

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

## CONCOURS HEC SESSION 2017

### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

#### Script n°15

#### **The Benefits of a Shorter Working Day**

By B.J. Epstein

*independent.co.uk*, November 22, 2016

"You're very... industrious."

This was how I was described by one resident when I was living and working in Sweden. And trust me – it was not meant as a compliment. Because, as I discovered over time, although Swedes work hard and with dedication, they do not think their jobs define them. I gradually noticed that people tended to have a healthy work-life balance, and a sense of themselves that was broader than whatever it was they did to make money.

When I moved to Sweden from Chicago in 2001, I threw myself into building a life, including some semblance of a career. I was working long hours, seven days a week, with little time for much else.

There's a word in Swedish, "lagom", that can be roughly translated as: "Not too much, not too little, just right". It's "moderate" or "just enough". Although it is something of a cliché to refer to lagom when talking about Swedish culture, it is still a good place to start. The concept of lagom, after all, raises a series of important questions.

Why work until I'm burned out? Why shouldn't I take regular breaks during the day, including the famed "fika", for coffee and cake? Why not enjoy the gorgeous Swedish summer by having several weeks off, completely disconnected from work? Why should I always ask "what do you do?" when I first meet someone, as though their job is their most important feature?

As someone who researches and translates literature, with a particular focus on Scandinavian texts, I have noticed that Nordic books are less about jobs than their English-language equivalents. For example, Swedish author Kristina Sandberg's award-winning trilogy about a housewife, *Maj*, has been extremely popular with Swedish readers, who are fascinated by how the main character lives her life. She cleans her home, raises her two children, socialises with friends, cooks meals every day, and has no outside occupation. It is hard to imagine readers in certain other countries allowing themselves the time and pleasure to read 1,500 pages filled with such intricate details, though I cannot help but think we would be better off if we did.

Swedish culture has taken a step further lately, by making moves towards a six-hour working day. In many of the organisations and companies that have made the change, they've noticed

that their staff are happier, more productive and more creative, which proves the point that if the employees feel better, they'll actually do better work. It is a win-win situation.

Burned-out people cost companies and society time and money. They need healthcare, time off work, replacements have to be recruited and trained. Rested, enthusiastic staff members feel positive about their workplaces and can be passionate about their jobs.

Some people argue that a six-hour working day simply would not suit work-obsessed cultures such as the US or the UK. But given how unhealthy we've become, with rising levels of obesity, insomnia and stress, something has to change. We have turned working hard – and its natural mate, sleeping very little – into a moral issue, or even a fetish. We know the damage that not getting enough rest does to us, and yet we seem unwilling to leave the office, ignore our smartphones, and switch off.

Some companies outside Sweden are trying out a shorter workday and – surprise, surprise – they have found that staff are feeling “refreshed” and enjoying the extra time they have for hobbies, friends and families. Time away from work also allows people an opportunity to think about work tasks in new ways and from different perspectives, so they return to their desks feeling stimulated.

Maybe it is time for more companies and institutions to start respecting their employees and shortening the hours they spend at work. And maybe the rest of the world will be inspired by Sweden, and we'll start having more fika, more time for leisurely reading about non-work topics, and a more lagom attitude towards our jobs.

Oh, and by the way, I am still industrious – but within reason.