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6. Changing Work Hours

Shashauna Phillips, a 43-year-old single mother in Charleston, South Carolina, loves her job at Walmart. There is just one problem. As a customer-service manager, responsible for supervising cashiers and keeping customers happy among other things, she is rarely given consistent working hours. "One week I might have four days on the schedule and the following week have two", Ms. Phillips says. "It makes my life a struggle." Things may be getting better. Walmart has launched a new scheduling system that will give its 1.5 m domestic workers more predictable shifts. As the labour market tightens, and state and local lawmakers clamp down on unpopular scheduling practices, more firms are likely to follow.

Over the past decade, American big-box retailers, supermarkets and fast-food chains have relied on workforce-management software to match worker supply and demand. Such systems boost profitability by scheduling only the minimum number of employees needed to keep lines moving and cash registers ringing. But they also encourage practices like keeping workers on call for shifts that may never materialize, or sending them home early when business is slow. This kind of just-in-time scheduling is widely disliked by workers. A study published in 2017 found that the average worker is willing to give up 20% of wages to avoid an irregular schedule set by an employer on short notice.

Lawmakers in congress have left the question for companies to resolve. The schedule that work act, which would force retailers to set schedules two weeks in advance and pay employees extra for any last-minute changes, has languished. States and city governments have done more. In 2014, San Francisco became the first big city to regulate scheduling practices. "To be honest, it's been fairly smooth from what I can tell", says Jim Lajurus of the San Francisco chamber of commerce. Scattle passed similar "fair work-week" legislation in 2016, followed by New York City and the state of Oregon in 2017. Chicago and Philadelphia are considering similar bills.

Adapted from The Economist, December 2018
