

## One thing we have learnt this week – The ecological limits of work

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The ecological limits of work is not something I've ever considered much. I

imagine my surprise yesterday when I read an article with a headline saying we are going to have to reduce our hours of work to 9 per week to "save the planet". The Ecological Limits of Work is the title of a report just out from a think tank called Autonomy whose mission is to think about the future of work. The first question which I have considered a little bit on this blog in the past is would cutting the hours of work or even work from home cut emissions? As we covered a bit in a our [book](#) there is an economic theory called the rebound effect. This states that energy efficiency savings in one area are more than wiped out by the change in another area. So in this case if working hours are drastically reduced the person might travel more and in winter uses loads of heating. There isn't much research in this area but such that there is suggests the savings are small. For a 1% reduction in work time the green house gas (GHG) cuts are in the range of 0.8% - 0.42%. Hence the drastic hours figures. This does suggest the Jevons paradox as the above idea is more formally known, might be in play here. Its also true that 1% isn't much and you still have to (in most cases get still physically get there). The authors of the report come up with a different way. Its elegant and relatively simple. To keep global temperature rises to below 2°C (and its arguable it should be below 1.5°C) then every person on the planet can emit 1.6 tonnes of carbon. This method assumes a proportional relationship between labour time and GHG emissions. Knowing the total GHG emissions per unit of GDP and using this the figure of GDP per capita that would be sustainable you can do some calculations. Dividing this figure by the productivity in an economy gives you the number of hours that would be sustainable. This for some leading OECD countries is 100-200 hours a year. The authors then slightly loose me. They do another calculation on how the labour is used. For example how many students work part time and how many holidays are there in a year. This is where for the UK they come up with the number of hours we could work is 9. It has to be said, its not many more hours for other economies either. So where are we? The authors do give a nod to the Jevons paradox. They do admit the cut in hours in of itself would not be sufficient. What they don't do is look at the acceptability of this and how people's lifestyle would be funded. I'm a big support of a citizens income (search this site) but the money for this has to come from somewhere. If everyone works just a few hours a week without automation then you've pretty much shut the conventional economy down (something I don't in principle have an issue with). Automation is not really mentioned. There is also the problem of making this socially acceptable. As someone who still struggles with underemployment, getting people to work a few hours a week could be difficult. Very few in society want to sit around doing nothing. One solution might be to work full time for a few months of the year and have the rest of the time off (this would be more productive anyway). Also under this theory the more sustainable we can make our economies the more we can work. A final thought. The whole area of work needs looking at urgently with not just the ecological threat but also the rise of automation. We need to have a big debate about work and come up with a fair plan that treats everyone equally. Neil

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