

# A revolution in working: Time, freedom and freelancing

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Author: [Deborah Talbot](#)

Illustration: [QU Lan](#)

**Does the rapid rise of freelancing tell us that people want a different way of working - one that liberates us from the constraints of the nine to five? Deborah Talbot looks at the evidence.**

In 2018, the UK woke up to the news that it was one of the lowest performers of any Western country, according to new figures on productivity from the [Office of National Statistics \(ONS\)](#). The average worker in the UK produced 16% less on average than any other G7 country. The decline in productivity began in the 1960s and suffered a severe slump after the 2008 financial crisis.

Despite having a small number of highly productive and innovative companies, comparative to other G7 nations, the UK suffers a 'long-tail' of unproductive businesses, particularly those located outside of the South-East.

**Why is this happening?**

Well, partly it's due to the low-skills base of the UK. The OECD found that the UK has the highest proportion of low-skilled young workers out of all the advanced economies. Despite innovations in apprenticeship policy, the UK has systematically failed to invest in young people's education.

But here's another clue. While our productivity figures are plummeting, we actually work the longest week in Europe, according to data from Eurostat in 2018. Could there be a relationship?

It appears so. This article will look at structures of working and its relationship to productivity and creativity. And it'll ask whether freelancing is the gateway to a new way of organising work.

## The push for workplace liberation

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The New Economics Foundation, citing Health and Safety Executive (HSE) statistics, found that the working hours lost to work-related stress, depression and anxiety totalled 15.4 million (three million more than the previous year and one in four of all sick days used). They said:

"We have constructed an economy which systematically robs us of the time we have, while not delivering any material benefits in the economy. An economy that is failing the vast majority of the population.

"It is time to learn from our European neighbours and destroy the notion that more hours equals a stronger economy; it doesn't, and it is causing untold harm."

Why are we working more hours to seemingly little utility? It's partly to do with government policy. The progressive publication The Conversation, recently reported that top Brexiters, like Michael Gove, were lobbying to scrap the EU Working Time Directive. Which rather modestly limits the working week to no more than 48 hours, plus some other benefits like paid holidays.

And it's still difficult to convince employers that their employees don't need to be chained to their desks 24/7. While a YouGov poll suggested that only 6% of workers had the traditional nine to five hours, most jobs offered are still full-time with possibly some minimal flexibility around the edges.

These attitudes prevail. Despite sound economic evidence that fewer hours equals greater productivity (and creativity, though I'll get to that later).

**We seem to be wholly entrenched in a culture that, somewhat irrationally, believes that, if we aren't working bad things will happen. Or are we?**

The rise of high-skill freelancing, and its gradual acceptance by employers as a legitimate resource, seems to buck this trend. And those who choose the freelancing life do it very much for the flexibility and freedom it offers.

"I love the freedom of working for myself," says author Clare Swatman, "and the downsides of not having a regular income are not enough to put me off."

Fitness instructor and founder of Right Path Fitness, Keith McNiven, also cited freedom and being connected to one's natural rhythms as being a core reason for leaving full-time employment, in favour of self-employment.

"I went to work, had my weekends off and lived a generally normal work life," he said. "After a while, I began to feel as if my time was no longer my time; I was almost always tired and never really had any energy to do anything after my workday was over (I've always been more of a morning person).

"So the wish for a more flexible lifestyle, one where I could control my own time, as well as who with and when and how I worked, set in."

McNiven sees the push as coming from below, as people seek to take control of their lives.

"People, creative or not, are no longer willing to adjust to company rules and standards when it comes to time, but will negotiate these so that they're suitable to their needs. And if the company refuses, there's likely to find another that will happily work with them (and provide more flexibility)."

Recent figures from the ONS suggest that McNiven might be right. The number of those who are self-employed has increased from 3.3 million in 2001 to 4.8 million in 2017 (around 15% of the UK labour force). And the rise has been driven by those working on their own or with a partner – this group accounted for four million in 2016.

And it's not about wages. The ONS argue that self-employed income 'centred around £240 a week, much lower than that for employees, which is centred around £400 a week,' though they acknowledge differences in the type and pattern of employment.

## Looking back at freedom

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We can only appreciate the significance of this social and cultural shift by looking at history.

The now deceased, Marxist historian E.P. Thompson compared the concept of task-orientated and clock-orientated time in an article called Time, Work and Industrial Capitalism, written in 1967.

In the pre-industrial era, he said, work was task-orientated – intense periods of activity while the task or project gets completed, followed by a few days of idleness. During industrialisation, however, our society began

to measure the worth of work by the clock.

Think about the cotton mills of industrial England and the rise of the factory. This was a type of working that reached its pinnacle with the Fordist division of labour, where everyone had their place in the machine-led factory cog.

The differences between the two forms of work were also about ownership. When work is task-orientated, you own your own time and hand over the product of your labour when it is completed to your satisfaction.

In clock-orientated work, you hand yourself over for a specified period, and there is little control over both how you spend your time and the product of your labour.

Thompson noted that, the industrialists had a tall order in breaking the working population's attachment to the freedom of their artisanal patterns of work and life.

And the domination of clock-time working had a whole host of consequences for how we organised society. From male-dominated workplaces with women, to formalised leisure time.

These two very different notions of working time echo how different it feels to work freelance against being employed. Mary O'Connell, a research and Comms Officer, who works half the week for a tech firm, and the other half freelance, argued that, for her, it meant two very different ways of working:

“With freelance work, my pattern is to work intensely for a few hours and take the rest of the day off. I can get massive amounts done in a few hours, but I'm mentally exhausted by 2 pm.

“Then it's time for a bit of recreational reading or a walk or a swim. Before I got a job, after a particularly heavy work period, I'd take a few days off to recover.”

So what about the nine to five?

“I see myself as being 'given over' the eight hours”, says O'Connell. “I'm less attached to the things I write, and I pace myself more, because I'm stuck there for the duration.”

Ironically, the great advocates of work-time discipline and long-hours – the Conservative Party – also ushered in the era of flexible working and freelancing.

It was never meant to be about freedom. Except for employers to liberate themselves from the notion of a secure job. But it turns out that the people have made of it what they will.

## The productivity conundrum

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In many ways, freelancing holds the key to the productivity conundrum – if we let it.

Because it turns out that higher productivity is associated with working fewer hours. A study by Sage People, which polled 3,500 workers across the US, found that employees were productive for less than 30 hours a week, despite ever-increasing working hours.

Why? They pointed to five reasons for this productivity-gap.

One reason they refer to as Parkinson's Law: 'work expands to fill the time available for its completion.' Meaning that our brains are wired so that, the more time we have for a task, the longer we will procrastinate.

The second reason is that working to the point of exhaustion leads to mistakes. "I always do the final edit first thing in the morning when my mind is fresh, and leave mundane or overhang tasks for late afternoon, when I've run out of steam," says O'Connor.

The third reason is that shorter working days result in fewer sick days being taken.

A study of care workers in Gothenburg showed, for example, that a six-hour working day cut sick leave by 10%. Also, recent evidence from France showed that shorter hours and longer holidays equalled more productivity.

An analysis by Silicon Valley strategy consultant Alex Soojung-Kim Pang leads us to the fourth reason: our brains can't maintain serious focus for more than four hours a day.

And the fifth? It is all about happy employees being loyal employees. Getting a break from work means that you care more about your work.

It's really about finding out what working patterns work best for the individual and having the flexibility to accommodate it. It is this flexibility that freelancing can provide.

Natalie Marchant, a journalist, says: "I feel far more productive as a freelancer and getting to choose my own work patterns or rhythm.

"I'm not the earliest of risers (although I'm enjoying having a sleeping pattern nowadays), but I find if I take some time off in the early afternoon, even a few hours, I'll be immensely productive and can even keep going on into the night."

Ellen Manning, who's also a journalist, agrees:

“After two years freelancing I've realised there are certain times of day when I'm just not that productive.”

The author and time-management guru, Laura Vanderkam, in her book Off the Clock – Feel Less Busy While Getting More Done, argues that time is a subjective thing. We can feel that time is dragging by or speeding up, depending on what we are doing, and how engaged we are.

Her solution is to be more mindful of time. By understanding how we use it, we can make room for more free time. Only by understanding that time is a function of the mind (and biology), rather than an external force controlling us, can we work through the controls that bind us to old ways of working.

It's not just about productivity. It's also about creativity. Claire Hodgson, the founder of Diverse City, outlined the manifold ways that a lack of flexible working cripples the creative sector. A nine to five (or should we say, seven to seven) mentality fails to capture the rhythm of creative endeavour. As she says: “A long-hours culture kills creativity. Not only artistic creativity, but the creativity of thought needed to run an organisation or venue.”

Tom Hodgkinson of the Idler, who wrote the ironically misnamed How to be Idle, also pointed out that people are perfectly capable of doing their job (any job) in a few hours of intense work a day. The rest of the time should be spent lazing, reading, thinking, wandering. In order to better infuse our minds with the imagination we need to think and create (and, of course, raise our children). Hodgson's and Hodgkinson's ideal has much in common with Thompson's task-orientated pattern of work.

But are freelancers taking advantage of the possibilities of reshaping time to suit themselves? Possibly not.

### Tied to the clock

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A survey by Freelancermap, of their freelance community, suggested that freelancers are working an average of 46.66 hours a week. Only a quarter spent less than 40 hours a week working. The freelancers I spoke to confirmed a reluctance to let go of traditional patterns of the working day.

“I could never go back to working in an office nine to five,” says Emma Wilkinson, “but I don't really feel like I have that much freedom – gotta pay those bills still. Also, surely if you're not keeping at least roughly regular hours, don't you miss out on opportunities for work?”

Rebecca Seal concurs: “I work more as a freelancer than I did as a staffer, in that I get more done in the time I have to work. But I am also much worse at taking time off. And the time I have 'off', I'm usually still very available, so I rarely feel like I'm truly off.”

Why the long hours? It's partly about having children, which imposes various time-disciplines. But it's also about the rest of the world, says Roz Ryan: "The rest of the world is nine to five, so it's hard to find experts to talk to at 11 pm, or file copy at 10 am after I've been happily up 'til 1 am working on it."

And it's also about the 'rate for the job.'

Many freelancers aren't commanding enough of a piece rate, which means they don't reap the benefits of time. Maybe we need the return of the Guild to defend our interests?

But Maya Middlemiss, founder of the 21st Century Work Life Podcast, says that we are recreating traditional patterns of work when we don't need to. The time has come for a rethink.

"It is funny," she says, "how so many of us basically recreate a nine-to-five for ourselves, unless we have a very specific reason to deviate – like colleagues or clients in another time zone."

"Whereas what flexible working should mean is the true freedom to work when and how is genuinely best for you – the most productive and enjoyable. It's something we really need to get behind, and start thinking in terms of results, rather than process, I think."

It seems that in order to really benefit from being freelance, we need to unlearn how and when we think we should work.

Individuals long for the freedom of artisanal working. Yet, they are stuck with old attitudes of the nine-to-five – just without the financial security a nine-to-five brings.

It's not just about personal fulfilment and wellbeing, important though that is. If the UK is ever to solve its productivity crisis, policy-makers need to take a hard look at how we work. As we approach the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', where the knowledge economy dominates, this change is more critical than ever.