

According to anthropologists, people in preindustrial societies spent 3 to 4 hours per day or about 20 hours per week doing the work necessary for life.

Modern comparisons of the amount of work performed per week, however, begin with the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) when 10- to 12-hour workdays with six workdays per week were the norm.

Even with extensive time devoted to work, however, both incomes and standards of living were low.

As incomes rose near the end of the Industrial Revolution, it became increasingly common to treat Saturday afternoons as a half-day holiday.

The half holiday had become standard practice in Britain by the 1870's, but did not become common in the United States until the 1920's.

In the United States, the first third of the twentieth century saw the workweek move from 60 hours per week to just under 50 hours by the start of the 1930' s.

In 1914 Henry Ford reduced daily work hours at his automobile plants from 9 to 8.

In 1926 he announced that henceforth his factories would close for the entire day on Saturday.

At the time, Ford received criticism from other firms such as United States Steel and Westinghouse, but the idea was popular with workers.

The Depression years of the 1930's brought with them the notion of job sharing to spread available work around; the workweek dropped to a modern low for the United States of 35 hours.

In 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act mandated a weekly maximum of 40 hours to begin in 1940, and since that time the 8-hour day, 5-day workweek has been the standard in the United States.

Adjustments in various places, however, show that this standard is not immutable.

In 1987, for example, German metalworkers struck for and received a 37.5-hour workweek; and in 1990 many workers in Britain won a 37-hour week.

Since 1989, the Japanese government has moved from a 6- to a 5-day workweek and has set a national target of 1,800 work hours per year for the average worker.

The average amount of work per year in Japan in 1989 was 2,088 hours per worker, compared to 1,957 for the United States and 1,646 for France.