

# Redefining Work: The Debate on Working Hours

By **Acharya Prashant** - February 16, 2025



*The nature of modern industrial work is such that for most employees, work is merely a means to sustain life, fulfill desires, and achieve materialistic objectives. For them, the purpose of work is to maximize output to input.*

The debate on working hours has intensified recently. Initially, it was suggested that Indians should work 70 hours a week, and recently, the chairman of a major organisation proposed 90-hour workweeks. This conversation spans many dimensions, significantly pitting employers, who prioritize profit, against employees, who work primarily to earn a salary.

The nature of modern industrial work is such that for most employees, work is merely a means to sustain life, fulfill desires, and achieve materialistic objectives. For them, the purpose of work is to maximize output to input. Input refers to the number of hours worked, and output refers to the salary received. Work is typically seen as something that brings money through physical or mental labor, with input measured in hours worked. The currently raging debate has hardly explored the true essence of work. Employers, on the other hand, seek to maximize profit and therefore promote long work hours. Corporate leadership reflects this obsession with numbers. CEOs, earning 300 to 1,000 times more than the average employee, advocate long hours – not out of passion but to extract an output that can justify the disproportionate CEO remuneration. If employees were compensated similarly, they might also work those hours.

This creates a class struggle between the employers and the employees, with both sides negotiating their interests. The work environments are loveless, where the various stakeholders have transactional relationships with each other, as well as their work. Then capping working hours becomes essential: if people are told to do 90 hours a week on jobs they hate, they'll go insane. Excessive work without any deeper connection or understanding harms the mental and physical well-being of employees, leading to burnout, health issues, and broader societal harm. In such transactional places,

obviously there needs to be a clear limit on how many hours one can work—not out of benevolence, but because economic disparity allows exploitation. The poorer someone is, the more they can be arm-twisted.

That is why developed nations implement strict regulations to prevent such outcomes. Countries like Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands cap workweeks at 31-36 hours. Conversely, in developing nations like India, Pakistan, Mexico, or Brazil, average workweeks often exceed 45 hours due to economic disparity and lack of regulations. In India, for example, over half the population works more than 50 hours a week, worsening worker struggles.

Experiments in the UK, Germany, and Japan testing the four-day workweek show that shorter hours lead to stable productivity and happier employees. The rationale for shorter workweeks is simple: when people know they'll get three or four days off, they put their full energy into their work during the remaining days. This is because they dislike their work and are motivated by the prospect of free time. When you dislike something, you naturally want to get it over with as quickly as possible. Knowing you won't have to do it for three days brings immense happiness. The reality is that the majority of people resent their jobs.

This disdain for work is evident worldwide. In the West, increasing life expectancy, declining birth rates, and reduced morbidity mean elderly people are living longer, healthier lives. However, with retirement at 60 and fewer young workers, many are being asked to work until 70. This has sparked debates: Why invest in aging research if living longer means working longer? Some resent their jobs so deeply that they'd rather live shorter lives than extend their years working. In France, for instance, 10 million people recently protested against raising the retirement age, eager to escape jobs they despise. A survey in Britain revealed that between 40% and 70% of employees consider their jobs either frivolous or redundant. People say, "Don't make me work more hours." Because their work feels trivial, and many times actually is, they fear AI replacing them. In general, AI threatens to take over work that lacks love and creativity. However, jobs that incorporate uniquely human elements are less likely to be replaced. If your work involves mostly mechanical operations, AI will easily replace you.

The harsh truth is that the majority of people worldwide do jobs they don't love. Education and cultural systems condition people to view work as a numerical equation, prioritizing financial gain over meaningful engagement. This mindset deprives individuals of pursuing fulfilling vocations. Consequently, discussions about work-life balance dominate because most view work as a necessary evil rather than a source of joy. Parents who compromise for a paycheck often pass down the same cycle of compromise to their children.

For those trapped in routine jobs, reducing work hours and ensuring fair treatment is essential for maintaining dignity and sanity. However, the debate over work hours reveals a deeper systemic issue: the need to rethink the meaning of work, shifting from numerical obsession to clarity and love. The real question isn't how long we work, but whether our work comes from deep understanding or blind compulsion.

This is why teachings of the Gita remain relevant. The Gita advocates for joy in desireless work—work done for its own sake, not for rewards. Such work emerges from awareness, understanding, and love. When work isn't driven by rewards but by the joy of the process, it becomes fulfilling.

However, this conditioning starts early. When children are told, "If you come first, I'll love you more," love becomes conditional. The focus shifts from the process to results, prompting shortcuts over love. The relentless pursuit of numbers, money, and convenience strips life and love from work. While advocating for work-life balance is important for those who have surrendered their life to a lifeless grind, the bigger question remains: Is it necessary to live this way? Why can't work or business be something heartfelt? If you're not living from the heart, are you truly living?

The debate over work hours is pointless. Both sides—those demanding more hours and those asking for fewer—are trapped in the same system. True freedom lies in work driven by love, but neither side understands this.

It's about love. One who truly loves—his work, his actions, his every step will reflect that love. But if love itself is missing, then how can you love your work? You can't even love yourself. Because love isn't selective. It's not a checklist where you pick and choose—this, yes; that, no. Love is like light. When it shines, it shines on everything. It doesn't decide whom to favor. Love means vastness—the ability to give. And the absence of love means pettiness—the habit of counting, measuring, calculating.

How to learn love? Love arises from wisdom—wisdom that arises from self-inquiry and self-knowledge. That is the essence of all wisdom literature – Bhagavad Gita, Ashtavakra Gita, Upanishads and other scriptures.

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