The Guide to Windowed Work

How to rethink your workweek so you can balance well being and performance during the global crisis (and beyond)

RANGE

Introduction

The workweek as we know is coming up on its 100-year birthday, and hasn't aged well. There's been a growing chorus of voices (joining Dolly Parton) for rethinking the 9-5 workweek for decades. Now, as the world grapples with COVID-19, many are trying to rebalance schedules and navigate a new kind of work from home — WFHWK (work from home with kids). This new reality makes the old 9-5 workweek feel especially arbitrary and out of sync with what organizations, teams, and individuals need to be successful.

When we first published an article about the concept of Windowed Work and shared how we're rethinking the work week, we were happily surprised how much it resonated. People wanted to know more about how breaking the workweek into disjointed work blocks could help teams and managers balance well-being and performance. So to help you and your teams adapt to this strange new normal, we're excited to offer this guide to Windowed Work.

We'll cover a bit of the history of the workweek, how rethinking the work week can help your team, as well as a framework for Windowed Work we use at Range, and template for a Personal Collaboration Handbook.

As so many continue to chart the path forward in a remote-first world — one that is a far cry from normal remote work — we hope this guide is useful, and will help your team be more effective and successful not just during these uniquely challenging times, but in how you approach the balancing performance and well being in all your future workweeks.

Windowed Work is the act of supporting flexible work schedules that don't conform to the traditional 9-5 workday.

Using Windowed Work, people are able to structure their work week to fit their logistical needs — such as balancing child care, elder care, or personal health and wellness needs — and their own needs for personal productivity and creativity.

To effectively support Windowed Work, organizations need to intentionally structure their communication and collaboration practices.

The end result is increased flexibility and organizational resilience.

Contents

Outdated technology
How the workweek came to be

The origins of the modern workweek began in the 19th century with the rise of scientific management or Taylorism, after its founder Frederick Taylor. Taylorism was a theory of management that focused on labor productivity; by optimizing processes, organizations saw revolutionary increases in their output. However, as productivity grew, so did working hours, ballooning from an average of 1,500 hours to 3,500 per year.
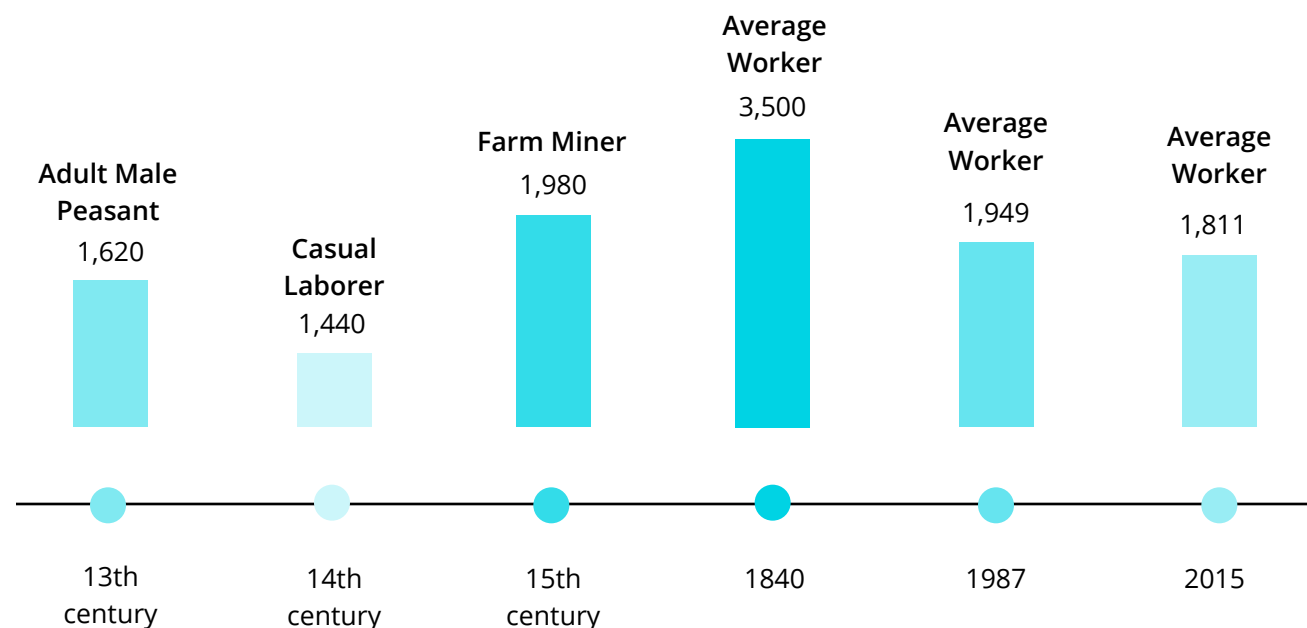
With industrialization, annual working hours increased, almost doubling by the end of the 19th century. Workers labored 70-hour weeks over 45-52 weeks a year.

In the US, the five-day workweek was popularized by Henry Ford back in 1926, who saw it as a way to improve efficiency. It grew with the adoption of Ford's approach to assembly line optimization and became especially popular during the Great Depression as it was seen to counter unemployment (fewer hours for each person meant more work hours to go around). It became law in 1940, and through the 60's more and more countries started to adopt a five-day workweek to align with international markets. Today, a 40 hour week is almost universal, from Afghanistan to Albania, Canada to Croatia. Variations do exist – for example France has a 35 hour week, in Indonesia many favor a 6 day work week with 7 hour days, and Burundi has a 50 hour week.

Average work hours through the ages
Source to data

Average Worker
3,500

Farm Miner
1,980

Average Worker
1,949

Average Worker
1,811

Adult Male Peasant
1,620

Casual Laborer
1,440

13th century

14th century

15th century

1840

1987

2015

Of course, since Henry Ford's time, the nature of work itself continued to evolve, especially with the rise of knowledge workers—people focused on work that is novel and creative. And while through the 80s people had to be in the office at the same time in order to work on things together, with the advent of email, collaborative editing, and chat, that's changed. From a management perspective, the idea that employees are working because they are at work, might be comforting, but it's shortsighted. And the way people get work done has changed as well, with teams now being the main unit of work, often cross-functional and spread out across time zones.

Today, despite technology having profoundly impacted how we work and the way we work together, when we ask why we use a century-old model to define the workweek, the answer seems to be "we do it that way because we've been doing it that way." What we have in place now is due to societal inertia—it's a habit that's hard to break. Questions such as "is working 9 AM to 5 PM the optimum interval for productivity each day?" Or "does working five days in a row lead to better well being?" are often largely ignored.

Social situations have also evolved. There are many more single parent households, and for married households with children, 65% now have two working parents. People are also living with fewer support structures than past generations. Globalization and a mobile workforce has meant it is common for people to live in different states or even countries to their family.

So, despite the workweek having been rooted in optimization, little has been optimized since it was originally rolled out. And when we evaluate a workweek as a technology in and of itself, more and more research points to it being out of date. Not only does it add undue stress on workers, it doesn't reflect the productivity needs of creative work.

Balancing creative energy and work

The 9-5 workweek assumes we all can (and must) do all our best work in that timeframe. But in the last 100 years, we've learned a lot about how physiology shapes creativity.

Melatonin levels fluctuate throughout the day, impacting our attention and wakefulness. And it varies from person to person. In other words, each of us has our own unique creative peaks and troughs. Different tasks are best suited to different levels of energy, and for many people these periods don't fit neatly into a 9-5 workday.

Tony Schwartz, the author of Be Excellent at Anything, told Harvard Business Review that people work best in intense 90-minute bursts followed by periods of recovery.

Basecamp has employees work four-day, 32-hour weeks for half of the year. Jason Fried, the CEO, wrote an op-ed in The New York Times and noted that "[w]hen you have a compressed workweek, you tend to focus on what's important. Constraining time encourages quality time. Better work gets done in four days than in five."

So when it comes to assessing your own optimal workweek, a good place to start is figuring out when your own creative output is at its best.

We really like Daniel Pink's work around chronotypes—our individual clocks that influence our moods, focus, and creativity over the course of each day. When we each gain an understanding of these, it can help us unlock our creativity, as well as our workweek.

Each of us has three daily productivity phases, and most people experience them in this order:

Peak — Trough — Recovery

However not everyone follows this order. Some people's phases actually happen in reverse order.

- **Peak**
  our mood and energy rises in the morning — best time for analytical tasks

- **Trough**
  our mood and energy declines in the mid-early afternoon — best time for administrative tasks

- **Recovery**
  our mood and energy rises again — best time for brainstorming or creative work
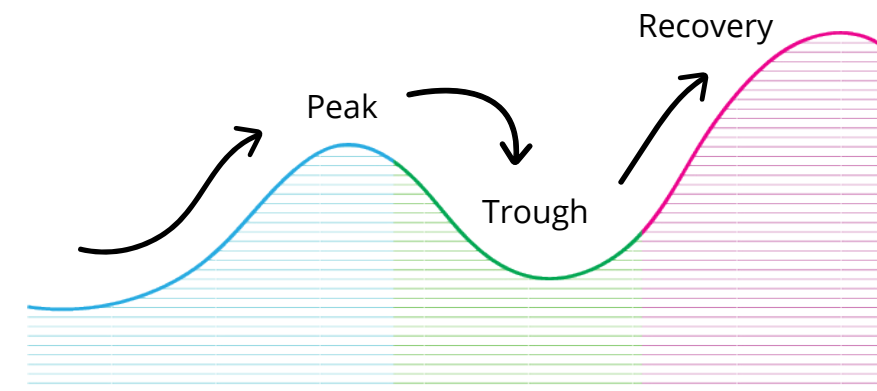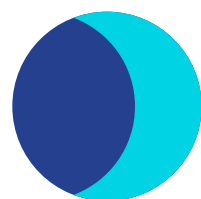
To figure out your chronotype, Pink came up with three categories: Lark, Owl, and Third Bird.
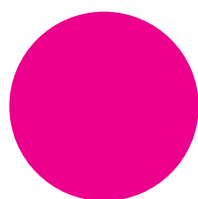
Larks
morning
people
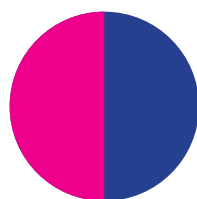
Third Birds
somewhere
in between

Owls
evening
people

We all usually start out as Larks when we are children, then morph into Owls as teenagers, then change (or stay the same) again around 22 years old. And when we're over 60, we turn back to earlier chronotypes.

Most adults are Third Birds and are most alert, and best able to make smart decisions, in the mid- to late-morning. In the afternoon, cognitive studies show that our minds become sluggish. Memory is not as sharp and we're slower to connect ideas. In the late afternoon and evening some cognitive ground is regained. When it comes to the workweek, if you're a Lark or Third Bird, fitting your cadence into a normal workday is possible, but Owls will find the typical 9-to-5 workday much harder.

For example, an Owl software engineer might find the following work day most productive:

10am - 12:30
Start work with some light-creative tasks such as spec writing, project planning, or brainstorming. Debugging customer issues, fixing easy bugs, or doing refactoring work would also work well. As energy declines, move into administrative tasks such as reviewing email, checking on metrics, or communicating with stakeholders.

Midday
Long lunch, do some exercise, go grocery shopping

2:30 - 3:30
Take a few meetings or calls.

3:30 - 4:00
Administrative block processing emails

4:00 - 6:00
Deep focus on analytical oriented tasks. Coding a new feature or system, or going deep on data analysis.

Evening
Family time

8:00 - 9:30
Revisit afternoon's deep focus project.

9:30
While at peak, create a plan for the morning, to make the most of your recovery block.

9:45 - 1:00am
Work on that fission reactor side project, or play Call of Duty until your eyes go dry.

To determine your "bird", use this exercise.

1. Take the midpoint of when you go to sleep and naturally wake up on a "free day" — days when you don't have to wake up to an alarm clock.

2. You're probably a Lark if your midpoint of sleep is 3:30 a.m. or earlier

3. You're probably an Owl if your midpoint of sleep is 5:30 a.m. or later

4. You're probably a Third Bird if your midpoint is somewhere in between

   The chart below can help you figure out the best time of day to do different types of tasks, according to Pink's assessment of chronotypes.

The best time of day to do these things, depending on your chronotype.

	Analytic Tasks	Insight Tasks	Making an impressions	Making a decision
Lark	Early morning	Late afternoon/ early evening	Morning	Early morning
Third Bird	Early midmorning	Late afternoon/ early evening	Morning	Early to midmorning
Owl	Late afternoon and evening	Morning	Morning (sorry owls)	Later afternoon and evening

As you can see, many of us have rhythms that don't align well with the 9-5 workday, or each other. So as we collaborate, if a Lark is working with an Owl, from making a decision to coming up with creative ideas, they may be very much out of sync. When we come to understand when we're more productive, it's much easier to have conversations around optimizing our well being and performance, especially as it relates to "classic" work schedules. And as we rethink the workweek, we need to start to rethink processes that—like 9-5—are outdated and inflexible.

For many, this is a pretty big mindset shift, but once you start asking questions such as "what processes really help a team collaborate", "how often are in person meetings really needed", and "what ways can we better use asynchronous communications", rethinking your workweek doesn't seem as daunting.

An ode to flexibility
Trust and remote work

The global pandemic has forced organizations to be more flexible and support working from home. It's also presented them with an opportunity to etch flexibility into their DNA and to heighten the trust they have with their employees.

High-trust companies see flexibility as a virtue. Because they trust their employees, their employees feel empowered to deliver on expectations in a way that feels natural to them. Organizations that embrace high-trust management practices, including flexible work hours, reap the benefits.

According to Paul J. Zak, a neuroeconomist, noted that "compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report: 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, 40% less burnout."

Trust is key to a healthy working environment, and especially critical to making remote work a success. Managing a workforce that's spread out over many locations takes more than learning new ways to communicate and coordinate — it means shifting the style of management. Rethinking the workweek could help organizations rewire their culture, making it more resilient and better equipped to adapt and thrive in the future.

Supporting flexible schedules and windowed work doesn't require your company to be remote-first.

But being remote-first does require supporting flexible schedules, so these things are easier for remote companies to achieve. There's a lot of inertia for co-located teams; it's so easy to fall into old 9-5 patterns.

Because many people actually prefer working in an office, we prefer to think about work processes as digital-first. That is, that by default you accommodate people not being in the same place at the same time. Being remote-first requires that you be digital-first, but digital–first doesn't make any judgement about offices and desks.

Flexible work weeks would also help to address a number of well-being concerns that are on the rise as people navigate working from home, such as:

- Allowing for inclusive practices for working parents / elder care

- Establishing practices around work-life integration vs. work-life balance

- Helping teams become more resilient to disruptive world events

Now we'll take a look at two tools to get you and your team started on rethinking the work week—Windowed Work and the Personal Collaboration Handbook.

Implementing Windowed Work

The first part of Windowed Work involves designing blocks of time based on a traffic light system of red, yellow, and green.

Green – focused work block (deep work; meetings and calls ok)

Yellow – working, but interruptible and on call for kids (primarily async, short bursts of sync ok)

Red – not working, family focused (may respond slowly to async communications)

Red is when you focus on the kids and have a limited ability to respond. Yellow is when you and the kids are both working but you may need to step away to help them out. Green is for video calls and deep work.

Following our article, Robert Half conducted a [Windowed Work survey](#) and found:

A greater percentage of respondents with children (78%) than those without (66%) said Windowed Work allows them to be more productive.

Nearly an equal number of men (75%) and women (71%) said they get more done when integrating personal and professional activities throughout the day.

More employees aged 55 and older (39%) noted they prefer a traditional schedule than those aged 41 to 54 (32%) and 25 to 40 (22%).

Below is a graphic of how you can think about aligning your Green/Yellow/Red windows with your logistical needs, such as when kids might need school support, your energy levels, and your ideal collaboration times.

Each week isn't static, and it takes time to align these and figure out what works best for you. After the graphic, we give you a sample of what this could look like in a schedule format and a template you can fill out on your own.

Time	Windows (green, yellow, red work blocks)	Energy Needs (recovery, trough, peak)	Collaboration Needs	Logistical Needs

On the next page is an example of a schedule that gives you a sense of the balancing act, where we match the windows to the logistical needs, energy levels, and ideal collaboration time of the day. As you can see, "ideal" is relative—it can be challenging to have everything line up perfectly — it's as ideal as it can be based on balancing work and home needs.

For example, while the Trough might not be the ideal time for Focused work, because of the kids' need for assistance during school in the morning and family time in the evening, that's the best time for Collaboration and for a Focused work block. Depending on your own situation, you can move these around based on the responsibilities and coverage you need. What's important is that you're aware of your Energy levels, which can help you optimize your day as much as you can.

Planner example

Time	Windows	Energy Lark ●	Collaboration	Logistics
8	🟥	Recovery		
9	🟨			Virtual School
10	🟨			
11	🟨		Core Hours	
12pm	Exercise 🟥			In–home
1	🟩	Trough		childcare
2	🟩			
3	🟩			
4	🟩	Peak		
5	🟥			Family Time
6	🟥			
7	🟥			
8	🟥			
9	🟩			
10	🟩			

🟩 **Green** focused work   🟨 **Yellow** working   🟥 **Red** not working

Planner template

Time	Windows	Energy	Collaboration	Logistics
8				
9				
10				
11				
12pm				
1				
1				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

The second part of Windowed Work involves assessing your current processes to see how they can be more flexible so your whole team can support each other so people can actually adopt a windowed work schedule.

This is different for everyone, but here are a few tips.

Shift more communication to be asynchronous.

Async communications allow teams to keep everyone in the loop without overwhelming people with meetings. A lot of transactional meetings, such status updates, aren't productive. Using async comms instead, such as a daily written check in, can give teams back valuable time and improve flexible collaboration, whether they're remote or in-person.

Use software tools that can also build remote team culture.

Tools like Range are designed not to just facilitate remote collaboration, but make teams more connected with features that strengthen culture every day. Being able to answer a daily team-building question or share a mood with an emoji may seem like trivial activities, but over time it has a huge impact on building a stronger team. This, in turn, fuels collaboration and performance no matter where a team is working.

Be transparent and over communicate.

Default to sharing your schedule and your work. It makes it much easier for people to understand your cadence, which can change often during events like COVID, and gain insight into progress or offer help without having to chase down information.

Finding your groove:
The Personal Collaboration Handbook

Over time, the shackles of the standard eight-hour workday loosen, making it easier for people to disconnect from work in the right way. People free up more time for things like exercise or time with family and friends and adjust their schedule so they can be more present and more productive. We call this finding your groove to avoid the grind.

Getting into a groove — an approach to your work that suits you best — helps balance performance and well being. To help our team, we developed personal collaboration handbooks. We share them with the entire team and update them as necessary — usually weekly. It contains contact information, current priorities, preferred working hours, meeting times, what's going on at home, and personal development goals. Check out the Personal Remote Handbook template at the end of this section.

Anyone can pull up a handbook and check on someone's availability or what they might be balancing at home. They may also come across a recommendation for a good read or a touching movie. It cuts down on the number of 1:1s and interruptions, and provides useful context.

This new approach doesn't limit people to a five-day workweek or nine-to-five gig. It doesn't require people to work more, but it helps them work better. Some people will work a bit early in the morning, get exercise or help their kids map out their day, and then be available for collaboration during set times. They may handle some part of work on a weekend, and mix and match the days depending on the balance that works.

RANGE

Above all, Windowed Work gives our team permission to develop a structure that works for them. We believe it empowers the team with an act of trust, the ingredient crucial to the health of any organization. There are many versions of workweeks that balance well being and productivity. Some, like Basecamp, use a 32 hour workweek in the summer. Twitter offers a 9/80 schedule, where people take a 3-day weekend every two weeks, while others may want to model the Indonesian 6-day workweek, with fewer hours every day. No matter what you decide, you've started to rethink the workweek, which is a great—and important—first step.

We hope you've found this guide useful, and if you want to keep your team more productive, focused, and connected, try Range for free at range.co

And on the following pages you'll find the template for the Personal Collaboration Handbook with instructions on how to fill your own out.

Personal Collaboration Handbook for _____

[Desk selfies] Use photobooth and share a couple of photos in your preferred working locations at home.

CONTACT
Email:
Cell:
Landline:
Alt. contact:

USEFUL LINKS
[Range Profile]
[LinkedIn]

CURRENT PRIOTITIES & FOCUS AREAS
List out the various workstreams you are contributing to. Try to be as exhaustive as possible and where possible give a rough idea of how much of your attention it takes. e.g. half a day per week = 10%.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Sharing your priorities has multiple benefits. You can use it as a way of helping yourself prioritize across your different responsibilities, while also communicating to others your focus and identifying opportunities for help or collaboration.

For example, if another person doesn't understand that you only intend to spend 20% of your time on a given workstream, they may feel anxious about the progress being made.

CONTEXT
Location
Describe where you are working from, help them visualize you on the other end of a Slack conversation.

_____

_____

_____

Home situation
Share any details that might help other people understand your home working situation. Is it quiet and calm, do you have kids running around, can we expect a llama to poke their head through the window?

_____

_____

_____

Working hours

Times like this require flexibility, we want to encourage you to find a situation that works for you, however, communication and expectation setting are important. As much as possible, outline your expected schedule here. Reality will deviate from a plan, but this will provide a useful baseline for others.

_____

_____

_____

Meeting preferences

When are the best times for you to take meetings? Can you easily jump on a VC or does it need to be scheduled?

_____

_____

_____

Communication preferences

Do you have a preferred way for people to ask you questions or get your feedback on things? Which channels are easiest for you? Slack, email, docs?

_____

_____

_____

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

What are your current goals, what are you working on, what are some of your current challenges. Where specifically would you like help?

_____

_____

_____

HEAVY ROTATION

What music are you currently listening to? What shows are you watching? What are you reading?

_____

_____

_____

SELF-CARE

What are your current tactics for self care?

_____

_____

_____

_____