EPISODE #324

The AI Productivity Paradox: Why We're Still Overworked

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn dive into the growing gap between technological advancement and personal leisure. Despite the promise of AI-driven efficiency, many workers find themselves on a faster treadmill, facing a "Review Tax" that eats up the time saved by automation. The duo explores the stark differences in global vacation mandates, the cultural hurdles of the Israeli work week, and the rising momentum of four-day work week trials across Europe. Can we finally shift from measuring "chair-time" to rewarding actual output, or are we destined to remain trapped in a cycle of endless digital grunt work?

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I would love to chat today about another major topic that affects living in Israel: time off from work. A large part of the promise of AI was displacing some of the grunt work and making lives easier and more efficient, requiring less time devoted to making a living. I remember looking at a Wikipedia page showing the average number of vacation days per country, and it stood out that Israel was exceptionally low. We seem to have taken the worst parts of US capitalism and combined it with some strange facets of socialism to create a system that doesn't really work. The European Union has mandated a concept of rest or days off, and some countries go way beyond that. I'd also love to talk about more radical shifts, such as the four-day work week concept piloted in Scandinavian countries. If AI can make us 25% more productive, shouldn't we be in the office 25% less of the time? Finally, there's remote work, which was popular during COVID but has seen a trend toward being rolled back. Herman and Corinne, what do you have to say about the working week around the world, where Israel stands today with its mandatory minimum vacation, and how some countries are approaching the reduction of the working week as policy?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Alright, we have a heavy hitter today. I was sitting in the kitchen this morning, and our housemate Daniel was telling me about this Wikipedia rabbit hole he fell down. He was looking at a map of mandatory minimum vacation days around the world, and it is pretty stark when you see where Israel sits on that list.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and yeah, that list is a bit of a reality check. Daniel sent us this prompt because he is feeling what a lot of people in this city are feeling. We are in January of two thousand twenty-six, and even with all the technological leaps we have seen in the last few years, the average person still feels like they are on a treadmill that is only getting faster.

Corn

It is the promise versus the reality, right? We were told that artificial intelligence would handle the grunt work, the data entry, the repetitive emails, and in exchange, we would get our lives back. But instead, it feels like we just filled that saved time with more work. Daniel mentioned that Israel seems to have combined the most aggressive parts of American capitalism with some very rigid, older socialist structures, and the result is this weird hybrid where everyone is working all the time.

Herman

He is not wrong. If you look at the numbers, the mandatory minimum in Israel is just twelve days for the first five years of employment. Compare that to the European Union, where the Working Time Directive mandates at least twenty days, and many countries like France or Denmark go up to twenty-five or even thirty. We are basically at half the European standard. And as Daniel pointed out, we don't have that second layer of public holidays to fall back on in the same way, because so many of our days off are tied to religious observance which often falls on weekends anyway.

Corn

Well, and that brings up the whole Sunday issue. We have discussed legacy systems before, like back in episode three hundred thirteen when we talked about why we are still using physical SIM cards, but the Israeli work week is the ultimate legacy system. We start on Sunday. For most of the Western world, Sunday is the day of rest, the day to reset. Here, Sunday morning is the busiest time of the week.

Herman

It is a massive cultural disconnect. There has been this ongoing debate for years about moving to a Monday through Friday work week to align with the rest of the world, but it always hits a wall. On one hand, you have the religious considerations, and on the other, you have this fear that if we lose Sunday as a work day, productivity will crater. But the irony is that Israel already has a productivity problem. We work some of the longest hours in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, but our output per hour is lower than many countries that work far less.

Corn

That is the paradox Daniel was hitting on. If we are working more hours but producing less, then the hours themselves aren't the solution. They might actually be the problem. I am curious about the artificial intelligence angle here, Herman. Daniel asked specifically: if artificial intelligence makes us twenty-five percent more productive, why aren't we in the office twenty-five percent less of the time?

Herman

That is the trillion-dollar question. And actually, there was some fascinating research released in July of two thousand twenty-five that explains part of this. There was a study by a group called METR, which stands for Model Evaluation and Threat Research. They did a randomized controlled trial with experienced developers. They found that when these developers used artificial intelligence tools, they actually took nineteen percent longer to complete their tasks than when they worked without them.

Corn

Wait, nineteen percent slower? That goes against every headline I have seen about artificial intelligence.

Herman

Exactly. But here is the kicker: those same developers reported that they felt twenty percent faster. This is what researchers are calling the perception gap. We feel like we are flying because the tools are generating text and code instantly, but we end up spending a massive amount of time on what is being called the Review Tax.

Corn

The Review Tax. I like that term. So, instead of writing the code from scratch, you are spending hours debugging something a machine wrote that you don't fully understand?

Herman

Precisely. The data suggests that for every ten hours of efficiency gained by using generative artificial intelligence, employees are spending about four hours just correcting, refining, or double-checking the output. So, you are not actually saving as much time as you think. And because the expectation from management has shifted, they think you should be doing twice as much work, so they pile on more tasks. We are essentially using the time saved to do more oversight, which is often more draining than the original task.

Corn

It is like we have created a new kind of digital grunt work. We traded manual data entry for manual artificial intelligence supervision. But let us look at the countries that are actually trying to break this cycle. Daniel mentioned the four-day work week pilots in Scandinavia. I know there have been some major updates on those recently.

Herman

Yeah, the momentum is really interesting. Iceland was the pioneer here, and their trials were so successful that now nearly ninety percent of their workforce has the right to reduced hours. But the big one to watch right now is the United Kingdom. As of late two thousand twenty-five, nearly eleven percent of the UK workforce is officially on a four-day week. They are using the one hundred, eighty, one hundred model. That means one hundred percent pay, eighty percent of the time, in exchange for one hundred percent productivity.

Corn

And does it actually work? Or is it just people working ten-hour days to squeeze it all in?

Herman

That is a key distinction. There is a difference between a compressed work week, which is what Belgium introduced, and a reduced work week. In Belgium, they passed a law allowing you to work your thirty-eight hours in four days instead of five. But that just leads to burnout on those four days. The real success stories, like the ones in the UK and Portugal, show that when you actually reduce the total hours, people become more focused. They cut out the fluff. They stop having hour-long meetings that could have been an email. They enter what is called deep work much faster because they know their time is limited.

Corn

It is Parkinson's Law in reverse. Work expands to fill the time available for its completion. If you give someone forty-five hours, they will find forty-five hours of stuff to do, even if ten of those hours are just staring at a spreadsheet. If you give them thirty-two hours, they prioritize.

Herman

Right. And here in Israel, we have a very strong culture of presence. There is this unspoken rule in many offices that you shouldn't leave before the boss, even if your work is done. It is about being seen. And that is the absolute enemy of the efficiency Daniel is talking about. If we want to use artificial intelligence to work less, we have to stop measuring work by the chair-time and start measuring it by the output.

Corn

But that is hard for a lot of managers to swallow. We saw this with the massive remote work rollback over the last year. In twenty-four and twenty-five, so many big tech companies started demanding four or five days back in the office. They cited culture and collaboration, but it felt more like a lack of trust.

Herman

It is a power struggle, honestly. There was a member of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom who recently made headlines by calling remote workers lazy, saying they need to do a proper day's work. That kind of rhetoric is exactly what is driving the return to office mandates. But the data doesn't back it up. Most studies from two thousand twenty-four and twenty-five show that hybrid workers are often more productive because they aren't wasting two hours a day commuting in traffic.

Corn

Especially in Jerusalem. If I never have to drive through the entrance to the city at eight in the morning again, I will probably add five years to my life expectancy.

Herman

Seriously. The stress of the commute alone eats into your cognitive load before you even open your laptop. But there is a ray of hope on the policy side. The European Commission has been moving toward a binding directive on the Right to Disconnect, and Australia actually passed a landmark law in twenty-four that gives workers the right to ignore work contact after hours. They want to make it a legal right for employees to ignore work emails and calls outside of office hours without being penalized.

Corn

We need that here. The always-on culture in Israel is intense. Because we are a small country and everyone is so connected, the boundaries between your personal life and your work life are basically non-existent. Your boss will WhatsApp you at ten PM on a Tuesday, and there is an expectation that you will at least acknowledge it.

Herman

And that is where the socialist facets Daniel mentioned come into play in a weird way. We have these powerful labor unions, like the Histadrut, but their focus has traditionally been on job security and wages, not necessarily on the quality of time. However, in the two thousand twenty-six budget agreement that was just finalized, the Histadrut actually secured eight paid long weekends for public sector workers over the next two years. It was specifically negotiated as compensation for some salary freezes. It is a small step, but it shows that time is starting to be viewed as a currency of its own.

Corn

That is a really interesting shift. Time as a currency. If the government can't afford to give you a raise, they give you your Friday back. Or they give you a long weekend. It acknowledges that our time has a specific monetary value.

Herman

Exactly. But we have to be careful that it doesn't become a tiered system where only the tech elite or public sector workers get these benefits. Daniel's point about the Wikipedia page is so important because it shows that as a society, we have set the floor very low. When the minimum is twelve days, the person working in a supermarket or a warehouse has almost no chance of recovery. They are just grinding until they hit a wall.

Corn

So, let us dig into the second-order effects here. If we stay on this path where artificial intelligence makes us more productive but we just work the same hours, what happens to the labor market? Do we just end up with massive burnout, or do we see a total decoupling of work and income?

Herman

Well, if you look at historical context, we have been here before. In the early twentieth century, people thought the industrial revolution would lead to a life of pure leisure. John Maynard Keynes famously predicted in nineteen thirty that his grandchildren would only work fifteen hours a week. He wasn't wrong about the productivity—we are far more productive than he ever imagined. He was wrong about our desire for more. We didn't take the productivity gains as time; we took them as bigger houses, faster cars, and more gadgets.

Corn

And now we are doing it with digital goods. We are working more to afford the latest artificial intelligence subscriptions and the hardware to run them. It is a feedback loop.

Herman

It really is. But there is an emerging movement called the Outcome-Based Economy. The idea is that instead of a salary being a payment for your time, it is a payment for a specific result. If an artificial intelligence agent can do eighty percent of your job in two hours, and you spend the other six hours of your day doing nothing just to fill the quota, that is a failure of management. A truly modern company in twenty-six should say: here is your goal for the week. If you finish it by Tuesday because you are an artificial intelligence wizard, go to the beach. We will see you next week.

Corn

I love that, but man, the infrastructure to measure that is so much harder than just looking at a badge-in, badge-out report. It requires managers to actually understand what their employees do.

Herman

Which is the real bottleneck. It is much easier to manage by sight than by insight. But the companies that are winning right now, especially in the Scandinavian trials we mentioned, are the ones that have invested in that measurement. They use artificial intelligence not just to do the work, but to track the workflows and identify where the bottlenecks are.

Corn

You know, it is funny you mention the Scandinavian model. I was reading about the Swedish trials from a few years back, and one of the things they found was that when people worked shorter hours, their health improved so much that the cost of sick leave plummeted. The state actually saved money on healthcare because people weren't exhausted and stressed all the time.

Herman

That is a huge point. In Israel, we have a massive mental health crisis, and a lot of it is tied to the pressure of living in a high-cost, high-conflict, high-workload environment. If we could reduce the work week, even by half a day, the long-term savings for the National Insurance Institute could be enormous. But our policy is still very short-term. We look at the output for this quarter, not the health of the workforce over the next decade.

Corn

It is the same thing we talked about in episode one hundred five regarding artificial intelligence benchmarks. We are so obsessed with measuring the wrong things. We measure the speed of the model, but not the utility of the result. In the workplace, we measure the hours at the desk, but not the quality of the thinking.

Herman

Exactly. And that brings us back to Daniel's question about where Israel stands. We are at a crossroads. We have this world-class tech sector that is driving a lot of these artificial intelligence innovations, but our labor laws are stuck in the nineteen fifties. We are a country of early adopters who are still punching a metaphorical time clock.

Corn

So, what are the practical takeaways for someone listening to this who feels like they are drowning in work? If you are in a system that doesn't mandate enough time off, how do you navigate that in twenty-six?

Herman

The first thing is to audit your own Review Tax. If you are using artificial intelligence tools, actually track how much time you are spending fixing their mistakes. If it is more than twenty or thirty percent of your time, you might be better off doing it manually or finding a better tool. Don't let the tool become a new source of grunt work.

Corn

That is a great point. And on the negotiation side, I think more people should be asking for time instead of money. If you are up for a promotion or a raise, and the company says they don't have the budget, ask for an extra five days of vacation. Or ask for a four-day work week at your current salary. In twenty-six, time is often more valuable than a five percent pay bump that just gets eaten by inflation and taxes anyway.

Herman

Absolutely. And for employers, the takeaway is even simpler: trust your people. The data from the global four-day week trials is overwhelming. Productivity does not drop when you give people more rest. It actually goes up because they aren't spending half their day being tired and resentful.

Corn

It is about moving from a culture of exhaustion to a culture of excellence. We have the tools now to make this happen. Artificial intelligence can handle the boring stuff, but only if we let it actually free us, instead of just using it to build a bigger treadmill.

Herman

Well said. And I think we should acknowledge that this isn't just a lifestyle choice—it is an economic necessity. As birth rates decline across the developed world, we can't just keep throwing more human hours at problems. We have to become more efficient, and that efficiency has to include time for people to be human—to raise families, to volunteer, to rest.

Corn

I wonder if we will look back at this Wikipedia page in ten years and see Israel as the outlier that finally shifted. Or if we will still be talking about the twelve-day minimum in twenty-thirty-six.

Herman

I hope not. I think the pressure from the younger generations, from Gen Z and the Alphas who are entering the workforce now, is going to be the tipping point. They simply won't accept the old deal. They saw their parents burn out, and they are saying: no thanks.

Corn

Yeah, I see it with the younger developers I talk to. They value their time off more than the fancy office perks. They don't want a ping pong table; they want to be home by five.

Herman

Or they want to be working from a cafe in Portugal. The remote work battle isn't over. Companies might be trying to roll it back, but the talent is going to flow to whoever offers the most flexibility. That is the ultimate market force.

Corn

Alright, I think we have covered a lot of ground here. We went from Daniel's Wikipedia rabbit hole to the METR study on developer productivity, to the global movement for the four-day work week. It really feels like the social contract is being rewritten in real-time.

Herman

It is. And it is an exciting time, even if it feels a bit chaotic right now. We are finally having the conversation that Keynes started a century ago. We just have to make sure we get the answer right this time.

Corn

Before we wrap up, I want to say thanks to Daniel for sending in this prompt. It is something that has been on our minds, especially living here in Jerusalem where the pace of life can be so intense.

Herman

Definitely. And hey, if you are listening and you have thoughts on the work week in your country, or if you have successfully negotiated a four-day week, we would love to hear from you. You can find the contact form at myweirdprompts dot com.

Corn

And while you are there, if you haven't left us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify yet, we would really appreciate it. It genuinely helps the show reach more people and keeps these conversations going.

Herman

It really does. We are also on Spotify if you want to follow us there and get every new episode as it drops. This has been episode three hundred eighteen.

Corn

Thanks for joining us. I am Corn, and I am going to go take a nap now in the name of productivity.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry. We will see you next week on My Weird Prompts.

Corn

Take care, everyone. Stay curious, and maybe try to close those work tabs a little earlier today.

Herman

If you can. See you next time!