



## The Four Day Work Week: A Silver Bullet for Burnout

By Christian Lowry

In general, most of Canada's workforce work a single job for 40 hours a week. It is not unheard of for that week to last longer. Many recent trials of a shorter week, however, have been conducted at the level of regional companies and even entire nations, as coronavirus-induced remote work has made employment options more flexible. The adoption of a shortened work week is a step in the right direction for virtually all companies, workers and managers. To see why, it is worth comparing the conventional work week and its effects with many of the alternatives that have been tested across different companies and countries.

In the current conventional work week, which normally lasts 40 hours (or longer), workers are locked into a series of constraints. If one earns hourly wages for a defined number of hours each week, finishing one's tasks sooner does not bring an end to the day or any greater

compensation, so the employee has a scarcity of incentive to work harder than necessary. Phenomena like foot-dragging, time theft, busywork, and burnout have become commonplace. The eight-hour day, the bulwark of the current five-day week, represents an even work-life balance in theory, with "eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, [and] eight hours rest." (Widrich, 2014). While it was undoubtedly an improvement, the limited time outside of work and sleep is often filled with personal tasks such as parenting, caretaking, errands, cooking, household chores, and other calls on one's very limited "free" time (Bird, 2010). This is as true for managers – who must spend as much time supervising as workers spend working – as it is for the workers under their charge.

A shortening of the working day means the same tasks must be completed in less time if productivity is to remain

stable or improve. The lesser amount of time spent at work is therefore compensated for by more effective completion of tasks. They would also be more motivated to finish these tasks and to finish them with proficiency. This was the same rationale for one of the first company-wide reductions of a 48-hour week to a 40-hour week by the Ford Motor Company 108 years ago (Xing, 2022).

Far from being a utopian idea, the shorter week is highly pragmatic and has strong precedents, if only recent ones. So far, trials of shortened work weeks at dozens of companies and ministries across high-income countries have shown that workplace productivity is maintained or increased while work-life balance and mental health improves (Bird, 2010; Pang, 2021).

The most famous recent example was a four-year trial encompassing one percent of Iceland's workforce, drawn from the nation's public service, which reduced weekly working hours from 40 to 36 (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021). In the end, "participants maintained or increased productivity and service provision." (ibid.) In August 2019, Microsoft Japan gave its 2,300 employees every Friday off, resulting in a 40 percent jump in productivity over August 2018 levels (Porter, 2019). Similar findings have been reported in many multinational companies across a variety of industries (Pang, 2021).

For management, shorter work weeks mean reduced psychological burnout and employee turnover among an overburdened workforce. A recent survey of 1,000 American workers found that 98 percent believed that the shortened work time of a four-day week would improve their mental health (Castrillon, 2021). It is far cheaper to retain an employee than to replace them, so the retention of skilled and motivated workers becomes an investment. By acquiescing to or even exceeding a required shortening of the work day, firms also avoid reputation costs and

boost their public profile as good places for talented individuals to work. The shorter week can also improve the interpersonal quality of the workplace by dangling the "carrot" of more relaxation rather than the "stick" of an overbearing, authoritarian boss during a longer week. Firms can and have competed for workers at the expense of the latter, but can also do so to their benefit.

The well-being of labourers, however, is the overwhelmingly important ethical consideration for a business, since they make up the majority of almost any workplace's staff, and the consumer of one business' goods and services is usually a labourer elsewhere.

It is also important to distinguish between different kinds of "shorter" working weeks. One cunning strategy some orthodox employers have used is the "compressed work week", which shortens the number of working days while keeping hours static (Bird, 2010). For instance, in workplaces with compressed weeks, two more hours of work are often added to each of the other four workdays to make up for the lost hours of the fifth day, making the majority of a given staffer's time – whether at work or home – more packed, burdensome and stressful in the process. It has the form of a shortened work week with none of the substance, defeating the purpose of any shortening. A genuinely shortened workweek would be uncompressed, shortening the total working hours first and days second.

The shortening of the working week should - and just might - become a reality in our time of successful trial runs, increasingly remote work, greater bargaining power, and labour shortages. It already has strong public support and precedent. All that is needed now is the corporate – and more importantly, the political – will to adopt it. Much of the business world's future undoubtedly waits on it.

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