

ABOUT THE 4-DAY WORKWEEK

There's been a lot of talk about the potential benefits of working a four-day week instead of a five-day week. So, to get an idea of what the conversation is around this topic, we set out to ask a simple question via Facebook:

A 4-day work week – are you for it, or against it? Why?

Some of the choice responses included:

“Why even bother asking this, it will never happen.”

“We definitely need an extra day on the weekend for our personal lives – one day to relax, one day for errands, one day to pursue our passions.”

“I’m against it – I want a 3 day work week and a 4 day weekend!”

But to understand why we would need a 4-day work week, let's go take a few steps back to the origins of the 5-day week we know and love.

According to an article on the BBC, in 19th-century Britain, Sundays were a holy day, and nobody was expected to work. There were those who took advantage of an opportunity and not turning up for work on a Monday became a bit of a tradition for them. Productivity suffered as a result of this, to the extent that factory owners decided to make Saturday a half-day instead. This would ensure workers arrived on Mondays with clear heads and increased enthusiasm.

Across the pond, Henry Ford made Saturday and Sunday days off for his staff as early as 1926 and he was also keen to set down a 40-hour working week. This also gave his workers the opportunity to spend their down time buying consumer products, keeping cash circulating through the economy. The USA officially adopted the five-day system in 1932, in a bid to counter the unemployment caused by the Great Depression.

The Types Of Four-Day Workweeks

There are two basic kinds of four-day workweeks for organizations. One centers on the entire company, where operations close for 72 continuous hours. The other is worker-based, often called a flex four-day workweek, where employees can choose which four days of the workweek to work.

So what are the benefits of having a 4-day workweek?

Increased Productivity

An in-depth examination of the relationship and productivity conducted by Sanford University revealed a clear correlation between the two factors. Overworked employees are actually less productive than employees working an average or normal working week.

New Zealand based company, Perpetual Guardian, conducted a trial study of a 4 day work week. Not only did employees maintain the same productivity level, but they also showed improvements in job satisfaction, teamwork, work/life balance and company loyalty. Employees also experienced less stress with a decrease of 45% to 38%.

The results from this study are relatively unsurprising given that some of the world's most productive countries, like Norway, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, on average work around 27 hours a

week -- the same hours proposed for a UK 4 day work week. On the other hand, Japan, a nation notoriously known for overworked employees, ranks as the 20th out of 35 countries for productivity.

An Equal Workplace

Research on the Gender Pay Gap from the Government Equalities Office shows that roughly two million British people are not currently in employment due to childcare responsibilities and 89% of these people are women. A 4 day work week would promote an equal workplace as employees would be able to spend more time with their families and better juggle care and work commitments.

Better Employee Engagement

A 4 day week can lead to happier and more committed employees. Employees are less likely to be stressed or take sick leave as they have plenty of time to rest and recover. As a result, they return to work feeling ready to take on new challenges.

From 2015 to 2017, Sweden conducted a trial study into a shorter work week. Nurses at a care home worked only 6 hours for five days a week. Results were largely positive with nurses logging less sick hours, reporting better health and mental wellbeing and greater engagement as they arranged 85% more activities for patients in their care.

A Smaller Carbon Footprint

Countries with shorter working hours typically have a smaller carbon footprint so reducing our work week from 5 to 4 days could have an environmental benefit too. Shortening our working week means that employees don't need to commute as much and large office buildings are only in use four days a week.

Disadvantages – are there any?

While there are certainly many benefits to a 4 day work week, there are also a few disadvantages. Implementing a four-day work-week can be difficult as it requires the right support, technology and workplace culture. Unavoidably, new changes will encounter some challenges and disadvantages.

A report in the Star quoted the SME Association of Malaysia president, Ding Hong Sing who said fewer work hours in Malaysia will result in less output and subsequently higher prices in the market as companies still need to cover their fixed costs. "Countries that have implemented this system are advanced and their production is automated. As a developed country, they will source out to Asean countries to purchase products that are not automated," he continued.

The Cost

Those against the four-day work week point to the cost of recruiting employees. In the U.S., and in other countries, full-time employees cost more than their annual salary: employers also cover the cost of benefits like pensions and health insurance. Employers may not be able to hire more people to cover decreased working hours. In addition, in many countries, workers prioritize a higher pay to working fewer days a week – or fewer hours.

The Equality

If a four-day work week starts to seriously gain traction, one of the biggest disadvantages could be that it might widen existing inequalities. Such a concept might widen existing inequalities between knowledge workers and flexible or manual workers who are usually paid based on the time they spend working.

Not All Industries Can Participate

Some industries require a 24/7 presence or other similar scheduling for optimal flow, making a four-day work week hard to implement. For example, if your business revolves around customer service, opponents have pointed out that it may be difficult to manage problems that arise with customers during four-day week. Making sure each area of the business is covered during the workday can require more effort scheduling and forethought.

The Risk Is Expensive

Opponents say the most glaring drawback for employers is the cost risk associated with a four-day work week, especially if employees fail to meet work requirements. In Sweden's two-year trial of a reduced working week (from 40 hours a week to 30 hours a week), they found higher worker satisfaction, but the experiment became far too costly to continue successfully.

Difficult Team Management

Managing multiple teams on a four-day work week can be challenging, especially if the business runs 24/7. If these employee days off are scattered, it can be difficult to set up team meetings and it can be difficult to manage projects. Employees may also feel pressured to tune in on their days off, so they don't miss anything important.

Final Thoughts: Should You Adopt the 4 Day Work Week?

While we're not quite at this point yet, there may soon come a day where technology, particularly AI, exceeds the capabilities of human employees. We'll then need to make some crucial decisions regarding the future of work and how best protect and promote human employees' well-being. A 4 day work week is one viable option as technology would make it possible for business to continue as usual. While humans can still have meaningful careers with a better work/life balance.

At the essence of it, it all boils down to each individual and what they can bring to the table. A business is responsible for their bottom lines, which in turn impacts the livelihoods of their employees. For this to be successful, all employees have to play their part by managing their tasks effectively and efficiently, and ensure that they can deliver the expected results.

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