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# A Shorter Work Week?!

## (COMMENTARY ON *THE FOUR HOUR WORK WEEK* BY TIMOTHY FERRIS)

by David M. Walczak



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Often times, Europeans will tease Americans about how hard they work and how they need to enjoy life a bit more. It makes me think about watching *The Jetsons* as a kid and being amazed at how automated and easy life would become in the future. Are you old enough to remember the advent of desktop computers in the '70s and '80s? There were people then who were convinced that the usefulness of actuaries / teachers / engineers / others would somehow be threatened.

In his book, *The Four Hour Work Week*, Tim Ferris doesn't use an entirely technological argument in making the case for all of us to be able to shorten our week at the office. In fact, this is as much a book about the author's philosophy of life as it is a roadmap to streamlining one's approach to working.

Mr. Ferris coins the term 'the new rich' in describing people who can live with the freedom of choice and motion that a traditionally defined wealthy person would, but with a key difference. He asks "*What makes someone rich?*" The book's answer is the ability to de-link life from someone else's schedule, to have the free time to pursue your passions in life and to do it without exhausting yourself financially. The challenge includes having to rise above our preconceptions about work, responsibility, and society and then drumming up the motivation and clarity of decision to execute.

Before making specific comments about the advice Ferris offers here, I want to preface with an industry-specific observation.

The book is theoretically geared toward all employees or management of any company. However, many of the author's anecdotes take place in a marketing, manufacturing or production environment with basic "lets make and sell widgets" type of challenges. I tried to be open-minded in considering how the tactics discussed would translate to an insurance company or consulting firm context as I read the book, but I have a few comments.

When working in an environment where new professionals are coming up the ranks and trying to learn from more experienced folks, it's just plain clear that in-person contact, even if it's not solving specific sales or manufacturing issues at the same time, is crucial to the ongoing mission. There are also just going to be some autocratic bosses or corporate cultures that don't believe in designing one's own job and the style with which it is carried out. It is equally clear that many rules are in place in Corporate America, especially in old-school financial services companies, simply due to inertia and staying within somebody's comfort zone. All of that said, pitching himself as a contrarian may also give Ferris the appearance of an outlaw or scammer. Remember that guy you knew in high school who tried to get around the rules for the sake of it rather than for the sake of a better outcome?

In *The Four Hour Work Week*, Ferris coins the acronym **DEAL** to lay out his top-down structure for reorganizing and freeing your time:

**Definition** means to set personal goals and lay out obstacles that might hinder them as well as recognizing the expectations created by your own environment. What would it mean to be contrarian?

**Elimination** deals with managing time and adherence to the 80/20 rule – "80 percent of results come from 20 percent of total effort". It's possible to get a ton of stuff done each day, but is it in the sweet spot that moves along your key definitional plans in as brisk a manner as possible? A very key set of thoughts here revolves around optimal use of everyday time management tools. The book asserts that tools such as e-mail, PDAs, souped-up phones and Twitter do more to hinder you than to help you since you can become an ineffective slave to technology and feel like you are accomplishing things.

**Automation** lays out the concept of taking care of the income demands upon your life by doing key tasks once and letting the machinery you build keep things moving. Outsourcing repeatable tasks that are

algorithmic, like big companies do with call centers or certain IT functionality, is a large part of this section. I'll mention again here that the environment in which actuaries operate is much less akin to personal outsourcing than selling/shipping health supplements would seem to be. By the way, Ferris notes that if you have a nine to five type job, the order of steps will be DELA instead.

**Liberation** may be the true goal of the author and his multitude of followers. Can you free yourself from a location, a company, even a given skill set and become one of the new rich?

It seems like Ferris has gamed human nature in writing a book on “getting out from under the man” and enjoying retirement-type activities right now—audiences are gung ho on that type of messaging. Who

would want to live for a point in time 25 years from now when it's possible to somehow work outside of the typical systems people use and pursue the life we want immediately?

I visited the author's blog and even a few sites that were critical of him for not just telling people to become ‘scammers’, but scamming them into buying his book and other online offerings! My personal jury is still out. The analytical thinker and student of economics lurking in me is skeptical that we could all work toward *The Four Hour Work Week* and still maintain a growing GDP—who is going to do the heavy lifting if we're all pursuing tango lessons in Buenos Aires?! ●

Can you free yourself from a location, a company, even a given skill set and become one of the new rich?

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