

The Five Hour Workday
By Stephan Aarstol
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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Introduction

This book is not only about getting things done, but much more, and it is particularly relevant to project work. But it is different from the books I typically review and so my approach needs to be changed accordingly. As a project manager I know the purpose of most books on project management – and that is how to achieve success.¹ So my review approach is to study such books to see how they help to get there. However, this book really is different, it's about a game changer of an idea and consequently the book's outcome is not at all clear, at least to me, initially.

On the face of it, history supports the conclusion of a progressive reduction in the number of hours employees have worked in a day. Pre-industrial revolution it was working all day to the tune of 16 hours or around 90 hours a week. At the beginning of industrialization, hours employed were around 60+ hours a week.

On my first construction site job as a site surveyor, the job site worked 8 hours a day, 7 days a week and we were expected to work 9 to 5, 7 days a week with occasional overtime for three weeks in a row. We then got three days off. That worked out at around 50 hours a week. The construction workers probably clocked about the same amount of time.

Subsequently, in an office job,² I was employed at 40 hours a week, which dropped to an expected 37.5 hours a week when Saturday working was eliminated, but with other days adjusted upwards to suit. How the hours were paid for is a different issue. Management and staff were paid for on a flat monthly salary, so the number of hours "worked" varied widely, so long as physical presence at the office was not less than the prescribed number. Towards my retirement, I negotiated a shorter day so that I had time for more necessary daily exercise, but at a correspondingly lower salary.

Field workers were paid by the hour, and claimed overtime pay in excess of the prescribed number. That's how field workers, trades people and so on, became effectively paid substantially more than office workers. Once upon a time it was a privilege, honor and benefit to be promoted to "management", but not any more – to the extent that many dedicated, and smart, workers refused such an offer. After all, when their day is done, their work is done, whereas for managers, their day is done only when their work is done.

It may be argued that brawn work is harder than brainwork and therefore should be paid more, especially with overtime hours. Yet, in large cities, many office workers add significant "unofficial" time to their workday, through the time they take to get to, and from, their place of work. This can be as much as an hour each way or even more. Add that to a 35-hour work week and you are effectively back to a 45-hour work week.

Nevertheless, the picture I have drawn clearly shows a general trend *downwards* in the amount of time spent, or at least paid for, at work. But in these days of rapid technology advancement, it is in the right

sort of brainwork where the money is being made. I recount all of this as background to author Stephan Aarstol's book wherein he proposes *The Five Hour Workday*³ [with a view to] *Live differently, unlock productivity, and find happiness*.⁴

Really? A five-hour workday? Is that even possible?⁵

Stephan sets out to extol the virtues of such a move, promotes the idea, explains what is involved, and demonstrates, in his own company that he started from scratch, how successfully it can be done. For whom might this apply? Well, that's an issue that is gradually answered through the book, but Stephan is no doubt convinced that it will become the norm at some time in the future. And, he concludes, that we'll all be the happier for it.

About the author

Stephan Aarstol is the CEO and Founder of Tower Paddle Boards, an online, manufacture-direct brand in the stand up paddle boarding industry. The company has been listed in the 2015 Inc. 500 List of America's Fastest Growing Companies. While Tower began as a disruptive, direct-to-consumer stand up paddle board company, it has since evolved into a more holistic beach lifestyle company offering a growing array of beach lifestyle products, sold and shipped directly to consumers.⁶ Based in San Diego, he and his company are in the right place on the west coast for promoting such products, given the climate in that part of the USA. Nevertheless, they ship their products all over the world.

Book Structure

The contents of this book are set out in eleven chapters plus a Conclusion as follows:

Part I: The Fascinating History of Work

1. The Agricultural Age: Before and After
2. The Industrial Age
3. The Information Age

Part II: Information Age Work and Lifestyle

4. How We're Working Today
5. The Golden Age of Entrepreneurship

Part III: Why the Five-hour Workday Works

6. Why Employees will thrive
7. Why Companies will thrive

Part IV: The Tower Paddle Boards Experiment

8. The Final Influence towards my Leap of Faith
9. Implementing the Five-hour Workday at Our Company

Part V: The Future of Work

10. How We might Live and Work soon
11. The Renaissance Economy

Conclusion

This book has a total of 268 pages, including the Introduction, but does not have an index or Glossary of terms. It's just not that sort of book. So, you may be asking why am I reviewing this book amongst a long series of technical books on project management?

The answer is because it deals with a pressing issue in the hi-tech industry, the source of the majority of today's projects and, indeed, the trend in many industries. According to the author, you will learn how to:⁷

- Improve business operations, efficiency, and profitability;
- Attract the brightest minds, the hardest workers, and the best performers;
- Stimulate employee performance and increase retention rates;

In ways that:

- Can be implemented and tested at your company, temporarily and without risk , and
 - Can change your life into something better than you ever imagined possible;
- All within a five-hour workday.

As the author explains:⁸

"Today, we're in the midst of a massive productivity shift for knowledge workers. And yet, the eight-hour workday hasn't changed."

He goes on to explain:

"A century ago, Henry Ford saw a sea change in worker productivity. It was the industrial revolution. Productivity and profitability soared. By giving more to his workers, he changed the quality of life of an entire nation. Today, we're in the midst of a massive productivity shift for knowledge workers. And yet, the eight-hour workday hasn't changed.

Until now, that is."

This book is about a company that had the courage to try an experiment towards re-inventing a more sensible, productive, healthy workday for today's knowledge workers, and explains why and how. The book is well written in an easy style to read.

And, oh yes, the book actually mentions the word "project" about three times.

What we found most interesting

Since I was brought up in the days of yore,⁹ it should come as no surprise that I approached this book with a considerable degree of skepticism. Who is this advice for, how would a five-hour workday work in practice, especially on projects, and how could it be brought about, I wondered.

In his *Introduction*, the longest chapter in the book by the way, author Stephan Aarstoll starts out with:¹⁰

"WHAT IF I TOLD YOU THAT YOU COULD WORK FEWER HOURS and be paid the same, or even more? What if I told you that you could give all of your employees a raise for free, and they could go home early, everyday? What if I told you this is the fastest way to grow your business?"

I doubt you would believe me, and I don't blame you. But here's the thing: I just did."

First and foremost, it is clear that the book's focus is on knowledge workers, or at least all those who use their brains at work. However, so far as the author's company is concerned it transpires that every employee themselves is expected to be something of an entrepreneur. As he says:

"To really advance your business in this era, ... You need your team to always be brainstorming, sharing ideas, and not necessarily in a formal way."¹¹

"I look at our business like a football team. Everybody's got to be on the field at the same time, for us to accomplish our best. You've got to know that you can count on your

teammates to be there, and perform, and inspire you to perform at your highest level too."¹²

A hidden killer¹³

"Flex time is another attempt at giving employees a better work-life balance, [but] it's twice as terrible as telecommuting. In extreme cases of flextime, business essentially doesn't have set working hours. If somebody likes working at night, they can come in and work at night. If someone likes taking five hours off in the middle of the day, they can do that. This all of a sudden makes it really hard to track when people are coming, when people are going, and nobody really knows how long anybody is there in the offices."

"... flex time is like having six players on the field instead of 11. ... That's how Flextime adds 24 hours to a one-minute task. And that's how companies with flex time and telecommuting lose customers and miss project deadlines. ... I look at our business like a football team. Everybody's got to be on the field at the same time, for us to accomplish our best."

The Warehouse example:¹⁴

"We have a warehouse. This was a tougher challenge, because they really were putting in more hours a day of labor. But it wasn't as efficient and productive as it could have been, so the five-hour workday forced them to innovate. That's the beauty of the new economy: there are technologies for nearly every problem. For warehouses, it's software. ... Software that eliminated many tasks that added labor hours.

When you've got plenty of hours to do your job, and twice as much time to get the work done, then who cares how the factory is laid out? Who cares about software? You just throw man-hours at things. ... That is why private enterprise almost always outperforms government agencies that basically have unlimited funds because they just raise revenue (taxes). The constraints of "profit or die" forces private companies to become efficient with both money and people."

"A five-hour workday is about being more productive, receiving the same or better pay, and getting your life back."¹⁵

However, for whom is this book really intended? Well, it is not until nearly the middle of the book that we get a clear statement, with this observation:¹⁶

"There's extensive discussion about wages in America right now [2016], as we're long overdue to raise minimum wage. But that's not going to do anything for work-life balance, happiness, and productivity in the knowledge-working world ***that this book is primarily focused upon.***" [The emphasis is mine.]

The real objective of the book:¹⁷

"The objective of the five-hour workday is to make you more efficient. If you can learn to produce the same amount of output in five hours as what you did previously in eight hours, you have to increase the value of your work. Once you've done that, you can keep optimizing your time and learn to do in five hours what most people do in two eight-hour days."

To me, this seems a bit of a stretch, but that's the benefit of the new technology. However, it also assumes the sweeping away of all those unnecessary Emails, and/or personal business during working hours. It's about continuous productivity specifically directed towards the required work at hand.

The Author's Case for a five-day workweek

According to author Stephan Aarstol:¹⁸

"In the last 40 years, productivity has just exploded – in the range of 80% – yet wages have gone up only about 11%. ... Companies are becoming highly automated, and highly leveraged. They are needing fewer and fewer employees, and they are able to replace full time employees with part-time workers at a much lower cost. But this isn't from losing your job to someone overseas, or any of the fear-mongering excuses you hear from politicians. ... It's technology and productivity.

But increasingly, in the new economy, employees are wanting to take back their time. To the younger generation especially, life is about much more than making money. It's about having time to do the things you love. To spend time with the people you love. That's what the five-hour workday is about.

The traditional employer mindset, still lingering from the industrial age, is that fewer hours means less output. ... But what employers are failing to see is, cheats have already been worked into the system here. They're making productivity gains every day, but they're not telling you. What are they doing instead? Facebook, Amazon shopping, vacation planning."

"... Why don't employers care? Because output isn't down. Productivity isn't down. What is down, however, is the total number of hours we need to do our work. That's part of where telecommuting comes from. It's from employees who understand that they need to get the hell out of the office, because they really only need two or three hours a day to get all of their work done. And now we've got a huge growth in freelance workers, and employees going to that side of the table, for (what I believe to be) the same reasons."¹⁹

The author goes on to say that today is similar but different:²⁰

"In the early 1900s, the working class was barely able to meet their needs. If they weren't working, they weren't eating. Today, that's not the problem, for the most part. Working conditions are much more humane and tolerable now, than they were 100 years ago. Most people have the possessions they need, although many may be blind to it, due to high levels of consumerism and materialism. The crisis we're in now is less about wages, and more about time. That's a huge difference.

... I believe that many of our society's ills could be fixed if people worked fewer hours per day. There would be more family time, community engagement, sleep, nutrition, exercise, and all the higher pursuits and experiences that drive health and happiness. ... And to have experiences, you need free time. ... More free time to do with as we like is the key, not more money [which] is why we all need to spend less time at work."

"The average American worker is logging 47 hours per week now. About 25% of our workers report working more than 50 hours a week, and another 25% report working more than *60 hours a week*. How insane is this? We're exponentially more productive than we were 40 years ago, and yet we're working 20-50% more hours per week? And we're doing it for 11% more pay? If you want a recipe for a societal crisis, this seems a pretty good one. An adjustment is long over due."²¹

"As a result, thousands of entrepreneurs like me took advantage of these new opportunities, and built companies for ourselves. Talented employees went to freelance or consulting side, to get out of their wasteful office environments. These two types of

workers – entrepreneurs and freelance workers – both have an incentive to pursue this newly available productivity. That incentive is *time*. Time to enjoy life.²²

Note to readers: All of this seems to assume that no "work" is ever enjoyable.

The Author's Vision Now and into the Future

Overnight Experts Everywhere:²³

"Training yourself and your staff is now lightening fast, thanks to online learning. ... In 1990, it might have taken you 20 years to become an expert. You'd have to go to some expensive university, and take a bunch of classes that were irrelevant. You'd have to get magazines and books and newspapers, and sift through a bunch of information you didn't want, to learn the things you did. But now, with a dedicated effort for 3-6 months, you can become an expert on almost anything in the online marketing world. For *free*."

On Brain Power:²⁴

"Brain power is different from body power. The body can do eight hours of work, but almost none of us can really focus intensely on mentally intensive work for eight hours. The eight-hour workday was set up for the *body*, not the mind. ... But just for the record, it's 52 minutes. Just 52 minutes of work before your brain is shot, and it needs to be followed by a 17 minute break.

That's what the most recent study found, from a productivity company behind the popular application Deskttime. It makes sense, because in the knowledge worker world, it's all about managing *mental* energy. ... If you think about it from the employer's perspective, you're buying their outputs. And how long it takes them to make that product is irrelevant."

However, all of this seems to assume that the worker's product is all the result of intellectual effort. Well and good, but if so, it is clear that the application of these ideas is relatively narrow.

On Looking to the future

Note: The problem I see is that we have not yet found a way of measuring the output of intellectual work. Consider the old saying: "What gets measured gets done." That implies that what is not measure (in some way) probably will not get done or at least done efficiently. For example, if you've got 7 hours to do a 5-hour job, it will take 7 hours.

However, the author continues:

"In the long term, I believe every business in the knowledge-working world will be dealing with the reality of a shorter working day."²⁵

"About Email: I truly believe that mail consumes too much of our time. Just because somebody sent it to you, doesn't mean you need to open it."²⁶

"We're past the horrific reality of physical slavery, but we are still very much in the grips of mental slavery. ... *None but ourselves can free our minds*. Human beings are social beings. Our happiness emanates from socializing with each other, both at a community level and an individual relationship level.

[It] doesn't come from possessions, work titles, or retirement account balances. Our happiness comes from experiences and from relationships (which are experiences themselves, really). ... Any environment where a team is uniformly happy, that's a

massively productive environment.²⁷ *Happiness* is the new productivity tool."²⁸

"Here's the truth: everything we are doing today will be done differently very soon. Technologies will render our current processes and knowledge obsolete. You can count on this being the truth."²⁹ ... From fear to confidence. From paranoia to goodwill. This is the magic created by the five-hour work day.³⁰ ... The objective of the five-hour workday is to make you more efficient."³¹

"Certain types of employee don't see the value in this, but you don't want those types in your company now."³² ... [Indeed,] after we went to the five-hour day, we realized that we're getting two types of people: talented people who love the five-hour workday for the right reasons, and lazy people who just want to do as little as possible.³³ ... We obviously need to weed out the lazy people."³⁴

Hiring and Firing

"The five-hour workday experiment will bring forward many new insights, when it comes to which employees you should retain and which you shouldn't. And you've got to fire your least productive employees to make room for the highly productive employees who want to work for you, after they hear about your five-hour workday."³⁵

Manufacturing New Levels of Productivity

"The fact that technology has driven massive gains in our ability to produce more, but our corporations and owners have not yet changed the standard eight-hour workday, has led to the creation of a lazy workforce. Talented workers know that they don't have to work hard or fast, and it's made our country soft, and susceptible to being overcome by countries of workers who are happier and more productive.

By adjusting the expected productivity of the work environment on a mass scale, our entire work environment will gradually learn to become more efficient and innovative. ... When this happens throughout an entire society, it would effectively double the output and productivity of the nation."³⁶

In our consumerism-gone-awry society, almost everyone is missing the point that time is the new money. In our era of a massively productive workforce, time is now the only true scarcity, not money."³⁷

We're approaching a period of renaissance, where we'll enjoy an entirely different way of living."³⁸

Footnote

In reading through the book, I came across a number of suggestions or descriptions of actions that seemed to me to be impractical. Impractical, that is, outside of the high-tech brainwork required to take advantage of the technological innovations that the author describes. Moreover, I felt that author Stephan Aarstol exuded an enthusiasm and confidence bordering on self-gratification. Was it really necessary to learn about his antics with his friend Mason who died of leukemia at the age of 13,³⁹ or how he got bitten by a stingray while surfing?⁴⁰

Still, all this does lead us up into how Stephan got into a disruptive approach to running a paddleboard business, and the trials and tribulations to get there. But his real breakthrough came when he landed a spot on the American TV show *Shark Tank*.⁴¹ Even if he did mess up when it came to his turn, nevertheless he was sufficiently impressive, in pitching his own capabilities as an Internet marketer and entrepreneur, to land an offer. It came from Mark Cuban who offered \$150,000 for a 30% stake in his

company, plus first right of refusal on any future ventures Stephan might think of.⁴² That's how Mark Cuban became the author's partner.

The company Tower Paddle Boards, by the way, is all about management and distribution of beach-type products including the paddleboards. The paddleboards at least, are made to specification in China.⁴³ We simply don't know if the workers there also enjoy the benefits of a 5-hour day workweek.

R. Max Wideman
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¹ In whatever way the idea of "success" is defined, or implied, by the particular author.

² With a consulting company

³ At full pay or better

⁴ Aarstol, Stephan, author of *The Five Hour Workday*, Lioncrest Publishing, USA.

In Chapter 4, Author Stephan Aarstoll also describes *How we're working today*, but from a different perspective

⁵ Another author promotes going even further! See Tim Ferriss's book: *The Four Hour Workweek*

⁶ Aarstoll, pp267-268

⁷ Ibid, back cover

⁸ Ibid

⁹ I.e pre- and post- second world war

¹⁰ Ibid, p9

¹¹ Ibid, p111

¹² Ibid, p113

¹³ Ibid, pp112-114

¹⁴ Ibid, p43

¹⁵ Ibid, p47

¹⁶ Ibid, p115

¹⁷ Ibid, p166

¹⁸ Ibid, pp38-40

¹⁹ Ibid, p40

²⁰ Ibid, pp76-77

²¹ Ibid, p85

²² Ibid, pp85-86

²³ Ibid, p103

²⁴ Ibid, pp107-108

²⁵ Ibid, p124

²⁶ Ibid, p142

²⁷ Ibid, p157

²⁸ Ibid, p211

²⁹ Ibid, p181

³⁰ Ibid, p182

³¹ Ibid, p166

³² Ibid, p185

³³ Ibid, p190

³⁴ Ibid, p191

³⁵ Ibid, p223

³⁶ Ibid, p231-232

³⁷ Ibid, p250

³⁸ Ibid, p241

³⁹ Ibid, p14

⁴⁰ Ibid, p26

⁴¹ Ibid, p29

⁴² Ibid, p34

⁴³ Ibid, p28