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What does the four-day workweek mean for the future of work?

Article

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Laker, B. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0850-9744
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What Does the Four-Day Workweek Mean for the Future of Work?

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected people's working lives, most recently advancing a shift toward flexible work arrangements and making ideas like a four-day workweek commonplace. Under these modified schedules, employees typically work four days and get a three-day weekend — with, it's critical to note, no reduction in pay.

Advocates have long suggested that having employees work four days instead of five increases productivity, and the supporting evidence is indeed overwhelmingly positive. For example, last year in Iceland, researchers found that a four-day workweek without a pay cut improved workers' well-being and productivity. And when parliamentary elections were being held in Scotland last year, first minister Nicola Sturgeon's campaign included the promise of 10 million pounds for companies to pilot a four-day week, an experiment that's currently underway. Ireland, too, will test out a four-day workweek for six months this year, and Spain has launched a three-year 32-hour workweek experiment as part of the country's economic recovery from COVID-19.

Businesses across the globe are becoming increasingly interested in the benefits of giving employees an extra day off, encouraged by Microsoft's August 2019 trial of a four-day workweek in Japan, which resulted in a 40% rise in productivity. Since then, many other organizations have followed suit. The British arm of camera company Canon is among the latest to try a four-day workweek without a pay cut. In the U.S., Kickstarter and Bolt are among the many companies experimenting with four-day weeks, as is Unilever, which announced last November that it would be piloting such a schedule in New Zealand.

A shorter week could also lead to a flood of job applications, as Atom Bank discovered; almost immediately after announcing a four-day week for its 430 staff members, the company saw a 500% increase in job applications. The bank's employees will now work 34 hours over four days (down from 37.5 hours in the past), taking either Monday or Friday off.

What Does This Mean for the Future of Work?

According to new research from Henley Business School, more than two-thirds of companies believe that offering a four-day week will be essential for future business success. Following the release of their 2019 white paper titled "Four Better or Four Worse?," which explored attitudes toward flexible work and the four-day workweek, the researchers revisited the subject in November 2021, with quantitative surveys of over 2,000 employees and 500 leaders in the U.K. Their findings concluded that the four-day week positively affects well-being: Seventy-eight percent of employers said that their employees feel less stressed at work, an increase of 5% from 2019.

Interestingly, the pandemic changed many people's opinions about the most significant benefits of an abbreviated workweek. A clear majority (70%) agreed that a shorter workweek would improve their overall quality of life, and more than two-thirds thought their mental health would improve with greater work flexibility. Furthermore, 69% of employees believe their family life would improve with fewer workdays. When asked how they would spend their extra day off, meeting up with family was the most popular activity across all generations (66%). Shorter workweeks could also positively affect retail, with 54% of people saying they'd use the extra day to go shopping. Charities could benefit as well, given that a quarter of respondents said they'd use the time to volunteer.

Of businesses already implementing a four-day workweek, 68% (up from 63% in 2019) said flexible work arrangements are helping them to attract the right talent by demonstrating the organization's forward-thinking approach to work, such as greater autonomy stemming from

meeting-free days. These businesses also recognize that their potential employees expect the norm to be “portfolio careers” of more than one job.

Indeed, in the 2021 Henley survey, 37% of employees indicated that a career in which they had multiple jobs or employers (also known as gig work) would be a “desirable way to live,” up from 30% in 2019. In the wake of the great resignation, organizations should embrace the four-day week to retain staff and attract new talent. The pandemic has permanently altered how employers and employees approach their work arrangements, so calls for a four-day workweek will only grow louder.