



# Introduction

## MAIN STREET, HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIFORNIA

When he first heard about the five-hour workday, David Rhoads thought, *I want to give this to my employees.*

David is CEO of Blue Street Capital, a Huntington Beach, California-based company that arranges financing for enterprise IT systems. He's also an avid surfer: Huntington Beach is one of Southern California's iconic surf towns, and Rhoads is "in the water as much as I can," he tells me. So when he saw an article about how Tower Paddle Boards—an online, direct-to-consumer company that sells stand-up paddleboards—had moved to a five-hour workday, he was intrigued.

Stephan Aarstol founded Tower in 2010. An appearance on the TV show *Shark Tank* won him an investment from Mark Cuban, and the company had grown steadily since then. As an e-commerce company, Tower was constantly experimenting with new technologies and business processes, and Stephan was convinced that they could use the same technologies to change how his employees worked,

not just how they sold paddleboards. If they focused on their most important work, cut out distractions, and used technology to automate routine tasks and make their hard jobs easier, he thought, they could dramatically improve their performance—and give him more time for surfing.

So in June 2015, Stephan offered his employees a deal: if you figure out how to do the same work in less time, you can keep the same salary and leave at 1:00 pm. He also implemented a 5 percent profit sharing plan, further increasing people's hourly pay. Finally, he shifted focus away from revenue growth to building company culture.

What happened? The day they announced the change on their website, Tower broke its previous daily sales record and booked \$50,000 in sales for the first time. They did it again a couple days later, and three more times in the next two weeks. By the end of the month, they had sold \$1.4 million worth of paddleboards, breaking their previous monthly sales record by \$600,000.

By the time David Rhoads read about the five-hour day, Tower Paddle Boards had been on the new schedule for nearly a year. It hadn't been easy, but it had been a great success: the company was one of the fastest growing in San Diego, customers saw the five-hour day as an expression of a "work hard, play hard" beach lifestyle, and revenues had gone from \$5 million to \$7.2 million.

You couldn't find two products more different than bespoke financial deals that fuel high-tech investments and surf equipment inspired by Polynesian sailors, but David started thinking about whether a shorter workweek could be implemented at Blue Street Capital too. He had run Blue Street since 2003, and after a couple "brutal" quarters, he was looking for ways for the company to improve and start taking on

challenges again, rather than just responding to them. He had dedicated workers, but “if we took out our breaks, took out our lunch, and took out all the [unproductive] nonsense that we do over the course of the day,” he thought they could compress the workday to five hours. They’d need to figure out how to keep customers happy during a shorter workday—companies depend on Blue Street Capital to help them finance mission-critical upgrades or expansions, and since every deal is different his employees spend a lot of time on the phone to clients—but he was sure they could figure it out. “We knew it would be a huge productivity tool for the business,” David says, “but we also knew we were going to get part of our lives back.”

Business development manager Alex Gafford remembers David announcing the five-hour day at an all-hands meeting. “I was kind of burned out that day,” Alex tells me. “It was after lunch, I’m tired, and I’m going to be in the office till at least five o’clock doing emails and calls and stuff.

“David says, ‘All right, at the end of this meeting everybody can go home for the day,’” Alex remembers. “We look at each other like, What? It was . . . unexpected. Then David says, ‘Hold on, let me explain what we’re going to do. We’re going to try a ninety-day experiment.’”

David explained the idea, talked about Tower Paddle Boards, and explained why he wanted to try a five-hour day. “I want you to have the lifestyle that I have,” Alex recalls him saying, “and I believe that you’ll be as successful as I am or more successful as a result.” David answered a few questions. No, salaries wouldn’t be cut. No, the company wasn’t about to go under. Yes, the new schedule would become permanent after ninety days if productivity remained the same and if customers didn’t complain. As one of the company’s leading

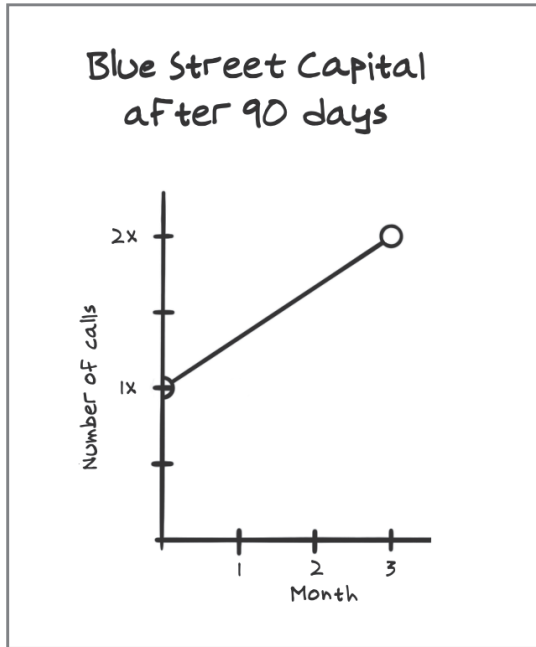
sales managers, Alex knew that the summer was a slow period at Blue Street, so it was a good time to start a trial.

During the trial, “there were not really any other instructions,” Alex recalls. “We had to figure it out on our own.” David had advice he had picked up from productivity experts—avoid multitasking, focus most of your effort on your most valuable work, take quick, purposeful breaks to stretch the muscles and get the blood flowing—but people were largely left to their own devices.

A single quarter wasn’t enough time to see a big change in revenue—in contrast to Tower Paddle Boards, Blue Street Capital has a long sales cycle—but after three months David could measure the impact of five-hour days on their leading key performance indicator (KPI), the number of calls per salesperson. More calls means more business: working the phones, staying in touch with clients, and pitching to new customers is essential if people are going to meet their sales targets and the company is going to grow. What did he find? When they cut the length of the workweek by three-eighths, calls per person . . . actually doubled.

How did they do it? Alex says that it wasn’t any single thing that helped them be more efficient; that steep increase in productivity was made from a bunch of little steps, not one giant one. A couple people had actually quit, because after years of working long hours, they couldn’t give up the idea that sixty-hour weeks were the price of success and didn’t like having to be so careful with their working time. “It was a culture shift for the whole business,” David says.

David made the new schedule permanent after three months in late 2016, and Blue Street has operated on an 8:00 am to 1:00 pm schedule ever since. After three years,



At the end of its ninety-day trial, Blue Street Capital had shortened its workday by three hours a day, but the number of calls each salesperson made had doubled.

revenues have gone up every year—30 percent the first year, 30 percent the second—and the company has grown from nine to seventeen employees.

Few things sound more Southern California than “Let’s shorten the workday to have more time to surf!” But shortening the workday to boost productivity and improve the company? That’s pretty counterintuitive. When you get a late-night email from a boss or a last-minute request from a client, you don’t think, *I know how to deal with this—I’ll take Friday off*. You don’t prove your dedication and passion by leaving work early. We live in a world in which business operates 24/7, the global economy never stops, and competition

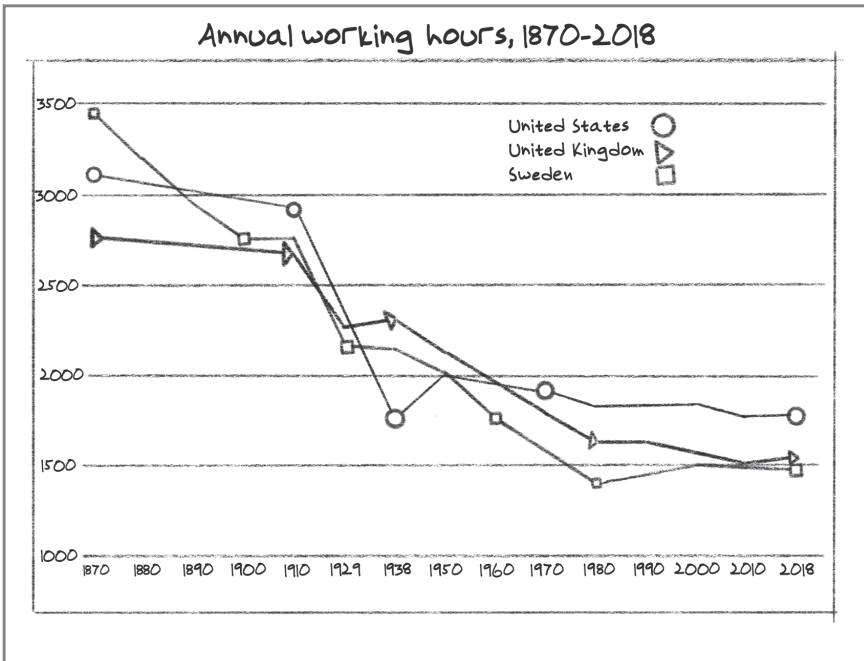
is relentless. And even if you can become productive enough to finish early, customers and bosses still expect you to be available at all hours.

And yet in the last few years, hundreds of companies in a variety of industries around the world have followed the same path as Tower Paddle Boards and Blue Street Capital: they've shortened their workweeks without cutting salaries, lowering productivity, sacrificing quality, or driving away clients. They're solving immediate problems in their businesses, often with surprising or dramatic results. They're also building a movement that could improve how we all work and could create a brighter future for work.

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH WORK

And we really need to improve work. A century ago, philosopher Bertrand Russell and economist John Maynard Keynes argued that by 2000—eight decades in their future and two decades in our past—we could all be working as little as three or four hours a day. In Russell and Keynes's lifetime, technology, labor union demands, rising educational standards, and greater prosperity had reduced the length of the average workday from fourteen to eight hours a day. They thought that as technology continued to advance through the twentieth century, productivity could continue to rise, economies could continue to grow, and working hours could fall further.

But Russell also warned that while “modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all,” if productivity gains and profits were hoarded by factory owners, executives, and investors, those same



Working hours from 1870 to 2018 in the US, UK, and Sweden. Working hours fell substantially between 1870 and 1930, and that decrease led Russell and Keynes to believe that they could fall much further by 2000, to as low as one thousand hours per year. Instead, especially since the 1970s, working hours have held relatively steady or fallen only modestly.

advances could be used to create a world that offered “overwork for some and starvation for others.” That’s not a bad description of work today. In the United States, working hours have slowly fallen since World War II, despite enormous productivity gains and economic growth. The growth of mass-consumption-oriented economies in the West made ever-increasing wages and hours more desirable than a shorter workweek for most workers. When economic growth slowed in the 1970s and labor unions lost power, companies offshored factories, outsourced jobs, replaced stable work with part-time gigs, and demanded longer hours from employees. The development of sophisticated models for predicting



## Work is becoming more precarious

Percentage of workforce working in temporary, gig, or zero-hours jobs:

United States	36
United Kingdom	10
Japan	17
Korea	2

The percentage of workers employed in temporary work, gig-economy jobs, or zero-hours contracts has grown dramatically in the US, with other advanced economies following.

labor demand and the growth of online freelance marketplaces have accelerated the expansion of the gig economy in advanced nations and the growing precariousness of work.

Executives learned they could boost profits by shredding workforces, tapping global manufacturing and transportation networks, or using “disruptive innovation” to drive established companies out of business. The rise of Silicon Valley in the 1980s brought with it a new model of work and success that glamorized long hours, made workaholics into heroes, and turned overwork into a badge of honor. As a result, we now live in a fast-moving, unstable world in which overwork is a source of riches for some and a necessity for survival for the rest.

But this way of working is costly for individuals, for companies, and for economies. The human cost of overwork and burnout—in lost earning potential, happiness, and creativity—is huge. Overworked people suffer from higher rates of chronic disease and depression. Stanford business professor Jeffrey Pfeffer argued recently that the health costs

**Overwork is a global problem**

Percentage of workers who average  
more than 50 hours/week:

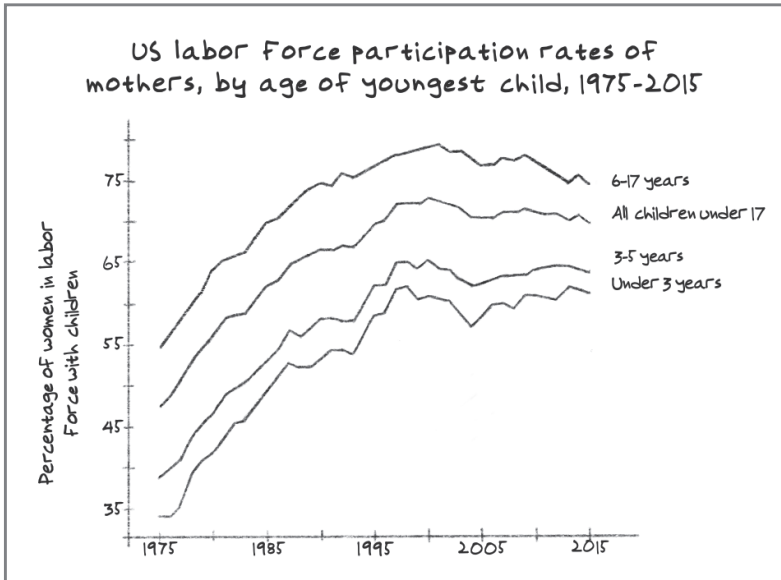
Turkey	32.6
Korea	25.2
Japan	17.9
United Kingdom	12.2
United States	11.1
OECD average	11.0
Sweden	1.1
Switzerland	0.4

Overwork is common in many developed countries.

of badly designed workplaces make work as significant a health hazard as smoking.

Overwork is also counterproductive for companies. Overworked or burned-out employees are actually less productive than well-rested workers. They're also less engaged at work, more likely to leave, and even more likely to cut ethical corners or steal from the company. People who drop out of promising careers are expensive to replace—especially in professions like law and medicine in which long hours, high standards, and intense pressure are common. And employee burnout costs the global economy an estimated \$300 billion a year in sick days and lost productivity.

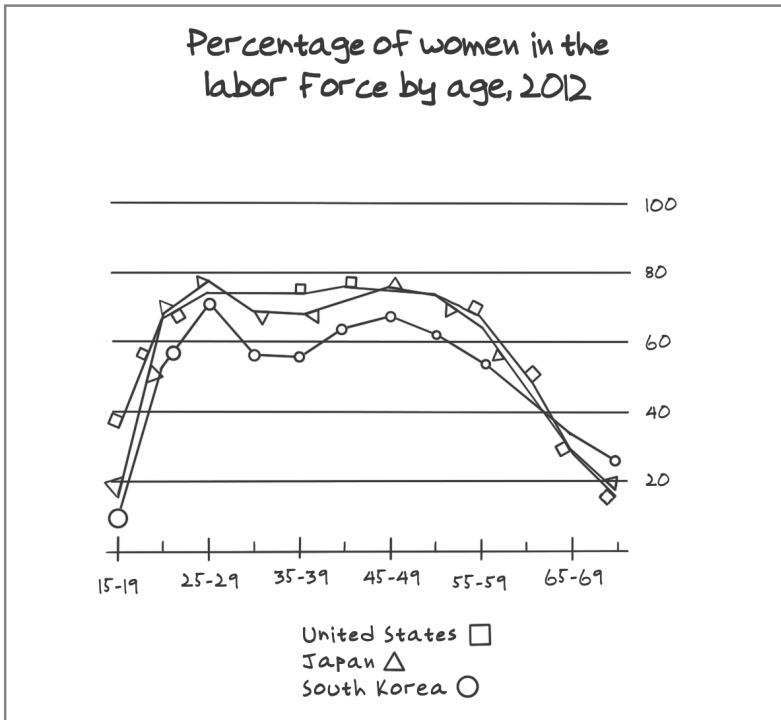
Even in countries where formal workplace discrimination ended decades ago, long hours make it difficult for women to manage the demands of bosses, professions, and family, and to maintain their careers after they become parents. Despite decades of corporate policies for improved maternity leave, flexible work schedules, and exhortations for women to lean in or manage their time better, solutions to the problem of



Labor force participation of mothers, by age of youngest child, 1975–2015. Participation rates rose steadily through the 1990s, but in the last twenty years have barely improved—and sometimes have dropped.

work-life balance remain elusive. In the United States, mothers flocked to the labor force in growing numbers between the 1970s and late 1990s. For the last twenty years, though, those participation rates have stalled, suggesting that family-friendly policies have not had as large an impact as their designers, and many users, would have liked.

To different degrees, in the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan, women’s full-time participation rates in the workforce decline when they have young children and take years to recover; even after they return to work full-time, they often earn less than men (including fathers with dependent children) and have lower lifetime earnings. Managing part-time or flexible work while raising children even has a measurable impact on women’s health: a recent study



The “M curve” of women’s employment. In many countries, women’s participation in the labor force climbs steadily until they start families; at that point, participation rates drop and remain low for some time. The size of the curve varies from country to country: as the chart above shows, in the United States it’s flatter than in South Korea.

of stress-related biomarkers (which provide a more objective measure of stress than surveys) found that women with children who worked part-time or in flexible schedules actually had higher stress levels than women working full-time.

Our worship of overwork also creates problems of recruitment, retention, work-life balance, career and financial stability, and burnout. Piecemeal solutions might help one of those problems but leave the rest untouched. Indeed, the limited success of programs for workplace wellness and flexible

work, added to the economic and technological forces that drive overwork, the number of voices that sing its praises, and its sheer overwhelming pervasiveness all contribute to the sense that long hours are natural and inevitable.

At the same time, the growing gap between the richest and poorest and the sense that modern economies are designed to enrich elites rather than generate prosperity for everyone are fueling a dangerous level of populism, discontent, and distrust in our political and economic institutions. And the imminent arrival of artificial intelligence, robots, and other new technologies threatens to further widen economic gaps, destroy jobs, and hollow out industries and the futures of billions of people around the world.

## DON'T PATCH, REBUILD

So for many people, and many industries, work isn't working. Today's economy is capable of amazing but unsustainable things, demands time and loyalty from workers while withholding security, and shows blithe disregard for sharing the benefits of rising productivity or using new technologies to improve everyone's lives. Workers are caught between a present that feels unbalanced and unsustainable and a future full of uncertainty, disruption, and inequality. Small-scale solutions to these problems are no longer enough. We need bigger, more holistic approaches that help fix today's problems and give us the means to build a better future.

At the risk of sounding like one of those internet ads that promise "one weird trick" for losing weight or getting rich, the shorter workweek offers a solution to all these problems—the

culture of overwork, gender inequity, and unequal division of economic gains, and the massive indirect costs of burn-out and shortened careers. After a year visiting and studying companies, I've seen that the four-day week, six-hour or five-hour day, or other shorter workweeks—you'll meet a variety of them in this book—help make them more focused and productive. It boosts recruitment and lowers turnover. It helps service workers be more engaged, creative workers more imaginative, chefs and servers more energetic, and salespeople more focused. It distributes productivity gains, using the one commodity even the richest of us can't buy—time. It helps level the hidden obstacles that drive women out of the workforce, that burn out hard-charging professionals, and that undermine valuable employees. It helps people give equal attention to work and family life and to derive satisfaction from being good workers and great parents.

I became convinced of the need for this sort of systemic change when I was promoting my last book, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*. In that book, I argued that many of history's most creative and prolific people—Nobel Prize-winning scientists, and authors, painters, and composers—worked far fewer hours than you would imagine necessary for producing world-class work. Rather than grind away, these figures worked in intense bursts of four to five hours each day and alternated time at their desks with long walks, exercise, or other activities. This looks at first like a poor use of time, but recent research in neuroscience and the psychology of creativity shows that our brains actually keep working on problems when we turn our attention elsewhere, and that scheduling rest periods after intensive work gives us time to recharge our batteries while allowing our creative

subconscious to continue searching for solutions to problems that have eluded our conscious effort. Rest, it turns out, is not work's competitor; it is work's partner.

While I was promoting the book on radio call-in shows and podcasts, with book readings and talks, people rarely challenged the idea that we should all rest more. Rather, I would almost always get a variant of the question "If I'm working a nine-to-five job, how do I convince my boss that rest is valuable?" Or "What are some tips and tricks for working mothers about how to get more rest?"

Of course, I had answers. The science clearly shows that overwork is counterproductive, I said. It stresses both companies and workers, hurts productivity, and contributes to burnout. Smart managers will recognize the value of letting workers go home on time, have email-free evenings, and use their vacation days. It's good for people to reclaim control over their own time; it's not easy, but that only makes it more rewarding.

But to tell the truth, I never really felt satisfied by those answers. Most of us work in environments where we don't have a lot of control over our daily schedules. Some of us are members of professions where overwork is the norm. For managers and entrepreneurs accustomed to offering perks to keep people on the job, rest sounds like a drag on productivity. I still think it's important for people to see that they have more control over their time than they realize. But we have to acknowledge that our control is limited by social expectations, the demands of bosses and organizations, and the economy. Personal solutions to problems of work-life balance can only take us so far. To put it another way, what I should have said to those radio-show callers was, "Working mothers don't need tips and tricks. They need a workplace and career

model that doesn't expect them to work as if they don't have kids, raise children as if they don't work, demand that they do both at exactly the same time, and say it's their own fault if they can't do that to some poorly articulated, impossible standard. They've gotten all the personal advice they need. What they need now is structural change."

So I was intrigued when I heard about some companies that were putting the lessons of *Rest* into practice, moving to four-day weeks or six-hour workdays, reducing their working time by 20 or 25 percent without cutting salaries, productivity, or profitability. I found software companies in Tokyo and New York, advertising agencies in London and Glasgow, financial services firms in Norwich and San Diego, organic cosmetics makers in Melbourne and Los Angeles, and even Michelin-starred restaurants in Copenhagen and Palo Alto. They're all led by entrepreneurs who are full of ambition, but who also think they can fix what's broken in their industries. They share worries about risks to productivity, missed deadlines, disappointed customers and clients, and skeptical investors and employees. But they also find similar ways of dealing with the challenges of doing the same amount of work in less time. And everyone sees similar benefits: higher productivity and profits, happy clients, improvements in recruitment and retention. The shorter workweek becomes an important part of many companies' brand; in a world where everyone is young, scrappy, and hungry, finishing by Thursday shows you're more efficient than the competition.

As a futurist, I've been trained to look for "weak signals," strange events that can be the leading edge of big social and economic changes. To me, these companies look a lot like weak signals. They are young and small, distributed across a variety of industries, and spread all over the world. Even



though they didn't know about each other, they're all moving down the same path. They're part of a larger movement that just isn't aware of itself yet.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is meant to introduce you to that movement and to show you how you can join it yourself.

In these pages you'll meet the leaders who have taken their companies on a journey to four-day weeks. You'll see how they do it: how they plan and design trial periods, how they redesign the workday to become more focused and effective, how they change their cultures and processes to get the same work done in four days rather than five, and how they convince clients and customers to go on the ride with them. You'll learn how they conduct efficient meetings, use technology thoughtfully, and support an innovation mindset that helps them shorten the workday. You'll discover the benefits that four-day weeks bring to companies, employees, and clients alike, how they make companies more productive, people more creative, careers more sustainable, and clients happier and more satisfied. You'll learn why many companies succeed in moving to a shorter workweek, and why a few fail. Finally, you'll see how by treating work and time as things that we can redesign using the same tools that cutting-edge companies use to create world-class products and services, we can make our work better, our workplaces happier and more prosperous, and the future of work brighter.

Reducing business hours runs against every instinct we have about work and success and requires defying professional norms and ignoring social expectations. Yet it can

work. Shortening the workweek can help make companies run better, encourage leaders and workers to develop new skills, enhance focus and collaboration, make work more sustainable, and improve work-life balance. It can even help the environment, reduce traffic and congestion, and make people healthier.

In today's always-on, globally connected, 24/7 world, it's easy to think that overwork is inevitable and inescapable. The companies you're about to meet prove that it's not. They show that you can reinvent the way your business works today, right now.

Let's get started.



# Frame

## SOWOL-RO, SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

“Maybe it’s because I have a design background, or maybe it’s my personal tendency, but I really like to find patterns and flip them, or tweak them, and think about why things are the way they are,” Bong-Jin Kim, the CEO of mobile app developer Woowa Brothers, tells me. We’re sitting in a Japanese restaurant in Seoul, a parade of exquisitely made *kaiseki* dishes floating past us as we talk. After spending several winter nights grazing my way across Seoul’s vibrant street-food scene and following a strict diet of skewers of food grilled on open-air braziers, the private tatami room at the Millennium Hilton is a pleasant change; the quiet also makes it easier for me to hear the pair of interpreters who are with us.

Korea is an unlikely laboratory for experiments in shortening the workweek. In 1953, after decades of Japanese colonial rule, World War II, and the devastation of the Korean

War, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. Nearly seventy years later, its economy had grown an astounding **31,000 fold**, and it was one of fifteen countries in the world with an annual GDP of more than \$1 trillion. Hard-driving high-tech companies like Hyundai, Samsung, and LG helped transform this small, resource-poor, and rugged country into a global economic and cultural powerhouse. But it's come at a cost: Koreans now work more hours per year than almost any other country in the world (only Mexicans work more). Suicide rates have tripled since 1990. The Korean language now has its own word for “working yourself to death”—*gwarosa*.

Yet despite (or maybe because of) this history, a number of companies in Korea are experimenting with ways to shorten working hours. In 2018, in an effort to ease pressures caused by long hours, the Korean government passed legislation capping working hours at forty-eight per week. Companies struggling to find and retain workers are giving them the option of working four ten-hour days. A few are going further and adopting four-day or thirty-five-hour weeks. Probably the best known of them is Woowa Brothers.

Bong-Jin is one of the country's most famous tech entrepreneurs, a star of what Koreans call O2O (online-to-offline commerce) and one of the more colorful figures in the normally buttoned-up world of Korean business. After what one biography diplomatically called an “eventful adolescence,” Bong-Jin studied interior design at the Seoul Institute of the Arts, then earned an MA in typography at Kookmin University's Graduate School of Design. After a short-lived venture making furniture, he worked as a web designer and art director for Nike Korea and credit card company Hyundai Card, before cofounding Woowa Brothers in 2010. Baedal Minjok,

Woowa Brothers' restaurant delivery app, was the first Korean smartphone app to be downloaded more than 10 million times and is now the Korean market's version of DoorDash or Deliveroo. The fledgling company attracted funding from Korean venture capitalists, and then foreign investors. By 2015, Woowa Brothers had grown from a scrappy startup to a five-hundred-person company that made *Fortune* Korea's list of fifty best places to work and landed Bong-Jin on lists of top CEOs in Korea.

But then Bong-Jin did something unexpected: he decided to shorten the workweek for his employees. Koreans work some of the longest hours in the world, and Woowa Brothers had been no exception. He implemented a 37.5-hour workweek in 2015, then in March 2017 cut hours further, to 35 hours a week, without cutting anyone's pay. "We didn't introduce this so we could slack off," he told *Bloomberg* reporter Sam Kim in 2019. "My goal was to create a workplace where we could concentrate better. We should never stop thinking about how we can change the way we work so we change the way we live."

I ask Bong-Jin to tell the story of how he decided to shorten the workweek at Woowa Brothers. The company spent its early years like any lucky startup, growing fast, burning cash and midnight oil. But eventually, "I realized that putting more hours into work did not lead to higher productivity," he recalls. "For a company like this, an IT company and a creative company, longer working hours are not very useful." Logically, if "the link between time and productivity was blurry," he continues, the company should try not to maximize working hours but instead aim "to promote more efficient work, to remind workers of what kind of people we are and what kind of work we are doing."