

Rise of robots 'could see workers enjoy four-day weeks'

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A four-day working week could become commonplace in Britain as automation and artificial intelligence increase workplace efficiency, a new study has concluded.

If the benefits of rolling out such new technologies were passed on to staff, then they would be able to generate their current weekly economic output in just four days. The research, by the cross-party Social Market Foundation (SMF) thinktank, found that even relatively modest gains from using robots and AI had the potential to give British workers Scandinavian levels of leisure time.

The conclusions of the study will come as a boost to John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor, who wants to look at reducing hours in the working week. TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady used her speech to the organisation's annual gathering last month to call for a four-day working week, saying that it should be achievable by the end of the century. She also attacked the likes of Amazon chief Jeff Bezos for overseeing a trillion-dollar company while "his workers are collapsing on the job exhausted".

While Labour is prioritising policies to deal with the insecurities of the gig economy in its next manifesto, McDonnell told the *Observer*: "We are interested in the TUC's proposals in how the benefits of automation, robotics and AI of the fourth industrial revolution are shared with the workers, both in rewards and potentially a shorter working week. Work-life balance is increasingly coming on to society's agenda."

British employees currently work longer hours on average than most of their European counterparts, while at the same time the UK has seen a slump in productivity. The typical British worker spends 42 hours a week at work but produces 16% less on average than counterparts in other leading economies, according to the Office for National Statistics.

The SMF analysis suggests that a 10% gain in workforce productivity could allow employers to produce the same output with a 38-hour week, assuming pay and employer profits remained the same. It would give British employees the same working week that Norwegians and Danes currently enjoy. A 30% productivity gain could allow the working week to fall to just 32 hours, or a standard four-day working week.

While new technologies could bring economic rewards for employers, the SMF also warned that without the right government policies the workforce may not see any benefits.

It called for big companies to be required to report their average profit per employee and to show how this is changing relative to wages. It also called on chancellor Philip Hammond to use his budget at the end of this month to give tax breaks to workers trying

to improve their skills.

Scott Corfe, the SMF's chief economist who authored the report, said: "Robots, AI and big data could dramatically change society for the better, addressing the UK's productivity crisis and creating more enjoyable work as mundane tasks are automated. If we manage this revolution properly, workers will get new choices, including whether to reduce their working week and having more leisure time.

"However, it also brings challenges. Some firms are using new technologies to micromanage and monitor every movement of staff – including how long they spend in the toilet. We need to ensure that technology is rolled out in an ethical way that maintains the dignity of work, and that workers are properly consulted."