**Seeking greater productivity**

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Following Shehbaz Sharif’s assumption of PM’s office, a key policy change is the implementation of working Saturdays in all government institutions across the country, and the change in morning reporting time to 8am. This translates to increased working hours and a longer work week.

The purported rationale behind the decision is that it would lead to increased productivity and expedite the resolution of public issues. Yet, it is pertinent to ask: how will this overnight change achieve the desired outcome? And more broadly, do greater working hours necessarily translate into higher or better outputs? Around the developed world, organizations are considering shortening the workweek to four days and allowing employees to work 32 hours as opposed to 40 hours to maximize productivity. There has been ample research on the subject with evidence to show that employees feel happier and are able to complete tasks in a more productive manner when work hours are reduced.

In Iceland, four-day workweek trials were run by the national government between 2015 and 2019, during which it was reported that employees felt less stress and burnout during a shorter workweek, with productivity either remaining the same or increasing. Different companies across Japan and New Zealand also began rolling out this policy. However, while these changes are mostly being adopted by the higher-income countries, when we talk about middle- and lower-income nations, multiple other factors figure into the debate on productivity. In the context of Pakistan, a crucial factor to consider in aiming to increase efficiency and productivity is the adoption of digital technology to carry out tasks.

Adopting widespread technology can streamline processes, help pace up results and lead to innovation of services. A blog about digital technology on the World Bank website distinguishes the three different ways through which technology affects the world of work in developing nations: automation, connectivity, and innovation. In developing nations like Pakistan, improved internet connectivity can play an instrumental role in increasing access to markets and resources, helping organizations grow and create jobs, or attracting work to new markets. A case in point could be SMEs, which are vital to the Asian economy, and depend on the internet to market their products and services and operate around the world.

More generally, the internet in itself is a productivity tool. It is full of useful websites and applications to help us broaden our knowledge base. Therefore, if the current transitory government is serious about setting the ground for greater productivity in public-sector institutions and otherwise, it can start by improving the network infrastructure required for better internet connectivity. This requires devising policies which encourage new private infrastructure investments and provide confidence and security to investors, to invest in far-flung regions. Amid the Covid lockdown, the digital divide between the urban and rural population became more pronounced when individuals – employees and students – had to switch to remote work and remote learning.

The lack of online access for a large chunk of population meant no work and no learning for so many, resulting in a negative impact on productivity. During the pandemic, we also learned that the internet can be a critical tool to enable access to healthcare by facilitating the process of Covid testing in major urban cities. The use of telemedicine demonstrated how technology can be successfully applied to help people get the medical help they need. Yet this privilege was only afforded by a certain tier of population who had access to the internet, leaving behind the minority groups and residents of rural areas.

In light of these facts, it is extremely essential to reduce the barriers for laying down the necessary infrastructure to enable greater connectivity. When individuals have the possibility to connect to the internet, other factors which are relevant for adoption and use need to be addressed. The main barrier towards adoption is affordability. Second is the lack of knowledge on how to use the internet. It is necessary to educate our communities on the use of digital services so they can fully avail the benefits provided by them and be more productive.

Strengthening the IT sector can be a necessary step towards the goal of promoting productivity as it would also allow more people to work online and contribute to the national economy. The most telling example of economic progress through the Information Technology sector is that of India; the country has used its IT services, e-commerce, software and hardware products to change its global perception about India’s storehouse of knowledge and skills. For Pakistan to emulate India’s model for greater productivity, the government needs to address issues and reform policies that could employ a greater number of people in the services sector so that the sector’s share towards the GDP of Pakistan can improve.

While the services sector has seen considerably good growth over the years and makes up 50 percent of the GDP, it is the industrial sector and the agricultural sector that employs a majority of the labour force. Changing that would allow individuals the option of working from home, a reality that is slowly taking shape in the post-pandemic economy. Similarly, greater effort needs to be geared towards improving access to quality education that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical life skills at an early age. The ‘learning by doing’ method should be applied in all classrooms where students must be given the opportunity to receive hands-on training as part of their course work.

To this end, curriculum must be revised with greater focus on practical work to help students and the faculty understand what skillset and level is in demand. Such an education will help boost creativity among young people and thus improve their productivity in future. Conclusively, there are multiple ways to increase productivity both in the short term and long run; having longer working hours is not necessarily one of them. In fact, it can be said with certainty that a longer work week would lead to quicker burnout and employees may not be able to perform so diligently at their jobs.

The pandemic forced us to reshape the way we work and pay greater attention to how themes like work-life balance, and mental health are necessary considerations in promoting productivity. Based on these lessons, organizations and governments around the world are applying working models that seek to create a work-life balance for employees. As the new government faces pressure to deal with social and economic issues of immediate importance, it would also do well to understand that taking hasty decisions without consultation of those being affected will likely be counterintuitive.

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