The care of the self and the meaningful four-day workweek

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Abstract

Those who find their work meaningful often need to be more committed. Over-commitment, in turn, frequently results in stress, personal conflicts, and burnout. Such over-commitment, in other words, leads to employees needing to take more care of themselves. This paper considers the prospects for meaningful self-care in the context of working time reduction. For this, we consider the case of the four-day workweek, asking employees of such organizations to explain how they make meaning out of their newly found time off. Conceptually, we rely upon the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his analysis of the care of the self. On its basis, we coded five self-care practices: (1) rest and recuperation, (2) professional and personal development, (3) domestic work, (4) balancing work, and (5) additional work. We conclude by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of work reduction for the analytical, ethical, and practical pursuit of meaningful work.

Keywords Meaningful work · Work reduction · Michel Foucault · Care of the self · Four-day workweek

Introduction

Contemporary employers often compensate the efforts of their employees not only with money but also with meaning (e.g. Ford and Collinson 2011; Lips-Wiersma et al. 2020; Michaelson et al. 2014). Such modes of compensation require them to both appreciate an employee's skills and capacities but also to evaluate the 'whole person' on an ongoing basis (Burke 2009; Johnsen et al. 2009; Muhr et al. 2012). For this 'whole person' is not only a site of muscle power and brainpower, s/he is also a site of passions and interests that manifest both within and beyond the workplace (e.g. Allan et al. 2019; Bailey et al. 2019; Lips-Wiersma et al. 2020). To consider this 'whole person' is to foreground the 'interactive

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relationship between meaningful work and a meaningful life' (Bailey et al. 2019; p. 490) and so with it 'what is personally significant and worthwhile' (Lysova et al. 2019; p. 374).

Meaningful work can become exploitative, however. For this, the 'whole person' has often been shown to have a strong propensity towards over-commitment, stress, and burnout (Bailey et al. 2019; Florian et al. 2019; Oelberger 2019). Therefore, contemporary employers find themselves having to ensure that work is meaningful (e.g. Michaelson 2011) and that workloads are manageable (Bird 2010; Burke 2009; Grosse 2018; Wajcman 2014). For their part, contemporary employees must also negotiate these seemingly contradictory imperatives: they cannot but make an ethical issue of how they have become compelled to achieve a work-life balance (Lim 2005). This paper demonstrates how employees of organizations implementing a four-day workweek undertook such negotiations.

Throughout our fieldwork in four organizations where employees have Fridays as well as weekends off, we encountered employees experimenting with new ways of working and living (Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018; Blagoev et al. 2018; Dalgliesh 2009; Munro 2014). We analyze these ethical processes of self-negotiation through the lens of the work of Michel Foucault, particularly from the perspective of his analysis of the care of the self (Foucault 1992, 1998; see also Alacovska and Bissonnette 2019; Barratt 2008; Crane et al. 2008; Deslandes 2012; Ladkin 2018). For our purposes, the advantage of Foucault's analysis resides in its capacity to prioritize how individuals negotiate ethical tensions. Here, we investigate the tension between the imperative for more meaning and the imperative for less work brought about by the four-day workweek.

The paper begins by discussing the paradoxical relationship between meaningful work and work reduction in the context of the four-day workweek. Next, drawing specifically upon Foucault's (1992) four ethical dimensions of the care of the self (ethical substance, mode of subjection, practices of the self and aspirations of the self), we demonstrate how individuals reconcile the imperative for less work with that for more meaning. We then outline the nature of our fieldwork before analyzing five such modes of caring for the self: (1) rest and recuperation, (2) professional and personal development, (3) domestic work, (4) balancing work, and (5) additional work. The following section substantiates each of these themes in turn. These five modes of caring for the self, we claim, raise important ethical considerations about when and how employers should intervene in how employees construct – and commit to – their own sense of balance between meaningful work and a meaningful life.

Meaningful Work and/or Manageable Workloads?

In their classic study of Zookeepers, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) showed how meaningful work was a double-edged sword. The Zookeepers they studied found purpose in their work while also finding themselves compelled 'to sacrifice pay, personal time, and comfort for their work, and to hold their zoo to a higher standard' (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; p. 32). More recently, Oelberger (2019), in her study based on 82 interviews with international aid workers, shows how individuals engaged in meaningful work experienced time-based conflicts with their partners. Those who experienced the most domestic conflict were also the ones who found their work most meaningful. According to Bailey et al. (2019; p. 489), such studies present an essential paradox at the heart of the pursuit of meaningful work: 'Individuals have an innate drive to seek out meaningful work to satisfy their inner

needs, yet this same drive can push them to harmful excesses'. Meaningful work, in other words, is often at odds with a meaningful life.

Work reduction protocols mitigate against this paradox (Burke 2009). The form of work reduction considered in this paper is the four-day workweek (see Barnes 2020; Coote et al. 2020; Soojung-Kim Pang 2020; Campbell 2023). In most contemporary cases, the four-day workweek reduces time spent at work from 37 to 40 h, 5 days a week, to 30–32 h, 4 days a week. In most cases, the four-day workweek also entails Fridays off, extending employee weekends from two to three days (Bird 2010; Grosse 2018; Soojung-Kim Pang 2020; Delaney and Casey 2021; Campbell 2023). Research from the 1970s had already suggested that a four-day workweek led to a decrease in absenteeism (Nord and Costigan 1973), increased job satisfaction (Ronen and Primps 1981), and increased productivity (Ivancevich 1974). As Grosse (2018) demonstrates, such important studies underplay the relationship between meaningful and reduced work. Recent studies of the four-day workweek, therefore, not only emphasise the benefits of the four-day workweek to employers, but they also emphasise how the four-day workweek can heighten employee well-being (Bird 2010; Grosse 2018; ensure better work-life balance (Travis 2010; Campbell 2023), and even promote gender equality (Schultz 2010). Meaningful work, in other words, need not be at odds with a meaningful life (so also Mullens and Glorieux 2023).

Abildgaard (2020; p. 33) references a British study conducted by Voucher Cloud amongst 1,989 office workers. It showed that, on average, they 'performed active work for just two hours and 52 min over an eight-hour work day'. A four-day workweek can help counteract such inefficiencies by creating a working process that prioritizes focus over distraction in ways that can help foster a sense of meaningfulness and well-being (Barnes 2020). Furthermore, Soojung-Kim Pang (2020) suggests that shorter working hours, in contrast to flexible working hours, shift the burden of scheduling and coordinating away from the individual. He argues that this diffuses 'the potential conflicts and organizational challenges that come when colleagues are on different schedules' (Soojung-Kim Pang 2020; p. 95), leaving more room for doing meaningful work instead of merely planning for such. Moreover, Abildgaard (2020), Coote et al. (2020), and Campbell (2023) suggest that having a three-day weekend enables employees to rest better and that this, in turn, has positive effects on their work-life balance and, therefore, on both their creativity and performance.

Just as meaningful work can be confronted with the paradox of over-commitment, the reduction of workloads does not necessarily answer the question of how to make one's life meaningful. On the contrary, the four-day workweek *responsibilises* employees to make their lives meaningful in new and exciting ways. In the following, we suggest that it is fruitful, following Foucault, to explore *how* individuals respond to their own newly found responsibilities, (re-) making themselves in the process. We then discuss the ethical implications of these modes of caring for the self for employees and employers alike.

The Care of the Self

Since the 1980s, Michel Foucault's work has had a continuing influence on organization and management studies (Raffnsøe et al. 2019). Whereas such work has predominantly emphasised 'the role of normalization within disciplinary mechanisms of modern organization' (Randall and Munro 2010, p. 1487), researchers in Business Ethics have looked more to

Foucault's understanding of self-care (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2019; Crane et al. 2008; Deslandes 2012) for inspiration. The care of the self, as Foucault had it

> is what one could call an ascetic practice, taking asceticism in a very general sense – in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being (1998, p. 282–283).

As Foucault (1998) goes on to explain, such ascetic practices are not just about setting up rules of conduct to constrain oneself; they are more a way of using rules of conduct to transform oneself. Foucault's analysis of *askesis* in self-care practices is indebted to Pierre Hadot's work, particularly his analysis of spiritual practices (Hadot 1995). Ascetic reflection upon who we are and what we might always be translated into a series of concrete practices (see Dey and Steyaert 2016; Garrison 1988; Infinito 2003; May 2006; Skinner 2013). The meditative exercise, the confessional testimony, and the psychoanalytic session – recurring examples throughout the later work of Foucault (1992, 1998) – each formalizes a series of practices through which individuals simultaneously recognize and practice the ethical duty to care for themselves. On such analysis, the meditative diary, the confessional box, and the therapist's couch are neither icons of deception nor revelation; instead, they are practices through which subjects *address themselves* so that they may hear their own truths and live their lives better. In the words of Foucault, they

> permit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (1998, p. 224-5).

Crane et al. (2008) have suggested, Foucault's account of the care of the self has implications for how we think about business ethics. While Foucault does not offer 'any substantive normative prescriptions' (2008, p. 306) as to how we should take care of ourselves, he does provide analytical instruction. As Alacovska and Bissonnette (2019; p. 147) put it, caring for the self is a 'pedagogical, moral and also ontological condition' for being 'a good leader' or 'worker'.

Furthermore, as Ibarra-Colado et al. (2006) have argued, Foucault highlights four dimensions that are particularly important to attend to when analyzing the care of the self in empirical practice. The first dimension is what Foucault called the *ethical substance*, constituting 'this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct' (Foucault 1992; p. 26). While modern philosophy often points to one's behaviour as ethical substance, earlier philosophies have pointed to the will, soul, passion, or desires (May 2006). The second dimension is what Foucault called *the mode of subjection*, i.e. 'the way in which the individual establishes his [sic] relation to the rule and recognizes himself [sic] as obliged to put it into practice' (Foucault 1992; p. 26). Foucault (1992) himself mentions fidelity in marriage as an example. One can submit to fidelity because one sees oneself as part of a bigger social community, considers it of spiritual importance, or considers fidelity a matter of pride. Analytically, these different ways of considering the ethical importance of fidelity are ways in which we establish ourselves as ethical subjects.

The third dimension concerns the *practices* of self 'that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct in compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior' (Foucault 1992; p. 26). While the mode of subjection establishes how one lets an ethical code of conduct take hold of oneself, these practices of self 'hold through what one does' (May 2006; p. 108). Analytically, the practices of self are the concrete daily practices one engages in to realize and attain proper ethical conduct.

The last dimension covers what Foucault calls the telos or the point of the moral conduct: 'an action is not only moral in itself, in its singularity, it is also moral in its circumstantial integration and by virtue of its place it occupies in a pattern of conduct' (Foucault 1992; p. 26). This dimension is concerned with the kind of self the process of self-care is trying to attain. For instance, as May (2006) points out, is it to attain self-mastery and become a person of virtue as in Ancient ethics? Is it to become a person of reason, as Kant does? Is it to contribute to more well-being as in the utilitarian tradition? Analytically, the telos is about the ethical vision towards which the ethical substance has to be remodelled through submitting to specific ethical codes and realizing them in practice.

Importantly, self-care practices in the four dimensions are not isolated from power and politics. As all practices are social for Foucault (1977), they are embedded in norms that govern what we consider good and bad. The ethical self is, therefore, as Loacker and Muhr (2009) show through Foucault, understood as continuously constituted within power/knowledge relations. However, as Loacker and Muhr (2009; p. 267) continue, 'an understanding of ethics based on practices (of the self) is therefore concerned with concrete situational answers to codes and normative, often inconsistent, expectations'. Relationships to and with others in this way affect how individuals develop as ethical selves. Care for the self – as a relational practice – is therefore always likely to reproduce power relations, with the risk of tying individuals closer to the hegemonic regime. Thus, as Foucault argued in his later work (e.g. 1998), self-care practices can both be acts of resistance to such norms and ways of reproducing such norms. Thus, as argued by Loacker and Muhr (2009; p. 267), 'the work of Foucault is useful to explain why (…) ethics is a question of 'personal choice' (in contrast to 'free choice') and lies in specific acts of responding to norms'. We now turn to each of the four dimensions in our analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected the data using one-to-one interviews at four Danish organizations. Two of the organizations are IT companies with around 50 employees. One is a small start-up design and innovation bureau with 10 employees. One is an administrative department of 200 employees in a larger organization. All four organizations had recently implemented a four-day workweek with Fridays off. None of these organizations prescribed how employees should spend their Fridays. Nevertheless, in interviews with management, it became clear that they often encouraged their employees to use this free time to relax, learn a new professional skill or engage in personal development activities. Using the Friday off for company work was regularly discouraged but rarely actively sanctioned. Only if management saw a pattern where the same employees use Fridays as work days. In such cases, the employee and management would start a conversation about why the employee needed to work Fridays.

The data consists of 42 semi-structured interviews conducted between February 2019 and March 2020. 22 of the respondents identified as men, 20 as women. We conducted the interviews in Danish, each lasting between 30 min and one hour. We translated and transcribed these for the sake of the analysis and its presentation. Each interview had a section on how respondents spent their Fridays off. The theme of self-care arose spontaneously from the interviews, and we invited respondents to elaborate on it through follow-up questions. The study was interpretive to gain insights into how four-day workweek employees and managers practised self-care on Fridays. The main author conducted the interviews together with several master students.

For this paper, we structured our analysis into two phases. First, we recorded and transcribed the interviews, translated the Danish interviews into English, and then analyzed these transcripts using latent codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our focus on how they talk about their Friday off from work guided this coding stage, during which we concentrated on terms such as 'relaxing', 'catching up on work', 'parenting', 'exercising', 'education', and 'travelling'. In the second stage, we used these terms, in conjunction with issues identified in the four dimensions of self-care, to analyze the rest of the data. Here, we aimed to highlight how our respondents experienced and managed their leisure time as self-care practices. We identified five categories of self-care practices: (1) rest and recuperation, (2) professional and personal development, (3) domestic work, (4) balancing work, and (5) additional work. The following section substantiates each of these themes in turn.

Rest and Recuperation

The first form of self-care is about relaxing on the day off. This form of self-care aims for the respondents to relax so they can return to next week's work with renewed energy. As Amy puts it:

> I don't do anything on Fridays. In the beginning, I felt weird about not doing anything and thought, if doing nothing is all I do on Fridays, does Fridays off then give me anything at all? But yes, it does because I felt it was the right choice to do nothing when I reached Monday.

As Amy explains, the emphasis here is on relaxing and revitalizing. Most of our respondents talk about how what they do on Saturdays and Sundays is very similar to other people. Fridays, however, are for doing something that is just relaxing, just for them. They are about ensuring that time is not spent on anything taxing. Such an observation of effortlessness itself requires effort. What Foucault calls the 'ethical substance' is primarily about doing what the company asks of them: relaxing outside of work to avoid becoming overwhelmed at work. As John puts it: 'I don't do much on Fridays. I try to relax. Work is off-limits. It is hardcore relaxation'.

Rest and recuperation involve different *modes of subjection*. For Karen, it is about sleeping and shopping, which she finds relaxing. For Carla, it is about not letting any work in. Carla insists that she 'never checks her e-mails' on Friday and only reacts to work on Fridays if her manager calls her with some emergency. She says, 'This may sound arrogant, but it is my choice'. For Eric, it is about making time for his kids, and for Matt, it is about finding some alone time. This also means that the employees engage in various self-practices

to self-manage their behaviour and make time for rest. Activities include streaming Netflix, sleeping in, going for long walks, meeting up with a friend for brunch, or taking the kids out of kindergarten to do something fun. As Eric puts it:

> I have two kids, so either I take one of them out of kindergarten and we have fun big time … or we don't need to go to 'Leo's Legeland' [a popular indoor playground] on Saturdays with the rest of Denmark, as we were there all alone on Friday.

For Eric, the telos or the point of moral conduct is about having fun with the kids more relaxingly. An activity that can be stressful on Saturdays becomes relaxing when done on Fridays. Other respondents, like Matt, had other aspirations with resting. For him, rest is not about family time but about being alone. Matt realized this by running or biking alone: 'I take a run or bike trip in the forest for 3–4 hours. This is 'me time'. My quality of life needs to have this Matt-time in the forest'. Mary also aspired to rest and attend to herself by starting Friday running, winter bathing, and going to the sauna. Sometimes I meet a Friend and have lunch. And then, I pick up my kids early and start the weekend. I like this routine. Rest and recuperation are about spending the extra day off either on themselves or with the people that are closest to them. Such activities are valuable both in themselves and because they enable individuals to come back to work on Mondays re-energized.

Professional and Personal Development

In this type of self-care, Fridays ensure personal and professional productivity. When our respondents engaged in this form of self-care, it was vital for them to establish their relationship to self-care in ways that let them pursue a meaningful existence in new ways. The modes of subjection, therefore, vary (Foucault 1992). This means that some of our respondents linked self-development to something personal, professional, or, in some cases, both. The self-practices used to realize this development ranged from taking a hunting license through weekend trips to European cities to taking another professional degree.

Jim, for example, explains: 'I've been to Budapest, Berlin, Turkey and all over Europe. There are cheap flights when you fly out on Thursdays, or Mary, who, as she explains, has 'been all around Europe' values the possibility of spontaneous trips. She elaborates: 'A quick trip to London or Amsterdam with my partner. We love travelling. For Jim and Mary, travelling becomes a way of doing good to oneself. Jim explains: 'I feared Fridays would become cleaning day because I can clean and do practical stuff all other days. I want the Friday to be special.

Travelling is not the only way this form of self-care takes place. Some of our respondents also use the extra day off for a more professional form of development. We saw this in our data when people dedicated the day off to watching TED talks, like Carolyn, reading literature about being a good manager, like Richard, taking online courses, like Mahmoud, or taking a degree on the side, like Jenny. The self that each of these respondents aspires to be is a self that is under development. The ethical telos, as Foucault would put it, is doing something that develops their potential, so the Friday off needs to be spent on something that makes sense to them personally and professionally. As Jim summarizes it:

> You can do a lot of domestic things on days other than Fridays, so I have been pretty straightforward about saying: Hell no, Friday is not for practical and domestic house-work…I have to do something for myself. This is extra time for you, man! To develop and learn new stuff.

For some female respondents, personal development also became an act of resistance against certain gendered expectations about how to spend the day off. Vivian, for instance, explained how:

> Friday has become me-time. If this had been five years ago, it would have been like… that I could have done extra for the family or my children. Now, it's a bit more like I've started to play the piano. I try to do some things, like going to museums. I'm actually trying to use the time for something so I don't end up just shopping and doing laundry.

Vivian describes how her free Fridays have evolved into me-time, where she can pursue her own interests and hobbies, which can bring her joy and satisfaction, instead of spending the time on household chores. However, as Monica explains, such a self-practice doesn't necessarily have to be focused on one activity but can also be focused on not doing one particular activity:

> On Friday, I won't be cleaning. I try not to stick too strictly to what I do on Fridays, but I practice a lot in doing what I need now. This means waking up on Friday and thinking, what do I feel like doing?

Such explicit resistance to gendered norms contrasts with the following type of practice: domestic work, which female respondents most often performed. We turn to this next.

Domestic Work

For this type of self-care, the ethical substance is about doing something for someone else by ensuring the house is in order. The mode of subjection here is that doing stuff around the house is a way of caring for others. This is done through self-practices to make Friday a domestic workday so household matters don't colonize the weekends and take time away from family and friends. The ethical telos here is to do the housekeeping activities on Fridays so everyone can relax on the weekend. As Rebecca puts it: 'I now do the stuff I did on Saturdays on Fridays'. This can be a wide array of activities related to domestic work, but the critical point here is that the task is performed not out of pleasure, me-time, or to develop oneself but purely not to have to do it on the weekend. As Kimmy mentioned, it is 'stuff like grocery shopping, cleaning the house and doing the laundry', Catherine also spends the Friday off to 'do some laundry', and Paul also tends to household chores because it, as he elaborates 'is about fixing the toilet and stuff'.

The self-aspired here has done everything in the housekeeping before the weekend, getting the domestic work out of the way so that the weekend can be used on the family or themselves. As Henry puts it, 'Fridays are there to do the practical stuff around the house … doing laundry, shopping, cleaning … so there is more time to have a weekend'.

Balancing Work

In the fourth type of self-care, the ethical substance is the balance between work and life in general, but here, it is achieved by working on Fridays. This is interesting as managers ask their employees not to work on Fridays unless something extraordinary occurs. However, the respondents who engage in this type of self-care are not interested in a full day off; they are interested in overall balance during the whole week and thus use working on Fridays to achieve this balance by working a few concentrated and undisturbed hours. The request from the managers to remember to take time off to rest, therefore, doesn't construct a meaningful work-life balance for these employees. On the contrary, working on Fridays does. For instance, Nora goes home early on Thursdays to have an afternoon off and then answers some emails on Fridays. In this way, the substance of ethical considerations might be how to get a balanced work-life, but one way to do this is to subject oneself to a principle of flexibility. For this type of self-care, the relationship to Fridays off is thus more flexible, loose and dynamic. As Liam puts it:

> Just because we have a four-day workweek doesn't mean deadlines disappear. If I have a deadline on Friday afternoon, I meet that deadline. I don't wait for Monday to come around, of course. But the Friday off creates flexibility in how I work… If I work Friday one week, I go home early on the following Monday.

This gives him a 'good conscience', as he explains. He wouldn't be able to enjoy Friday off if he knew he had a deadline; he would instead want to work Friday and go home early another day. Tina says something similar:

> I am not super strict on myself about not working Friday. The important thing for me is that I can choose to work on Fridays. For instance, I can book a meeting with a customer late Thursday afternoon, or I can go home early and take the meeting Friday morning. What is important is the flexibility.

In this way, the respondents seem to prioritize a Friday meeting over meetings stacking up during the week, and in that sense, they create balance. The work has to be done anyway, so for them, a meaningful balance is achieved by working Fridays to avoid working too much the rest of the week or catching up on work on Sundays, as some of the respondents – especially the managers – mentioned as a practice they have before the implementation of the four-day workweek.

Others, like James, also consider the clients' needs more explicitly, as he explains that 'sometimes I take work on Fridays if we have a customer that can't meet on any other day'. In this way, Friday is reserved for being flexible. Nora is even more explicit about using Fridays to be adaptable to meet clients' needs:

> it is important and if it is a big deal for the customer, of course I work then…I think it has to do with the extra energy you get by knowing you have the Friday off. Then you don't mind spending a Friday now and then on a customer.

For Nora, Liam, Tina and James, therefore, the way they relate to the Friday off is not as a day devoted to rest, development or domestic work, as in the previous examples, but as something that gives them the possibility to have more flexibility and control of their own time. It is also not paramount whether they take Friday off completely; it is knowing that they have the possibility if they want to, but also having the chance to prioritize differently if it makes the most sense to them overall. They engage in various self-practices to achieve this dynamic relationship to Fridays off. Thus, the ethical self they aspire to be has a work-life balance, which is best achieved by considering Friday as a kind of buffer, something dynamic. This means that the ethical choice is not about not working at all; instead, it is about using the Fridays off to allow for more flexibility during the week.

Additional Work

Finally, there is the fifth type of self-care. However, the ethical substance here is not to work less or achieve better balance; instead, to work another job on Fridays. Although this type of search for meaning in Fridays off is not as common as the other 4 types, some employees, such as Lea, Svend, and Charlie, have other jobs or have their own companies on the side. Charlie is an excellent example of this. To begin with, he had much trouble adjusting to the four-day workweek:

> Suddenly, you are left alone with your thoughts about Fridays. If you have this much free time, how do you use it? So, when we started the four-day workweek, I got a bit of a life crisis.

Charlie responded to this crisis through self-care, which went through episodes of the above types of self-care. First, he used his Fridays to relax, primarily by drinking beer with his friends. He started to devote Fridays to domestic work before using them for personal development, such as exercising, reading, and getting a hunter's license. None of these types of self-care seemed to construct meaning for him. He was still unsatisfied with how he spent his Fridays and felt he wasted time. So, in the end, Charlie devoted Fridays to entrepreneurial activities. He and a colleague started working on their start-up. Reflecting on the process, Charlie described it this way:

> What the heck is this all about? We were sitting around drinking beers on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. It was counterproductive, and then I decided to do something more constructive.

For Charlie now, Friday is not a day off. It is a start-up day. Taking time off did not provide him with meaning; quite the contrary, it caused what he called a crisis, where he felt he was wasting his time and being counterproductive. So, the four-day workweek was something Charlie had to cope with, as not knowing how to spend his time productively caused a life crisis. After trying all the other types of self-care that his colleagues practice, he realized that working on Fridays is much better for him. He, however, no longer sees his entrepreneurship as a coping mechanism as he has also realized that working on his start-up improves him as an employee in the firm he works for. He explains: '[working as an entrepreneur]

advances the knowledge needed to do my job in the company I work for, so there is a good synergy there'. Charlie does this concretely by working Fridays on his start-up in the office of the company he is employed in. He justifies this by arguing that working on his start-up makes him attain a more competent self and, thus, of more value to the company he works for. This also makes Charlie's self-care practice very different from the others, as he uses the physical space of his organisation to not work for them.

Concluding Discussion

Our analysis demonstrated how the relationship between meaningful work and meaningful life is formed under reduced working hours. It also explained what kinds of ethical considerations this entails. We highlighted how employees in 4 Danish four-day workweek organizations constructed the meaning of this work-life relationship on their newly gained Friday off. We identified five types of self-care practices, each seeking to balance work and life responsibilities meaningfully. These findings are summarised in the following Table 1:

We now discuss the ethical implications in more detail and, subsequently, the practical implications for employees and employers.

Theoretical Implications

One of the more direct implications of looking at Foucauldian care of the self and meaningful work is focusing on how meaning construction can be ethical. In this regard, it is especially important to explicate two ethical aspects of self-care. We turn to these next.

First, the care of the self – and the meaning-seeking processes that follow it – grounds one's identity. In such a view, ethics is not just about providing the right normative conditions so employees can find a sense of purpose in work. It is also about understanding how seeking purpose itself is ethical. The analysis showed that the employees committed to various practices and justified them in multiple ways to make sense of the Fridays off. As Michaelson et al. (2014; p. 85) pointed out, organizational scholars often start with the assumption that 'meaningful work is a good thing, whereas normative ethics seeks to establish a philosophical basis for why it is good'. As our study suggested, it is essential to notice that employees contribute to such considerations. They try to understand how the interaction between meaningful work and life can be achieved. In doing so, they also consider why such an interaction is good. The very grounding of a meaningful work-life balance is, in the words of Foucault, an ethical act – a moment of self-care. Our study is here in line with Ciulla's (2000) point that meaningful work has objective (working conditions) as well as subjective dimensions (employees' perceptions) and Michaelson et al.'s (2014) point that these interact. Moreover, we add two aspects to this. We suggest that the relationship between meaningful work and life interact and that in this interaction, objective factors such as work hour reduction and subjective factors such as making sense of the Fridays off are combined in ethics of self-care.

Our above point is that self-care is a personal choice, not a free choice, and becomes essential. Self-care is not supposed to be seen as an act of complete agency but instead as an act performed in and through norms, requirements, and dilemmas. As Derrida pointed out, the ethical moment is not about optimising the moment but about unknowingness and

Table 1 Types of self-care

	Rest	Development	Domestic work	Overall balance	Entrepreneurial work
Ethical substance	To relax on Fridays as to not get overburdened by work	Ensuring that the day is spent in ways that will develop one personally or professionally.	Doing something for someone else by ensuring the house is in order.	The ethical substance is the balance between work and life generally achieved by working on Fridays.	Working on oneself by working on a start-up
Mode of subjection	Doing activities that are considered relaxing	Self-development is linked to something personal, for others, something professional and some, to both.	Doing stuff around the house as a way of taking care of others.	Subject oneself to a principle of working Fridays 'if needed'.	Being busy with something work-like, such as one own company
Self-practice	Activities include streaming Netflix, sleeping in, going for long walks, meeting up with a friend for brunch or taking the kids out of kindergarten to do something fun.	Taking a hunting license, going on weekend trips to European cities, and taking another professional degree.	This is done through a series of self-practices aimed at making Friday a domestic workday so household matters don't colonize the weekends and take time away from family and friends.	Practices on Fridays might involve answering emails, finishing work tasks, or talking to a client or customer, but they are meant to achieve a more general work-life balance.	Doing start-up activities such as marketing, programming or finding investors
Aim or telos of ethical conduct.	Spending time with the family or having 'me-time.'	Doing something that develops their potential, so the Friday off needs to be spent on something that makes sense to them personally and has ethical value for them as employees.	Doing the housekeeping activities on Fridays so everyone else in the household can relax at the weekend	Achieving a work-life balance by using Fridays for work is needed	Becoming an entrepreneur develops skills that the company can use

undecidability. Something he referred to as the aporia (Derrida 1993). Judith Butler later combined the ethics of Foucault, Derrida, and Levinas to discuss the impossibility of full self-knowledge. Butler writes:

> Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others, suggesting that these relations call upon primary forms of relationality that are not always available to explicit and reflective thematisation … it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (Butler 2005; p. 20)

It is important to our discussion of self-care to understand that all self-care practices are performed with limited knowledge and limited responsibility, but that ethical self-care is found in constant doing and becoming.

Secondly, it is crucial to understand that self-care is not just for the self as something isolated. Caring, for Foucault, is not only directed towards the well-being of the self but also at others' well-being. As Ladkin (2018; p. 312) elaborates, 'indeed, the purpose of caring for the self is so that the interests of the larger community might be well served'. Self-caring in Foucault is also caring for something larger than oneself. It is always relational. Here, it is interesting to notice that there are various forms of caring for others in the different types of self-care among the four-day workweek employees. It is more precise in domestic work, as the employees explicitly talk about taking care of the home so they can spend time with their partner, family, and friends on the weekend. But relaxing there is also a kind of care for the whole four-day workweek project, as it seems essential to them to stay true to the assumption that rest on Fridays is good for you – and your performance the following week.

In this second type of self-care -– development -– personal development is not solely understood as something good for the self but also something that can benefit the company. In the type of self-care centred around working on Fridays to get more flexibility during the week, working on Fridays is also done out of respect for customers. Even the entrepreneurial type considers their care for themselves a potential good for the company. Understanding the ethical implications of meaningful work and life under circumstances of work hour reduction, in other words, also means understanding more about how employees in these processes of self-care ground not only their identity but also their commitment towards others.

Again, it must be remembered that these self-care practices are not isolated from power and politics. Any form of self-care practice is social and thus embedded in normative frameworks of power that dictate who we should be and how we should act.

For instance, in our analysis, we observed some explicit gendered aspects norms being both performed and resisted when it came to respondents engaged in self-care and involving domestic work. Here, women, in particular, were reinforcing norms about doing domestic work on Fridays. However, women–particularly Vivian cited above – also engaged in explicit resistance to such norms. The way household chores are both performed more and resisted more explicitly by our female respondents is an example of how, as we explained earlier, self-care practices can both be acts of resistance to such norms and ways of reproducing such norms. The way Judith Butler (e.g. 1999) draws on Foucault in their work on gender performativity helps us understand the nuances of what is happening here. Butler claims identity to be performative, which means that gender is not something we *are* or *have*; it is also always doing. Performativity, in this way, implies repetition with a difference, which means that the way we reiterate social gender norms – with tiny variations and differences – constitutes the social temporality of the gendered subject. The gendered subject, thus, 'turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation' (Butler 1999; p. 22).

Finally, as the above analysis also suggests, these practices can also consolidate and reinforce certain work norms about resting to be a better worker or view oneself as an entrepreneurial subject. As Johnsen et al. (2009) show, this way of resting to become a better worker cannot be seen as a free choice or entirely performed under a capitalist ideology. Freedom and suppression are intertwined in these acts of self-care (Muhr et al. 2012). They

are, as Grey noted already in 1994, a project of the self and, in that way, again, a personal choice, not a free choice. This further confirms Delaney and Casey's (2021, p.185) argument that a four-day workweek risks 'strengthening employees' investment in capitalist work and organizations. However, as Foucault (1998) suggests, as an ethical practice, the care of the self allows individuals to shape their lives in ways that challenge and resist the normative dictates of power. Again, performance and resistance are always intertwined.

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Practical Implications for Employees

To take care of oneself involves finding meaning in and outside of work. It also demands a critical evaluation of the meaning to be found. As Lynch (2016) points out, such critique has three levels.

First, it is about knowing the codes and norms one's practices are a part of. A practice of self-care is always a part of broader societal practices that inform self-care. For instance, working on Fridays, as the entrepreneurial type does, might reproduce a specific norm about meaningful work that equals long work hours. Similarly, doing domestic work on Fridays–primarily something the female respondents talked about – can reproduce certain gendered expectations about women caring for the household so their partner can have a career.

Secondly, Lynch points out that self-critique also requires individuals to challenge their aspirations, means, and ends. Why does one, for instance, desire to work on Fridays or take care of the house? To what degree are these active choices resulting from giving in to certain social expectations (if such a distinction can even be made)? This also supports Lips-Wiersma and Morris' (2009) suggestion that employees have to recognize and discuss their perceptions of meaning with colleagues in an effort to see commonalities and differences in the search for meaning.

Thirdly, what Lynch (2016; p. 181) calls the question of challenging 'the networks of power relations' is also essential. That is how societal codes and norms intertwine with individuals' aspirations and desires. For instance, the whole four-day workweek project can be seen as challenging the assumption that meaningful work equals long hours and losing oneself in one's job (Pedersen et al. 2024). Employees could also reflect upon how they, in their own self-care, can unearth other assumptions about gendered roles in domestic work.

Practical Implications for Employers

There are also some solid implications for employers and managers. This research's primary purpose was to determine how employees construed different definitions of a meaningful day off through individual forms of ethical self-care. Our study both supports the idea that employees seek meaning as a basic human need (Yeoman 2014) and shows that there are different ways that this can happen. Furthermore, it also points to the ethical duty employers have to consider the meaningful needs of employees (Bowie 1998). However, it also adds to such discussions concerning the ethical duty of employers.

For instance, if the employer is ethically responsible for providing not only meaningful work but also conditions for a meaningful life under work-hour reduction, then they must understand differences in how employees take care of themselves. They must also consider differences in how employees make sense of their day off. This also means not always promoting the employees who choose to work when they are supposed to take the day off.

Employers may also benefit from reflecting upon what it means when explicitly asking for relaxation on Fridays, but employees refuse to do so. Here, it is fruitful to look to Foucault's distinction between morality and ethics. While ethics, for Foucault, is a practice where employees take a caring and critical approach to the contexts they are part of, morality refers to:

> a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches and so forth (Foucault 1992; p. 25).

As Ladkin (2018; p. 311) points out, there are 'two elements [that] comprise morality: codes of behaviour (the rules) and forms of subjectivation (how those rules are enforced from a social perspective)'. In the case of the four-day workweek, we see employers enforcing a code of behavior by reducing work hours and paying employees to take Fridays off. However, as we saw in the analysis, employees constitute themselves as ethical subjects in light of this morality in various ways. The ethical care of the self is not about following the enforced moral code but, as Ladkin (2018; p. 311) puts it, how the subject forms 'her own responses in relation to those codes'. When employers enforce a particular morality, they have to consider that employees also have an ethical response to that morality. Some follow it, while others directly reinterpret it as something else for instance, a chance for flexibility throughout the week, a chance to work on something else, an opportunity to catch up on domestic work, or as a possibility to constitute a new sense of self through various practices such as learning to play the piano.

Following Foucault, all of the five types of self-care are ethical because they all are ways of aligning actions with beliefs about what is right to do with a Friday off that goes beyond the social morality of the company they work for. While knowledge of explicit morality is essential, so is knowing how ethics is conducted through employees' various forms of self-care. More research is needed on how managers can better provide an environment where employees can experience meaningfulness at work and how they can also work toward an understanding of their own values and how they complement and differ from others at work.

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