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Can the four-day week solve work-life balance?

Exploring why a four-day working week won't create better work-life balance

Many of us would like better work-life balance, or should that be work-life integration? [1] Whichever term you prefer, we can agree that everyone needs ample time away from work to recharge, spend time with their loved ones and keep up with a constant deluge of life admin.

Often, though, the balance is tipped in favour of work. The CIPD's UK Working Lives survey 2019 found that just over one quarter of workers felt their job affects personal commitments (26%). Just 7% agreed that their personal commitments affect their job. The same survey also found that three in five UK employees work longer hours than they'd like to.

Why a four-day week?

Could making a shift towards a shorter working week be a radical, but potentially powerful, way to better balance work and life? Four-day working is a hot topic. It sounds fantastic for work-life balance and well-being. Who wouldn't want to work a day less per week, for the same pay?

It has the potential to tackle other issues too, such as pay inequality and productivity. However, a wholesale change in working hours across the UK is far from reality. Now is the time to explore how a four-day week would work in practice, and what this means for the balance between work and life.

Will a four-day working week reduce flexibility on working days?

Early adopters are using a variety of approaches to manage the four-day week. [2] One company has implemented set working hours and discourages non-work appointments in working hours. Creating guidance for managing a four-day week is a positive step, but it could also mean that employers reduce other types of flexibility. For some this might be a trade-off worth making, but for others with caring responsibilities or medical issues, this

lack of flexibility could be a problem.

Flexibility is increasingly important for employees. Researchers have identified several 'boundary styles,' [3] highlighting that we all have different preferences when it comes to managing the balance between work and home. One colleague might be happy to bring their work home in the evenings and flex their hours around other commitments. Another colleague might find this blurring of the lines between work and home inherently stressful, preferring to keep their 'work' and 'home' lives separate. Optimum work-life balance (or integration) looks different for each of us.

Will a four-day working week require employees to work more flexibly?

We already work in a global, 24/7 world. As research from [Henley Business School](#) [4] highlights, the working week falls across different days internationally. This already creates challenges for businesses and for employees. Given the same research found that 82% of organisations said that reduced availability for customers is the largest barrier to the four-day week, there's a question of how rotas will be managed to allow responsiveness. Will employees be required to pick up meetings in their non-working day to meet this demand, or will businesses think creatively about task management, job sharing and shift rotation? Work will still spill into our personal time in a four-day working week unless businesses think about these issues.

Are employers ready to address workload issues to ensure five days of work aren't squeezed into four?

Linked to this is workload. One report suggests that UK workers put in an average of 42.5 hours a week, more than our European counterparts, [5] so reducing working hours could be beneficial for work-life balance. But there's a real question about whether workload could be reduced to align with a shorter working week. This might be supported by better job sharing and technology being used for some tasks, freeing up employees to do more value-added work.

But we need better evidence on the tools that employers who have moved towards a four-day week use. Are they using these sorts of arrangements or relying on the idea that productivity won't suffer if we move from five days to four? Many supporters of the four-day week suggest productivity won't suffer when reducing working hours. One study of call centre workers [6] found that call duration increases after workers hit the 35-hour mark, presumably due to tiredness. In other words, after a certain point we become less efficient and productive, so shaving off a day might not impact us as much as we think.

But long hours can also indicate that workloads aren't manageable, or we're falling foul of poor management practices. And many industries already have an issue with job

strain; for example 73% of nurses and over 90% of teachers say they are exhausted after work. [7] Working too many hours over a sustained period is fundamentally about workload, not work-life balance. These issues need to be addressed by businesses before moving to shorter working hours. Otherwise, we could create additional issues for well-being and work-life balance.

Are the potential trade-offs worth it?

Moving to a four-day week requires flexibility and careful management by employers and employees. There may also be trade-offs to be made. For one person, a four-day week with less flexibility over start and finish times would be a reasonable trade-off. For others, a flexible five-day week is more manageable. Whether or not the four-day week will help with work-life balance depends on what work-life balance means to you, but also how businesses manage the four-day week.

Ultimately, we talk about work-life balance because many of us encounter challenges meeting the demands of our work and non-work life. According to the HSE, the UK loses 15.4 million working days due to work-related stress. [8] Businesses and employees need to work together to manage this and ensure people have the autonomy and flexibility to work in a way that suits them, and that workloads are manageable – whether we move to a four-day working week or not.

References

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[8] Find out more at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>
