

Balancing health and work: employees demand more flexibility in when, where, and how they work

Article

Accepted Version

Laker, B. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0850-9744>,
Fontinha, R. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2390-098X>
and Walker, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3477-0236>
(2024) Balancing health and work: employees demand more
flexibility in when, where, and how they work. BMJ Leader.
ISSN 2398-631X doi: 10.1136/leader-2023-000869 Available
at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/115564/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/leader-2023-000869>

Publisher: BMJ Publishing Group

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Balancing Health and Work: Employees Demand More Flexibility in When, Where, and How They Work

By

Benjamin Laker*
Professor of Leadership
Henley Business School
Henley on Thames
Tel: +44 (0) 1491 418799
Email: benjamin.laker@henley.ac.uk

Rita Fontinha
Associate Professor of Strategic Human Resource Management
Henley Business School
Henley on Thames
Tel: +44(0)118 378 5249
Email: r.fontinha@henley.ac.uk

James Walker
Professor and Director of Research
Henley Business School
Henley on Thames
Tel: +44(0) 118 378 7374
Email: j.t.walker@henley.ac.uk

***Corresponding Author**

Keywords: Flexibility in Work Structure, Employee Well-being and Satisfaction, Leadership Roles in Changing Work Culture, Evolving Work Schedules, Technological Facilitation and Collaboration.

Word count (excluding title page, abstract, references, figures and tables): 3526

Acknowledgements: None

Competing interests: None

Ethics approval statements that refer to your institution: None required

Contributorship statement: All three authors, namely BL, RF, and JW, have made equal contributions to this commentary. Each has been involved in formulating the concepts discussed, structuring the arguments, drafting the manuscript, and reviewing the content for intellectual rigour and accuracy. They have jointly given final approval for the version to be published, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, thereby ensuring its integrity. Therefore, they share equal contributorship for this commentary.

In an era defined by ceaseless innovation and societal change, the norms that once defined the world's work experience are under significant scrutiny. Employees are challenging the traditional 9-to-5 work structure, advocating for a more fluid approach to their professional lives. Bolstered by technological advancements and prompted by recent global events, an increasing number of workers are demanding flexibility^[1] in when they work, where they work from, and how they work. Employee demands for flexibility are more prevalent for those in jobs that can fully or partially be done remotely. There is a large diversity in employers' views regarding whether or not to implement or keep flexible working practices.

There is a marked shift in employee preferences towards more flexible working arrangements, individualised career development, improved work-life integration, and increased job satisfaction, which is influencing changes in workforce and management practices. These changes are challenging established norms and opening up opportunities for enhanced societal wellbeing and prosperity. The focus on employee health and wellbeing reflects the importance of adaptability and progress in the contemporary workplace. Flexible policies and technological advancements that support a balance between personal and professional life not only benefit individual workers but also contribute to a more robust society. A society that values wellbeing and work-life balance can reap comprehensive benefits, including economic, social, and health improvements. The evolving attitude towards work indicates a future where success is defined by more than just economic survival but also by overall societal wellbeing. In this context, leaders have a crucial role in guiding the transition towards a more thriving society.

The implications for leadership in this changing landscape are profound. Leaders are now tasked with cultivating an environment of trust, empowerment, and flexibility. They must not only adapt to the changing demands of the workforce but also innovate and inspire, fostering a culture that encourages balanced living, personal growth, and professional development. Effective leaders will be those who understand that their role transcends traditional boundaries of authority and extends to improving the wellbeing of their team, ultimately influencing societal health and prosperity. In this dynamic and flexible future of work, leadership means leading by example, fostering a culture of wellbeing, and driving the collective growth of individuals, organisations, and society as a whole.

So, as we embrace this promising new era, we are left with an important question to consider: How can we, as leaders, contribute to this work revolution, ensuring it leads to the healthiest and most prosperous future for all?

The New Rhythm: Rethinking the Working Week

The established "9-to-5" work schedule, which has been a corporate mainstay for generations, is increasingly being questioned. Workers are seeking schedules that suit their personal lives, provide for better work-life balance, and enhance productivity by harnessing peak productive hours, which vary significantly among individuals.

Technology has been a critical enabler in this shift. With the rise of powerful collaborative software, high-speed internet, and mobile devices, workers can perform their tasks and collaborate with teams without being physically present in an office. Recent global events, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, have further demonstrated the viability of remote work and flexible schedules, particularly when workers have autonomy and self-leadership[2]

For decades, the standard "9-to-5" work schedule from Monday to Friday has been a cornerstone of corporate life. However, as we inch further into the 21st century, this rigid structure is increasingly perceived as an outdated model. There is a burgeoning demand for work schedules that accommodate personal lives, foster better work-life balance, and boost productivity. The pandemic, and the fact that many people started re-assessing purpose in their lives during these times, has been a main driver to reignite debates around how long one should be working.

The once immovable notion of a five-day working week is being challenged, particularly in light of escalating burnout rates and a growing emphasis on work-life balance. In response, companies are exploring the potential of a four-day working week. Henley Business School decided to investigate firms already implementing a four-day working week in Britain in 2019 and 2021[3]. Their white paper suggests that a reduced working week can reduce organisation's intermediary costs by reducing absenteeism and increasing their ability to attract and retain staff, alongside presenting substantial benefits for employee well-being. These results have been confirmed by recent trials worldwide[4,5]. Beyond the direct mental and physical health advantages, a shorter working week can contribute to a reduced environmental footprint through less commuting[3].

The Henley report also found that a four-day working week with no loss of pay and days off prolonging the weekend was considered desirable by 72% of respondents. However, when asked about a four-day week with days off chosen by the employer, only 54% of the respondents were interested in this option. In fact, working full time, but with flexible hours (evenings, weekends) was considered desirable by a greater proportion of respondents (64%)[3]. This illuminates a changing mindset: employees are not simply seeking less work, but a more focused and efficient work schedule that provides ample time for rest, personal pursuits, and overall well-being.

The transition to this new workday paradigm heralds a redefinition of our understanding of a workday. The traditional boundaries of nine to five are fading, making room for a model that prioritises flexibility, balance, and above all, health. Our work suggests 33.7% of UK business leaders in 2019 believed that offering employees a four-day working week with no loss of pay would be an important action for their future organisational success. This percentage rose to 42.2% at the end of 2021. The sample was proportionally representative of all sectors in the UK economy. Sectors requiring frontline work (agriculture, production, hospitality, transportation and storage) are also the ones less interested in the implementation of a four-day week. As the working week as we know it stands on the precipice of change, it's clear that the welfare of workers has become a key determinant in shaping the future of work.

A World Without Walls: The Boundless Workplace

The *where* of work is equally in flux. The conventional notion of an "office" is being revised as an increasing number of individuals are embracing remote work. This dramatic shift is catalysed by technological advancements, including state-of-the-art collaboration software, rapid internet connectivity, and omnipresent mobile devices. The potential for employees to participate in tasks and team interactions, unbounded by geographical barriers, is truly revolutionising the world of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust this transformation into the global spotlight, affirming that moving away from the usual office setting could be a tangible alternative. Indeed, with the appropriate digital resources, employees can effectively complete their tasks from any part of the world. The pandemic-triggered transition to remote work proved that numerous roles could be fulfilled outside the customary office environment, without a detriment to productivity or

work quality, granted that the quality, if not the frequency, of communication with colleagues and supervisors remains high[2].

Yet, the story of work's future is not exclusively about conducting a series of tasks in home offices. The keyword for employees is 'choice' – the flexibility to work from home when convenient, along with the option to step into a physical workspace when necessary for collaborative projects or social interaction. We see a movement towards a hybrid work model, allowing for a balanced mix of remote and in-person work[6]. It is also crucial to acknowledge diversity in the way people view flexible working arrangements - differences associated with demographics, work styles and personality are important here[7].

Furthermore, one should also acknowledge the fact that several jobs do not allow for such flexibility regarding when and where one works. Taking healthcare as an example, there are several jobs that require frontline work. For these workers, who often manifest high levels of burnout [8], a work time reduction could be an important solution [9].

Beyond productivity and convenience, there are important health implications of this new way of working. Reducing commute times can alleviate stress levels, often linked with lengthy travel[10]. Greater flexibility could also foster a healthier work-life balance, which is pivotal for mental well-being. Our own research among 2,000 UK employees and 500 business leaders suggests that both groups loathe commuting, with 62% of employees and 68% of employers viewing this as the key reason to work from home. When employees have the autonomy to select their workspace, they can better align their professional responsibilities with personal life, resulting in less stress and a decreased risk of burnout^[11].

Despite these clear general advantages for mental health and well-being, home working also may carry risks for physical and mental health. In terms of physical health, research on home-work during the pandemic found changes in eating behaviour and an increase in body weight [12]. Research during the pandemic on remote work also found mental health issues in terms of feelings of isolation [13]. We also addressed possible negative implications for integration of newcomers and potentially promotion [14].

In the wake of COVID-19, businesses worldwide are reconfiguring their operational models. An innovative structure, the "hub-and-spoke" model, is gaining traction. Consisting of a central office ("hub") and several smaller, remote locations ("spokes"), this model offers practical benefits to organisations. Interestingly, research suggests that this model positively impacts service delivery, thus, it is reasonable to infer that similar benefits might extend to employees[15]. As we step into this new era of work, flexibility, choice, and balance are emerging as the cornerstone principles, shaping the workplace of the future.

The Art of Collaboration: Redefining Teamwork in the Digital Age

Alongside when and where they work, employees are reevaluating *how* they work. As the landscape of work continues to evolve, employees are craving more autonomy over their working day, specifically, the control over the tools they use to collaborate, and when they schedule meetings with colleagues.

With a significant part of the global workforce shifting to remote or hybrid work models, many workers have realised the potential of redefining what a productive workday looks like. Increasingly, this definition includes a stronger say in the tools and technologies they use and a preference for meeting times that align with their unique schedules. After the pandemic, and with a widespread adoption of remote work in the IT sector, there is evidence of a significant decrease in synchronous communication and an increase in asynchronous communication[16].

So why do employees prefer this level of control?

Primarily, employees value the opportunity to utilise tools and practices that best fit their unique working style. Instead of being confined to a standardised approach in terms of collaboration tools or meeting schedules, they desire the autonomy to choose the tools that make them the most efficient.

Moreover, the ability to flexibly manage work schedules allows employees to better integrate their work into their personal lives. This becomes particularly crucial for those with caregiving responsibilities or those operating in different time zones, as it grants them the flexibility to adjust meeting times according to their needs.

Advancements in digital collaboration platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Google Workspace have offered novel ways for employees to collaborate without necessitating constant meetings. Additionally, the emergence of flatter organisational structures and autonomous teams has empowered employees to take more control over their tasks.

The inclination towards fewer but more productive meetings stems from employees' need for uninterrupted periods for in-depth, focused work. In the health and social sectors, meetings are crucial for collaboration, coordination, and communication among teams. Yet, an excess of lengthy meetings can contribute to overload, adversely affecting employees' wellbeing, job satisfaction, and in some cases, patient outcomes. The transition to remote and hybrid work models during the pandemic has exacerbated this issue, with a surge in meetings to offset the lack of face-to-face interaction[17,18].

Given the central role of meetings in the health and social care sectors, it is necessary to develop innovative solutions to manage meeting overload. One such strategy is implementing no-meetings policies, setting aside certain days for employees to focus on their individual work and collaborate at their own pace. Such policies could enhance employee wellbeing, productivity, collaboration, and ultimately result in superior patient care.

No-meetings policies have the potential to improve the health and social sectors by reducing meeting overload, increasing collaboration, and improving employee wellbeing[17]. Studies have shown that frequent and lengthy meetings negatively impact psychological, physical, and mental wellbeing, leading to stress, burnout, and decreased job satisfaction[19]. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues, with remote and hybrid workplace models leading to an increase in meetings to compensate for the loss of in-person interaction.

The adoption of no-meetings policies has the potential to reduce employee stress and burnout, leading to improved health outcomes. Reducing meeting frequency and duration improves employee wellbeing and job satisfaction[2]. Similarly, reducing meeting overload increases job satisfaction and improves employee mental and physical health[20].

No-meetings policies can also improve collaboration and communication in the health and social sectors, leading to better patient outcomes[21]. Reducing meeting frequency and duration increases collaboration and productivity[17]. Researchers also found that the adoption of a no-meetings policy leads to more effective communication among team

members, resulting in improved patient outcomes. After all, when team members are feeling less stressed and have more time to collaborate, they can focus on providing better quality care.

However, the implementation of no-meetings policies in the health and social sectors can be challenging due to the unique needs and challenges of the workforce. As health and social care professionals require frequent collaboration and coordination to ensure patient safety and quality care, it is essential to strike a balance between reducing meeting overload and ensuring effective collaboration among team members. Evidently, the adoption of no-meetings policies requires careful consideration and planning to ensure that patient care is not compromised. That said, is it possible to implement no-meetings policies in a way that maximises their potential benefits while minimising their challenges?

Moreover, survey results indicate that the impact of the introduction of no-meetings policies on employee wellbeing and collaboration is proportional to the number of weekly meeting-free days. Health and social care organisations should, therefore, carefully consider the number of such days to implement in their work schedules, using the findings of our survey as a guideline. For instance, the introduction of one meeting-free day per week can be a good starting point, as it can lead to improvements in autonomy, communication, engagement, and satisfaction, resulting in a decrease in micromanagement and stress, and a subsequent 35% increase in productivity. As the number of meeting-free days increases, the benefits also increase, with a 57% reduction in stress and a 55% increase in cooperation resulting from the establishment of three meeting-free days per week. However, it is important to note that any meeting reductions beyond 60% lead to diminishing returns, with decreases in productivity, engagement, and cooperation.

Organisations should also consider implementing better meeting hygiene practices to improve meeting effectiveness and productivity. Research^[17] found that a lack of clear meeting agendas and outcomes can lead to meeting overload and negatively impact employee wellbeing and productivity. Thus, health and social care professionals should ensure that each meeting has a clear agenda and outcomes and encourage team members to refrain from holding any meetings that do not add value. Assigning participants to time-keeper or note-taker roles can also be advantageous for larger group meetings, and clear bullet-point recaps

should be sent after each meeting to keep the team accountable and prevent redundant additional discussions.

Navigating the New Work Landscape: A Conclusion

As we enter an era where the flexibility of when, where, and how employees work takes centre stage, organisations are required to reimagine their traditional work paradigms. The transformation is unequivocal - a shift towards diverse forms of flexible working, such as the four-day working week, the rise of hybrid workplaces, and the reinvention of collaboration and meetings using digital platforms. Our own longitudinal data collected pre- and post-pandemic suggests that both workers and business leaders in the UK have more positive views of any type of flexible work arrangement after the pandemic.

This new landscape presents a compelling opportunity for organisations to reevaluate their work policies and adapt to the evolving needs of their workforce. It offers a path to greater productivity, increased employee satisfaction, and ultimately, a more sustainable and inclusive work environment.

However, the transition is not without its challenges. The options of when, where and how employees and employers work have expanded rapidly. And understanding which options are best for individual employees, the teams in which they work, and the organisation needs careful consideration and will undoubtedly involve compromises and careful negotiation within organisations.

The future of work is unquestionably flexible, and it demands an innovative approach from all stakeholders[22]. Evidently, more rigorous and timely research to understand how to enable employees and employers to be able to make the most of the time devoted to their working is essential to understanding the rapidly changing landscape.

It's a brave new world for organisations and their employees alike, and navigating it successfully[23] will be key to ensuring a prosperous and productive future. In this changing world of work, flexibility is not just an option—it is an imperative. And as the world evolves, so too must the structures that govern our working lives. While it's crucial to appreciate the complexities and challenges of implementing new work arrangements, particularly in critical services like healthcare, we must also acknowledge the immense potential they hold.

In adapting to these new work models, organisations will need to strike a careful balance between meeting employee needs and maintaining service quality and productivity[24]. It will require creative thinking, open communication, and a willingness to trial new approaches and learn from their outcomes[25].

Organisations should also view this as an opportunity to foster a more inclusive, sustainable and equitable work culture. Remote working can provide increased opportunities for those who may struggle with a traditional office environment, such as parents or caregivers, and individuals with disabilities[26]. A four-day work week could contribute to improved work-life balance, mental health, and overall job satisfaction. Meeting-free days can offer employees a much-needed respite from the incessant demands of an always-connected work life, freeing them to focus on tasks that require deep concentration and creativity.

Indeed, the transition will not be easy, and there will undoubtedly be missteps along the way. Yet, the challenges should not deter us. Rather, they should inspire us to persevere and innovate, for in the challenge lies the opportunity. Through a combination of perseverance, innovative thinking, and flexible adaptation, we can navigate this brave new world and build a prosperous, productive future where the work environment is tailored to the evolving needs of its most vital component – the employees.

In essence, we stand on the precipice of a remarkable shift in our work culture. It's a shift that can lead us to a future where flexibility isn't just a concept, but an integral part of our work structure. As we journey into this future, it is important to remember that the world of work is changing, and so must we.

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