to be recognized.

You are one of a million people who are in this situation. Um, and this, you know, this turns out to be essential. This turns out to be an endemic problem that, most companies that, uh, that. Organizational sociologists and business school professors have studied or kind of recognize, but have yet to figure out how to solve.

So I think, those are the challenges.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:27:39] that's my experience is that you ended up kind of bending over backwards to try to keep up, and so , it is stressful in its own way.

Alex Pang: [00:27:45] Yes, absolutely. And I think that the, you know, the expectation that , that things are going to be better, is, uh, often crudely disappointed and, but we tend to think that when that happens, that it's, you know, because it's our own fault.

You know, in the fact that everybody has this problem suggests that actually it's not just our own fault or that we could, we could solve it by working just a little harder, you know, answering a few words, a few more emails, checking in with the office wall, you know, worth at the playground or at the school play that's not actually going to solve

Debbie Sorensen: [00:28:26] Right, and it creeps up. It creeps up. Yeah. And as an alternative, your book highlights the benefits of a completely radical change here, which is totally changing the organizational structure you advocate for. A shorter work week for everyone without decreasing pay. So either fewer days a week or a shorter day in the office.

Tell us why you're, you're advocating for this as a better solution.

Alex Pang: [00:28:52] well, I think for individuals, the immediate advantages are obvious, right? Having a three day weekend or having, you know, having a six hour day rather than an eight plus hour a day means

logistics get easier. You've got more time to recover from the challenges of work. Um, you're able to, , either spend more time with kids or pick them up earlier in the day and. A whole bunch of the like just logistical and what in Britain they call life admin challenges get easier when you've got more time. But it turns out also that companies benefit as well, that companies that move to four day weeks see increases in, retention.

They're able to recruit people who are more experienced, who are, or have more senior or more dedicated. they also see that.

People work in a more concentrated and focused manner. and that people also, because they have more time off, in creative industries. Are more likely to, come up to be more creative when they're at work. And this is true for employees and for leaders as well, right? Being in a, having the time in the week to do things, I get out of the office and, you know, go for a hike or go for a long bike ride means that they've got time to, you know, kind of just turn over ideas in the back of their heads.

To think through problems, to come up with new approaches to come up with solutions that you wouldn't get just sitting at your desk. The other remark, and the other remarkable thing is that these companies manage to be just as profitable and just as productive, working four day weeks or 30 hour weeks as they had working, you know, working industry standard full time.

And this is true whether you are talking about call centers or. nursing homes, or creative agencies, or advertising agencies, or software startups or restaurants. Right? We're not talking about like, you know, guys who operate, you know, a shack down by the beach. Um, we're talking about industries where, you know, 70 hour weeks are perfectly standard, where, you know, sort of all nighters when you're young.

Are totally normal. You know, places that have often very kind of, you know, macho cultures where where people don't just overwork. They compete with each other to see who can work the most. And even in those kinds of industries, shortening the work week turns out to have benefits for individuals and for companies.

It also has the, and finally, I think that there are important kind of cultural effects that it has within, within organizations. So in particular. To go back to the flexible work challenge. One of the things that four day weeks or six hour days do is, they give benefits obviously to working parents, but they do so for everybody else as well.

And so you're not creating a kind of stigmatized second class of employees who are, , the people who are stuck in the office or have. Yeah. Wonder about, you know, is this person really doing the work or not? You don't get those kinds of questions when everybody leaves at 2:00 PM or everybody leaves for the weekend on Thursday afternoon.

So by doing that, you eliminate the challenge. You eliminate both the challenges within the office, within offices and within organizations to do the additional work. Of scheduling, of, uh, managing communications, et cetera, that come when you have a flexible workforce and you eliminate from the people who are working flexibly.

The actual labor of having to do all of that stuff because it tends to fall on them as well as the stigma of being the person who is working from home one or two days a week. So, those are the benefits.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:33:09] Yeah, I mean, it's, it's revolutionary. It feels counter culture to even propose it. And I your book. Yeah. Right. It seems, it's so funny that it seems so like outside the norm and I love you give so many great

examples of companies that found really interesting ways to make this. Happen, and, and some of the benefits, and I mean, I, I just wonder, maybe people can go to the book, but if you could give one example of, of a company that really made a big change in like a creative thing that they did to make it happen. I mean, there's so many examples in your book, but maybe you could just give a quick one.

Alex Pang: [00:33:43] Right. So one of my favorites is, I mean, I've got a lot of favorites, but I'm a creative agency that did this. It, for example, is a one called the mix, which is in London, and they do kind of big data stuff and ethnography and sort of behavioral economics. Basically. They are, you know, they're one of these agencies that tries to understand, you know, modern users and consumers and what they want.

Then kind of, you know, new consumption trends and this sort of thing. And they were founded by someone who had, had been working in the industry for a few years, you know, very smart, you know, or have a very ambitious, and she found after. Yeah. Several years into this company that she was at, she felt herself at risk of burnout.

You know, she was putting in a lot of time. Um, it was affecting her health and, relationships. and I think she felt across the organization that this was starting to, uh, starting to take its toll. And

so they trialed moving to sort of a four day week

for about three months or so, which is turns out a very standard, very standard thing and the things they did in order to make a four day week work turned out not to be terribly radical or revolutionary.

Right? You make meetings a lot shorter. You make them more focused. , you cut the number of people who who are in meetings, circulate agendas beforehand. You do all the kinds of stuff that we all know we should do with meetings in order to make them more effective. One of the other things that they did was, redesigned.

The kind of flow of the Workday. So there are particular times of day that are carved out for working on like really focused creative stuff. And during those periods, you don't have to answer the phone. You don't have to look at email or Slack channels. You don't have to talk to people. , you can just concentrate on your most important stuff at the screen.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:35:48] that, having time to focus. That's so....

Alex Pang: [00:35:51] The idea, you know, the, I think we've, we all know that feeling that we have to get out of the office in order to get our work done. And unfortunately it is so ubiquitous that we forgotten how completely bonkers and counter productive that is. But, um, you know, turning that, turning the office back into a place where people can actually get work done is, you know, that sounds simple, but, you know, sort of crazy.

You know, another thing that, they did and that many other companies do is they actually do more formal social stuff. So. Yeah. It turns out one of the, one of the things that people like about going to offices is their coworkers.

work affords a social interaction and, you know, a time with friends and if you enforce rules about work that damage those friendships, then that can have a real hit both on personal happiness and on company productivity. And

one of the things that places like The Mix do is, um. Invest more in social activities outside those focused hours. So people get both the benefits of, you know, of being able to get work done, but also still are able to, you know, spend quality time with coworkers. And then the other thing that they do is they kind of get a handle on, um, using technology more thoughtfully in ways that are not distracting.

But actually, , help people get stuff done. And. None of these steps by themselves sounds particularly radical. , a lot of it is just good leadership and good management than sort of better technology use. But you put all that stuff together and you end up with something that actually is pretty revolutionary. You know, the ability to close the office on Thursday and, um, to still do great work and to keep calm, know, while keeping clients happy.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:37:59] Yeah. That's great. Do you think there, cause I can hear that some people will. Will. Have some doubts about this. I'm sure you've gotten that right. Do you think there are certain industries where this just is not gonna work? Like I'm thinking, you know, if you need someone at the cash register in retail, or if you need nurses there in the ER and healthcare systems or something like that, do you think that there are ways, do you think it's possible in those kinds of industries to, or are there at least ways to add flexibility.

Alex Pang: [00:38:27] yes. So I think that if you are an Uber driver or a lawyer, basically if you are in a job in which you bill, you bill by the hour, you bill clients by the hour. Um, this is really hard to do. I think that. , if you go to sea or you're working on an oil rig or in a mine, you know, something where you have to take a helicopter in order to get to the workplace.

Um, you know, already there, you're probably, you know, out on the, out in the field for two weeks working 12 hour days or arguably if you are. Working in an emergency room or you're a first responder, there is a case to be made that you need to learn how to perform well at any time of day. Right. However, one of the w.

Remarkable things that I've seen is that once you get past that, it's really all about scheduling, um, that, you know, it's not just like, you know, when I started this, I assumed it was going to be like really like fuzzy, creative, you know, or to have places that we're able to do this. But it turns out. You know, there are Michelin starred restaurants, there are, you know, call centers where absolutely every last thing is measured, right?

The number of seconds you're on call, the number of calls per day you make, how many dollars per hour you generate, all of that stuff is tracked to an amazing degree.

You see it in nursing homes in, there is an auto dealership in Maryland that has been experimenting with four day weeks.

So, you know, Across a wide range of industries, it turns out that shortening hours. Increases productivity, increases happiness, recruitment and retention, and even in places where you would expect there to be a really significant hit in terms of your labor costs. there are benefits that help make up for that.

there's a nursing home in Virginia, for example, that has implemented what they call the 30, 40 program where, um, nurses assistants. Who work 30 hour weeks,

who and meet a couple other criteria. They come in on time. They leave on time, um, get paid 40 hours. Now this has meant that they've had to expand the number of nurses that they hire because, you know, nurses assistants are the people who help patients get dressed.

They manage activities. they need to be always available. So. You can't compress that work. So you simply need people there 24 hours a day. So they've had to hire more people, but they also no longer have to call, you know, temp agencies two hours before someone shifts starts because they've, you know, called in sick or, you know, whatever.

And so it means that in savings, in things like temporary agency fees, in fees to recruiting agencies, they actually make up almost all the money that they have that they, that they have to spend in additional labor costs. It's something like, it works out to an additional \$20,000 a year across the organization.

It'll at the same time, they are prescribing fewer psychotropic drugs. they've had a dramatic increase in the health of the health of residents. , there are fewer falls. There were fewer other kinds of, accidents. and residents are happier and healthier.

And you know, the big, the big question is is it worth \$20,000 to have people or to have live happier and better lives. and if you can answer yes, then even if you are, you know. Even if you're an institution like this where you have, you know, a workforce that has to be always available, then it

works for you.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:42:32] Well, , you know, as a psychologist, I think about the human cost and how, say you're in corporate law and you're just going to try to get all those billable hours, but nobody's sleeping. And you know, we know that people can only do so much if they're not sleeping, and if they're not taking care of themselves, and maybe.

Just having a satisfied workforce, we're not going to have people burning out and quitting and turnover. I mean, it does seem so revolutionary, but you can imagine there's some, some hidden benefits that that might not come to mind right

Alex Pang: [00:42:59] Yeah. And I think that there are hidden benefits that you can think of, as kind of softer benefits, right. , people are happier on the job. Um, consequently they are less likely to quit. Consequently, you have to spend less money, on, um, recruiting people.

, and I know there's a, there's another organization that saved something like a quarter million pounds a year on recruitment costs because their turnover went from, you know, more than 50% to less than 1% when they went to a four day week. And this isn't an industry where job hopping is a very common kind of thing.

So it turns out that there are these, . Other companies. Yeah. They report some savings in things like, you know, energy spending in, you know, the cost of keeping the lights on because you're only open four days rather than five. , and so there are these second order effects that not, that are not just your benefits to people, but also are, you know, affect a company, affect and improve a company's bottom line as well.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:44:01] Well. Final question here, and I'm not trying to blame the individual with this, just to be clear about that. If you're someone like me who maybe isn't able to control, you know, I wish I could say, Hey, everybody, we're going to have a, you know, 30 hours a week, but I, I'm not in that position. Right. . So again, without blaming the individual, but do you have any thoughts for recommendations for people?

Should be people be speaking out about this, should they be doing day to day things to try to work smarter? Any thoughts for listeners who are intrigued by this and want to know what they can do.

Alex Pang: [00:44:33] That's a great question. I mean, and it's, and it's part of the, part of a bigger issue around, right? What can individuals do , to change structures that are, poorly designed for the, for modern life, that are unnecessarily inefficient, exploitative, et cetera. Um, and I think that, if you are not working in a place that that is thinking about this or offering it, , what I would recommend is.

First off there things that you, that these companies can teach us about how to work better that we can, that we can implement in our own lives, right? In a way, I think of these companies as being a bit like elite athletes or know really good sports teams, right? I will never play basketball as well. As the golden state warriors, or at least though, given what they're like this year, I don't, you know, I'm getting, you know, I would get closer, but you know, there still are things that you can learn about teamwork, about, you know, exercise about exercise routines from them.

I think likewise that.

Companies that have moved to four day weeks or six hour days. Teach us an awful lot about how we can use, how we can do things like, or respect people's time or of how we can treat, , challenges like focus, like attention, like parenting, not as individual psychological challenges, but rather as collective problems.

that we can all actually solve more effectively if we solve them together. about using technology more wisely in ways that help us be more focused and productive rather than living in a state of constant, you know, we're of continuous partial attention as Linda Stone put it. I think also that thinking a little bit more broadly, that one of the, some of the.

Things we will have to confront as more companies move to four day weeks is the other kinds of institutions that don't work on four day weeks that kind of get in the way of successful implementation. So, I'm thinking in particular that there are some school districts that have played around with this.

That, but you know, I think that, um, you know, ironically, one of the challenges that schools often have is that, you know, parents, parents are working five day weeks have to figure out, you know, what the kid is going to do on day five. And you know, this is a, this is actually. You know, as any parent, you know, know who's lived through, you know, a snow day where the schools are closed and, or, but you know, you've got to go to work.

This is a nontrivial thing. And I think that there are systemic things like that, like of thinking about how to move, how we can, you know, move schools, move governments. The government offices , to a schedule like that, that can, uh, that can help make the four day week more essentially kind of a normal thing.

Kind of normalized in the cultural sense, but also logistically easier for all of us to implement. I think, you know, ultimately what that really comes down to is the way to make a four day week work for all of us individually is for all of us. To work a little more together, on or have problem on these problems of focus and concentration and productivity and also of the parenting and work life balance. I never want to send the message that, we are helpless in the face of dealing with these kinds of things. You know, very often we have or have more power than we might think to shape how we spend our time. You know, about how, where we place our attention.

But. I think it's also important to, uh, to recognize that, , often collective action is the most potent form of self care that there is and that we should practice more of it.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:49:03] Well, you are doing your part, and I appreciate that. I think in some of those little ways that does matter, even just recognizing these times when you're getting caught up in some of the social pressure or recognizing the times that you're, getting caught up in the swing of it and taking a different point of view is so helpful.

You have really interesting ideas in your work and in your book. Not only that, I mean it's revolutionary, but it's also really backed up with some good data. So I, I think that it's great that you're getting people to think in these new, more flexible ways about how the workplace can be more humane. So I thank you.

Alex Pang: [00:49:37] Oh, thank you. No, and you know, this is, I think this is, this is, it is amazing to see this movement of evolving all over the world in, you know, not just Scandinavia. Um, but in, you know, the United States and Germany in Japan and Korea. Countries that have invented their own words for working yourself to death, to see it across a wide variety of industries and you know, to see a global movement that is only now barely kind of aware of itself, kind of taking shape.

And I think, you know, I've worked as a, you know, as a writer and as a technology forecaster and futurist for a number of years. And this is an of all the things that I've studied. This is. One of the most hopeful and optimistic things I've seen that makes me think, you know, the future could actually be a little better than, you know, than the present.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:50:37] Well, I love ending on that hopeful note, I mean, I really, it does feel like a paradigm shift that has some real promise to, make an exciting difference for people. So I thank you and thank you again so much for joining us for the second time on the podcast. We really appreciate your time. Thanks for coming on.

Alex Pang: [00:50:53] Oh, thanks. It's always a pleasure.

Diana Hill: [00:50:55] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:50:58] You can find us on iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Please help us out by writing a review on iTunes.

Jill Stoddard: [00:51:04] We'd like to thank our interns, Dr. Katharine Foley-Saldea and Dr Kati Lear.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:51:09] This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're having a mental health emergency dial 9 1 1. If you're looking for mental

health treatment, please visit the resources on our webpage. We're at offtheclockpsych.com.