

A four, five, or six-day working week?

1 Warmer

a. Answer the questions and share your answers in groups.

In an average month:

- How many hours do you work a day? _____
- How many days do you work a week? _____
- How many paid overtime hours do you work? _____
- How many unpaid overtime hours do you work? _____
- How many weekends do you work? _____

b. Do you think you have achieved work-life balance? Why (not)?

2 Key words

a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below.

Check your answers and your understanding the words by using the same word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

default efficiencies enforce given mills notice
philanthropy practicalities pressure proposition tentative unpredictability

1. the belief that you should help people, especially by giving money to those who need it

Finally, many companies now realize that arm's-length _____ —simply giving an annual donation to charities—is no longer enough.

2. factories where products such as cotton, wool, or steel are made _____

My great-grandfather worked in textile _____ until the day he died.

3. a worried feeling that you get when you have to deal with a difficult or complicated situation

With greatly increased workloads, nearly everyone is feeling under _____ now.

4. an offer or suggestion, especially involving business or politics _____

I have an exciting new business _____ I'd like to run past you.

5. because of a particular fact _____

_____ *that workplace conflict is inevitable, we need to learn how to manage it.*

6. the real facts or details of a situation, rather than ideas or theories _____

I'm not sure that he really considered all the _____ of living at sea before he set off on his sabbatical year sailing around the world.

7. not definite or not certain _____

At the end of the 8-hour meeting, they had only reached a _____ agreement.

8. the abilities to work well and produce good results by using the available time, money, and/or supplies _____

The new technology is aimed at improving _____ in customer service and retention.

9. the way that something will be done if you make no other choice _____

The frequency will automatically _____ to once a week if you don't set it manually.

10. make sure that a law or rule is obeyed by people _____

The main role of the police is to uphold and _____ the law.

11. the quality of being impossible to say what you think will happen in the future

Sunshine is needed to ripen grapes, and a defining feature of the British weather is its

_____ *; therefore, a good harvest can never be guaranteed.*

12. the period between the time that you tell someone something and the time that you actually do it

I have to give a month's _____ if I want to leave my job.

A four-day week might benefit employers as well

SARAH O'CONNOR

- 1 In Britain, in the 1840s, a campaign to reduce the length of the working day in factories from 12 hours to 10 prompted predictions of disaster. One parliamentarian called the idea “dangerous” while another warned such “mistaken philanthropy” would prevent workers from providing for their families.
- 2 But in 1846, parliament heard the results of an experiment run by an owner of large mills in Manchester and Preston. When he reduced the working day to 11 hours, he found production volumes remained the same and the quality of work improved. “It is, I believe, a fact not to be questioned that there is more bad work made [in] the last one or two hours, than the whole of the first nine or 10 hours,” he said.
- 3 Similarly, when Henry Ford reduced the working week in his car factories from six days to five with no cut in pay in 1926, the decision followed several years of experiments which had assured him production would not suffer. “We can get at least as great production in five days as we can in six, and we shall probably get a greater, for the pressure will bring better methods,” he said.
- 4 Almost a century later, a number of companies want to find out if they can shrink the working week even more. A large experiment in Iceland cut the working week of thousands of staff from 40 hours a week to 35 or 36 without a reduction in output. In the UK, about 30 businesses have signed up to a six-month trial of a bolder proposition: a four-day week with no reduction in pay.
- 5 Given the average working week for full-time workers in the UK is only 36.3 hours, a campaign for even more time off would probably sound decadent to the generation which lived through the Industrial Revolution*. But the “leakiness” of modern work into evenings and weekends combined with the demands of intensive parenting have left many feeling starved of time. In the 2010s, the average time people spent on leisure shrank in eight out of 13 countries for which data is available, according to the OECD.
- 6 Most objections to the idea of a four-day week focus on the practicalities. Would the business suffer? What would happen to people who already work four days for 20 percent less pay? Would crunching five days’ worth of work into four put too much pressure on people, or mean that even more work spills out into our supposedly “free time” under the radar?
- 7 The experiments should provide some tentative answers. Shaun Rutland, chief executive of gaming company Hutch, which has signed up for the trial, says work in creative industries always expands to fill the time available. He hopes the four-day week will make staff happier and prompt new efficiencies.
- 8 Some changes will be simple: meetings will default to half an hour rather than an hour, for example. The staff members who work four days already will be moved to full-time pay. But he says some staff are worried the place will start to feel less friendly if there is more time pressure. Hutch will measure the frequency and quality of game updates, and use regular surveys to track the happiness of staff. Rutland is open to the experiment ending in success, failure, or something in between. “If in six months our quality goes down, they’re too stressed over four days,” he says.
- 9 The bigger question is whether the push for a four-day week can address the most urgent problems in the 21st-century world of work. For a start, the workplaces which seriously overwork their staff are not the ones taking part in experiments like this. Goldman Sachs, for example, is in some ways in another century: it recently promised to enforce Saturdays off for junior bankers complaining about 95-hour weeks.

Continued on next page

10 More importantly, in low-paid sectors like retail, hospitality, and care, the bigger problem is the unpredictability of the working week. It is common for employers in these sectors to put staff on zero-hour or part-time contracts, then flex their hours up and down with scant notice. Overwork one week could turn to underemployment the next. A UK survey last year found 55 per cent of full-time low-paid workers were given less than a week's notice of their schedule, and 15 per cent got less than 24 hours. Tackling this requires more targeted policies, such as the "fair workweek" scheduling laws implemented by some US cities.

11 While these issues need different solutions, the common thread is that both white-collar and blue-collar workers want employers to be less greedy with their time. If history is any guide, that might prove beneficial for companies in the long run too. As Henry Ford concluded: "The harder we crowd business for time, the more efficient it becomes."

** the Industrial Revolution = the period in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and the US when machines began to be used for producing goods and many new industries developed*

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3 Understanding the article

a. Answer the questions in as much detail as possible.

1. What have you learnt from the article about the history of the working week for blue-collar factory workers in the UK?
2. What have you learnt from the article about the history of the working week for blue-collar factory workers at the Ford Company in the US?
3. Which other country proved these points when they reduced working hours?
4. What are the challenges and worries surrounding a reduced working week?
5. In which types of industries might a 4-day week work well?
6. Which types of industries are more likely to struggle to successfully implement a shorter working week?

4 Business language

a. Find multi-word phrases in the article with these meanings.

1. ignored or not noticed by most people _____ (3 words, paragraph 6)
2. agree to do something or take part in something _____ (3 words, paragraph 7)
3. a reoccurring feature or characteristic of something _____ (2 words, paragraph 11)
4. not immediately but at some time in the future _____ (4 words, paragraph 11)

b. Use the phrases to complete these sentences.

1. Cutting jobs could be more expensive _____ if we have to hire freelancers.
2. We've noticed a _____ running through these discussions, and we'd like to address that now.
3. He managed to stay _____ for years despite stealing continuously from the pension fund.
4. I think I'm going to _____ the health and safety refresher course.

c. Use two of the phrases in sentences of your own.

5 Business quotes

a. Without referring back to the article, complete these quotes to the best of your recollection. Write the name of the person who said each one and the date if known. Then find them in the article to check the answers.

b. Which one do you most agree with and why?

1. There is more _____ work made [in] the last one or two hours, than the whole of the first _____ hours: _____
2. We can get at least as great _____ in five days as we can in six, and we shall probably get a greater, for the _____ will bring better methods: _____
3. Work in _____ industries always expands to fill the time available: _____
4. The harder we crowd business for time, the more _____ it becomes: _____

c. Henry Ford is well-known for his business quotes. Find other Henry Ford quotes that you like and agree with and write them on the lines.

6 Discussion

a. Discuss in pairs.

- Refer back to your answers to exercise 1: How do your answers compare to a typical work situation in your country 10 / 25 / 50 years ago?
- How many hours a week (or month) do full-time employees in your country work on average nowadays? How does this compare to one hundred years ago?
- Could you work a four-day week and still be as efficient and productive as you are now? Is this something you'd like to do? Why (not)?

7 Wider business theme – employee communication

- a. You are the founders of a small but successful tech company. In the past couple of years, during the pandemic, with home offices, online conferences, etc., the way your 22 employees worked changed greatly. Now you want to see how your employees will cope with yet another change – moving from a 5-day week to a 4-day week.

Write an upbeat email to all employees, urging them to make the change to a 4-day week a smooth and beneficial one for them, their families, and of course, the company. Point out the advantages and try to pre-empt any worries they might have by providing them reassurances that their workload and income will not suffer. Add any further details you can think of, include a prediction of what the change will lead to, and ask for their support.

Share your emails.