

Europe launches major study to find where and when shorter working hours can succeed

The €3.37 million OPTIME project will compare working-time reduction models to understand which are feasible, inclusive and sustainable, for whom and under what conditions.

EUROPE, 19 October 2026: A European research consortium has launched OPTIME, a three-year EU project creating the first cross-national, multi-level evidence base to understand which working-time reduction models are feasible, inclusive and sustainable, where they work and under what conditions.

Funded through Horizon Europe and coordinated by the University of St.Gallen from Switzerland, OPTIME will connect evidence about workers, organisations and national systems. Its comparative approach will examine how the same arrangement can produce different outcomes across countries, sectors, workplaces and life circumstances.

“A four-day week is one possibility of working time reduction, but not a universal prescription,” said Professor Julia Backmann, OPTIME coordinator and Professor of Leadership & Transformation of Work at the University of St.Gallen. “Employers and policymakers need to understand which models are viable in their circumstances and what has to change to make them work. OPTIME will compare different working time models and examine the conditions behind their outcomes, including the barriers and opportunities.”

The research is organised around four questions:

- **Which model?** Compare different ways of reducing total working hours, including four-day weeks and shorter working days.
- **Where?** Examine how national institutions, sector requirements and organisational settings shape what is feasible and sustainable.
- **For whom?** Study different workers and life circumstances, with attention to groups underrepresented in existing research, including women, caregivers, older workers, migrants, people with disabilities and neurodivergent workers.
- **Under what conditions?** Identify the barriers, enablers, incentives and risks that shape whether a model succeeds, including how organisations redesign work and use digital technologies.

Researchers will combine new workplace pilots with existing trial data, historical working-time reforms and online experiments. A dedicated data collection in twelve countries will also ask employers, employee representatives and policymakers what enables or prevents working-time reduction in their context, and what would make it feasible. Surveys, interviews, experiments, time-use diaries and health measures will connect changes at work with life outside it. Outcomes will include employee health, organisational performance, gender equality and inclusion, alongside commuting, energy use and other environmental effects.

“Reducing total working hours raises practical questions about how a hospital covers its shifts, how a small firm serves its customers and how a parent combines paid work with care,” said Dr Dale Whelehan who is the consortium partner leading the project’s communication and dissemination, and is Director of BehaviourDoc and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin from Ireland. “Those questions deserve to be part of the evidence. Understanding who can benefit, and who faces barriers, will help us design working time recommendations around the realities of people’s lives.”

Over the next three years, OPTIME will work with employers, employees, trade unions, policymakers and social partners to translate findings into practical implementation tools, policy recommendations and scenarios for the future of working time.

ENDS

Notes to editors

OPTIME stands for Opportunities for Time in Employment, Environment, and Equality. It is funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme under grant agreement 101289891, with an EU contribution of €3,365,173.80. The project runs from 1 October 2026 to 30 September 2029.

The consortium comprises the University of St.Gallen (coordinator), Tallinn University of Technology, BehaviourDoc, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research, the Centre for Social Innovation in Vienna, Chalmers University of Technology and the University of Sussex.

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Project record: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101289891>



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