

The Wayback Machine - <https://web.archive.org/web/20220709192146/https://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/job-career/work-life-balance-around-the-world>

REAL SIMPLE

REAL SIMPLE | LIFE | LIFE STRATEGIES | CAREER

Here's What Work-Life Balance Looks Like Across the World

In some countries, a "right to disconnect" after work hours is protected by law.

By Ashley Zlatopolsky

January 05, 2022



FB



Tweet

... More



As the standard of American work culture is being challenged, the way we think about work-life balance comes into question. Country by country, cultural norms can vary—but in American work culture, employee output and performance often overshadow personal needs. Now, as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and lean toward a more remote future that includes working from home, the lines between work and life have become increasingly blurred, contributing toward a nationwide push to reimagine what American work-life balance should and could look like in the months and years to come.

Research shows that nearly half of U.S. workers are considering switching jobs in pursuit of a better work-life balance, which could potentially uproot the workforce. Throughout the pandemic, numerous corporations, like Adobe and Twitter, have also announced permanent remote work structures to accommodate changing needs. Other companies, like Kickstarter, are piloting four-day work weeks to test productivity.

"People's expectations about the roles of work and life are changing," says Lauren Pasquarella Daley, PhD and vice president of Women and the Future of Work at think tank Catalyst. "What's most important to consider during this moment in time is exploring, shifting, and adapting elements of corporate culture to create more equitable, flexible, and inclusive workplaces now and into the future of work."

From traditional five-day work weeks, to long and late hours, to the idea that life goals should be built around work, could existing workplace norms eventually look different in America? To expand our ideas of how work and life could or should coexist, we took a look at what work-life balance looks like across the world.

CREDIT: ALICE MORGAN

Australia

Employees in Australia look forward each year to four weeks of vacation—which is mandated by federal law. After 10 years of service with one employer, one earns an additional 8.67 weeks of paid leave—for a whopping total of three calendar months of paid leave. Further, Australian employees are entitled to up to 18 weeks of paid parental leave, with an option to choose additional unpaid parental leave for up to a year. A universal public health insurance system also guarantees health insurance for all residents of the country.

While these benefits can undoubtedly help employees take crucial time off to recharge and start a family, Institute for Workplace Skills & Innovation America president Nicholas Wyman, who grew up in Australia and now resides in California, says the pros come with cons. "A misconception is Australia has a laid-back work culture, but that's not really the case," Wyman explains. "In Australia, people start work early and work long hours."

Recent studies agree. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's Better Life Index recently released data showing that 13 percent of Australians work more than 50 hours per week, compared to the global—and U.S.—average of 11 percent. The increased shift toward remote culture doesn't help either. When surveyed by the Australian Government in 2020, 38 percent of men and 46 percent of women claimed that their work-life balance was difficult; nearly two-thirds of respondents sometimes or always work from home. The top difficulty: child care.

Canada

In a recent survey by labor firm ADP Canada and pollster Maru Public Opinion, Canadian workers ranked work-life balance higher than salary. It's no surprise, then, that 15 percent of Canadian employees took a new position, changed industries, or left the workforce altogether since the pandemic started, with 29 percent of that group claiming the need to limit workload and stress, while 28 percent wanted to seek out more flexible hours. All provinces guarantee two weeks of paid leave, except for Saskatchewan, which allows for three. Maternal leave is also lacking, offering up to 17 weeks of unpaid leave, while parental leave offers up to 63 weeks of unpaid leave.

Colombia

OECD's study ranked Colombia last. Data shows that full-time workers in Colombia actually devote less of their day on average to things like personal care and leisure, coming in at just 12 hours per day, compared to the worldwide average of 15 hours per day. Unusually, Colombia offers a maximum of only 15 vacation days per year. The idea of work-life balance is relatively new for Colombians. Though maternal leave includes 18 paid weeks, paternity leave has recently been expanded to include only 15 paid days, with a goal to extend that number to eight weeks within the next five years.

CREDIT: ALICE MORGAN

France

In France, the idea of working to live—rather than living to work—shines strong. Eating lunch at one's desk was once against the law in France. Existing laws, including 2017's "right to disconnect," requires organizations with more than 50 employees to forbid employees from sending or replying to emails after certain hours or while on vacation. Working overtime is also uncommon in France, as laws require companies to pay 25 to 50 percent more per hour.

CREDIT: ALICE MORGAN

Hong Kong

Taking the bottom spot on Kisi's study, Hong Kong is the most overworked country in the world, with more than a third of respondents claiming to work more than 10 hours a day. Only one day of rest per week is guaranteed. Another study by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions found that 20 percent of Hong Kong employees work an average of 55 hours per week. (Of particular note: Security guards work up to 72 hours per week.) Only seven days a year of paid leave is standard. Maternity leave has recently been raised from 10 weeks to 14 weeks.

CREDIT: ALICE MORGAN

The Netherlands

According to the 2019 OECD Better Life Index, the Netherlands ranked as the best country in the world for managing work-life balance. Scoring 9.5 out of 10 on the work-life balance scale, data also discovered that just 0.4 percent of employees in the Netherlands work long hours (more than 50 hours per week). The standard work week for Dutch companies is 38 hours and working overtime is uncommon. With part-time work also a regular option in the Netherlands, especially for parents with young children, some unions are even pushing to standardize a 30-hour work week.

The Dutch national child care system greatly supports family life as well, offering free daycare services for up to 10 hours per day, five days a week. Women can also take advantage of flexible maternity-leave policies that can begin up to six weeks before one's due date for a total of four months. Partners also receive extended benefits, thanks to a new law that allows them an additional six weeks of paid leave.

Russia

In Russia, work-life balance is a major priority. According to OECD, only 0.2 percent of all employees work more than 50 hours per week. Fifty-eight percent of workers under the age of 24 feel they have achieved a satisfactory work-life balance, while all other age groups hover around 50 percent. Russian overtime laws prevent overwork, prohibiting more than four hours of overtime during two consecutive days, and requiring double the pay after two hours of overtime. Russia also doesn't allow for more than 120 hours of overtime per year. Russians are entitled to 28 calendar days of paid vacation time per year as well, offering Russian employees nearly a full month of time off.

CREDIT: ALICE MORGAN

Scandinavia

According to a 2021 study by security firm Kisi, four out of the five top world cities ranking for work-life balance are in Scandinavia: Helsinki, Oslo, Stockholm, and

Copenhagen.

Recent studies show that Norwegians work an average of 1,424 hours per year, or 20 percent fewer hours than Americans, while still achieving a higher annual per-capita GDP. In Scandinavian countries, 40-hour-or-less work weeks are enforced, thanks to a focus on "hygge," the Danish word for coziness. While often thought of in the sense of home decor, the concept extends to simply being comfortable in life, including at work.

Flexible work structures help promote work-life balance as well. Finland's Working Hours Act allows workers to adjust their start or end times at work by up to three hours. A recent update permits employees to determine the timing and location of their work for at least half of their regular working hours. Mandatory vacation laws in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway give employees a minimum of five weeks of paid vacation, making it some of the most plentiful in the world. But productivity hasn't suffered. Studies show that not only do health and life satisfaction levels increase, but that Scandinavian countries continue to rank high in output.

