

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

1 Warmer

a. Answer the questions and share your answers.

In a normal 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? _____

2 Key words

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

Check your answers and your understanding of 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.

factories output pressure production providing for shrink

1. buildings where large quantities of goods are produced using machines

There are a lot of _____ on the big industrial estate outside of town.

2. looking after someone by making money to buy the things that they need.

She has been _____ her family ever since she was 18.

3. making things in large quantities, especially in a factory, so that they can be sold

The _____ this year is so far much less than last year.

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

With all this extra work, nearly everyone is feeling under _____ now.

5. become smaller in size or number _____

I expect my income to _____ by about ten percent this year.

6. the amount of something that a person, organization, or business produces

Industrial _____ increased by four per cent last month.

efficiencies enforce expands notice practicalities unpredictability

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

I'm not sure that he really thought through all the _____ of living at sea.

8. becomes larger in size and fills more space _____

The liquid _____ when the temperature increases.

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

The new technology will help us improve our _____.

10. make sure that people follow a law or rule _____

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

One thing you can be sure of with the British weather is its _____.

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

I must 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. **Decide whether the statements are True or False according to the information in the article. Correct any that are false.**

1. In the UK, in the 1840s, 12-hour days were normal for most factory workers.
2. Leaders thought that if workers worked fewer hours they would not have enough money to pay their rent and buy food for their families.
3. In 1926, Henry Ford reduced his workers' working week from six to five days and paid them less money.
4. On average, employees in the UK work 10 hours more a week than employees in Iceland.
5. Some people worry that people on a 4-day week will take more work home with them.
6. No one knows what to do about people who already work part-time / a 4-day week.
7. A four-day week is likely to be a big success in low-paid sectors like retail, hospitality, and care.
8. Even though there will be challenges, a four-day week could be beneficial for companies over time.

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 feature or characteristic of something that can be seen again and again
_____ (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 the customer complaints.
3. He managed to stay _____ for years even after people noticed that someone had been stealing the money.
4. I think I'm going to _____ the health and safety refresher course.

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

5 Business quotes – Henry Ford

a. Without referring back to the article, complete these Henry Ford quotes as you remember them. Find them to check the answers.

1. 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: _____

2. The harder we crowd business for time, the more _____ it becomes: _____

b. 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.

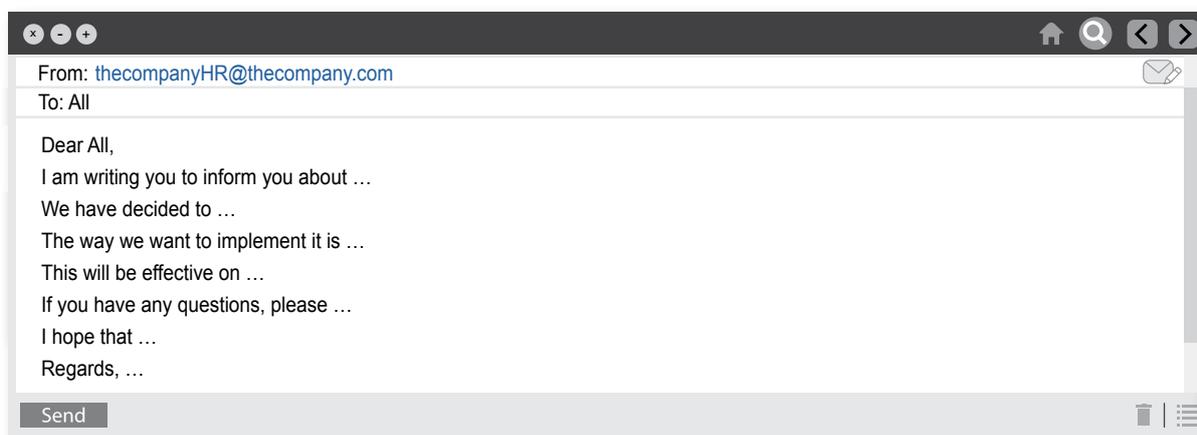
- Look back at your answers in exercise 1. How do your answers compare to your work situation 2 / 5 / 10 / or more years ago?
- How many hours a week (or month) do full-time employees in your country now work on average? How does this compare to one hundred years ago?
- Would you like to work a four-day week? Why / 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 and 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.

Use the template below if needed. Share your emails.



The screenshot shows an email composition window with the following content:

From: thecompanyHR@thecompany.com

To: All

Dear All,

I am writing you to inform you about ...

We have decided to ...

The way we want to implement it is ...

This will be effective on ...

If you have any questions, please ...

I hope that ...

Regards, ...

Send