

Will the **FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK** work for you?

An examination of the experiences of a four-day working week: a qualitative case study.

FROM THE UK



BY DR AARON TAYLOR

Head of the School of HRM at Arden University

With the world of work changing fast, in order to recruit and retain the best talent, organisations are under pressure to put in more effort to understand the aspirations and desires of their employees. If organisations can succeed in doing this, they will create an environment where employees are more satisfied. As it is commonly stated, happy employees tend to be more productive in the workplace.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most organisations were forced to operate remotely. Despite the disruptions, the transition to remote working presented benefits of a more flexible approach to work. This shift accelerated previous discussions around flexible working, meaning that, if you ask anyone today what is

FROM THE UK



BY DR VICTORIA RAFFERTY

Senior Lecturer in HRM at Arden University

FROM THE UK



BY DR GRATIEN DAVID-PILLAI

Senior Lecturer in HRM at the University of East London

“

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE IMPORTANT BENEFITS OF THE FOUR-DAY WORKING WEEK FOR EMPLOYEES AND ORGANISATIONS, THERE ARE ALSO AREAS WHICH REQUIRE FURTHER INVESTIGATION IN TERMS OF CHALLENGES POSED CONCERNING EMPLOYEE FATIGUE, BUSINESS CONTINUITY AND PARITY. HOWEVER, ANY SHIFT IN WORKING PRACTICE NEEDS TO BE WELL PLANNED AND CLEARLY THOUGHT OUT.

five employees at a car parts manufacturing plant in the North-East of England, which recently trialled a four-day working week. As the change in the working week (from 37.5 to 36 hours) became more popular with employees, it is now widespread. Employees who work in the offices and in the factory can sign up for this, with employees choosing to work either Monday to Thursday or Tuesday to Friday (8.30–6 p.m. with a 30-minute break). The company prefers employees come to the office for two out of the four days to maintain team spirit. Those who work in the factory must be on site for four days due to the nature of their work.

meant by flexible working, the four-day working week is likely to be mentioned.

In most countries, the standard working week is between 36–40 hours over five days. The four-day working week tends to see this reduced to between 30–32 hours a week without a reduction in salary. It does not necessarily mean that workers must work four days, but it is more about the general idea that there should be a reduction in the number of hours workers work to be considered “full-time equivalent”.

Many organisations are currently trialling this altered working week and have seen benefits in recruiting and retaining talent, increased staff morale, reductions in absenteeism and improved productivity and well-being of employees.

However, the four-day working week may not work for all organisations as this has had practical implications for their operations: availability to their customers and the negative perception that peers may have of colleagues who opted to work four days as lazy. A reduction in working days or hours and the availability of employees can impact on organisations that would need to provide customer service beyond standard business hours. Staffing such shifts can be very challenging for employers.

In this brief study, themes were constructed from data collected through interviews with

Despite the reduction in hours, there is evidence of increased productivity and staff turnover has substantially decreased. Across the workforce, it is reported that the organisation is a more attractive place to work due to the new arrangement and the overall benefits for well-being. From the findings analysed, a number of key benefits were identified:

- better retention;
- ease of recruiting new staff;
- reduced stress;
- more time with family;
- increased employee engagement;
- increased productivity; and
- fewer sick days recorded.

FINDINGS

First of all, it was discovered that the four-day working week led to better employee retention, primarily due to the flexibility it offers. The employer commented that retention had greatly improved due to this factor, which they found unusual, as turnover was usually high for this line of work. A second benefit was that it was easier to recruit talent. The organisation found that their reputation had been enhanced by implementing the four-day working week. Previously, they used to rely on word of mouth and agencies but now employees contact the organisation directly, asking if there is any work.

Furthermore, it was identified that the new working arrangements led to a more relaxed



working atmosphere with more engaged employees. It was noted that the factory workers were more visibly relaxed, motivated and happier than previously. Employees were particularly pleased that they were able to spend more quality time with their families. Interestingly, despite the reduction in hours over the course of the working week, productivity increased by 22.5% from January 2022 to September 2022. There were also much fewer sick days than before. The organisation believed this to be connected to Fridays and Mondays now being days off whereas employees were usually absent before or after a weekend when working the previous working pattern.

However, there have been some issues noted, such as the length of working days, Fridays being requested by most workers and parity across departments. Some employees found the longer working days more difficult to manage as they were not used to them and were often tired. However, these employees gradually become more accustomed to the four-day working week.

One of the most challenging aspects of administering the four-day working week from an employer perspective is having the right number of staff available every day with most employees requesting Fridays as their day off. To counter this, the organisation has started a rota which was seen as the fairest solution to this issue. This intervention is currently working well.

The final issue is one of parity. There have been several complaints from employees who are used to working Monday to Friday, as they like to finish at the same time every day. Several of these workers were not happy that finishing work later led to higher childcare costs. These colleagues have been offered the opportunity to return to a five-day working week in order to mitigate this issue.

CONCLUSION

As the organisation of work undergoes significant consideration, debate and investigation, this small-scale study provides further evidence of workers' experiences of a four-day working week. Although there are important benefits of the four-day working week for employees and organisations, there are also areas which require further investigation in terms of challenges posed concerning employee fatigue, business continuity and parity. However, any shift in working practice needs to be well planned and clearly thought out. This would depend on the sector and the type of work which needs to be carried out. A one-size-fits-all approach might have consequences both for employers and employees. ■

DR AARON TAYLOR is Head of the School of HRM and **DR VICTORIA RAFFERTY** is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at Arden University in Coventry, UK. **DR GRATIEN DAVID-PILLAI** is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at the University of East London, UK.



sanbs.org.za
0800 11 9031
f t

