

Why UK employees need a four-day work week more than we think

UK workers desperately need a productivity boost, and that boost could be a country-wide implementation of a four-day work week.

The average UK employee productivity dropped from 82.14% in 2020 to 63.47% in 2021, according to the recent data gathered from the DeskTime time tracking app. What's even worse - it seems that this drop in productivity was compensated for with overtime work. In 2021, UK employees on average worked 92.10 overtime hours, which is nearly 22 minutes extra every day.

These findings once again prove that long working hours aren't the road to higher productivity. Long working hours are, however, a road to burnout and job dissatisfaction according to the latest Work Happiness Score by Indeed, as much as 36% of UK employees are unhappy in their jobs.

Besides, employee work-life balance suffers, too. 52% of UK employees admit their work-life balance is poor, and 66% are looking to make a change or hope their employer would provide a solution. The question is - could that solution be a four-day work week?

Recently, more than 30 UK companies announced that they will participate in a six-month trial of a four-day work week starting June 2022. The experiment's aim is to measure the impact of a shorter workweek on productivity, employee wellbeing, as well as the impact on the environment and gender equality.

If this experiment finds that productivity doesn't suffer when people are working less, this might be a game-changer and the first step to much-needed

change. After all, a 40-hour workweek hasn't always been the norm either.

The UK has shortened the workweek before

An average UK employee today spends about 40 hours per week at work, but it hasn't always been this way.

In the 19th century, a typical working day lasted 14-16 hours with a six-day workweek. Then, Welsh philanthropist Robert Owen suggested decreasing the operating hours to 10, and later to 8 hours a day.

Despite people now working fewer hours, there was no significant decrease in productivity. So, the eight-hour working day persisted and today, more than 200 years later, 9-to-5 is still considered the standard working hours across the globe.

Much has changed since the 19th century, especially technology that now allows us to work more efficiently. With the help of advanced software, AI, and machine learning, we can spend much less time on the operations that 200 years ago would've taken months.

So, why are we sticking to the traditional 9-to-5 even if it doesn't make sense anymore? Perhaps, it's finally time to introduce another reduction in the UK's working schedule.

How the UK will benefit from a four-day work week

Companies around the world that have already implemented a four-day work week report that it has helped their employees to have a better work-life balance and boost performance. And there are more benefits to a four-day workweek, including lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, and increased gender equality.

Decreased stress

Employees who work fewer hours can dedicate more time to their families, health, and hobbies, which makes them happier and more resistant to stress. Stress, according to research, is one of the leading killers of productivity.

A survey by Colonial Life showed that about 41% of workers report that stress has caused a drop in their work productivity. Stress is also dangerous for one's

overall health. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) calls stress one of the main hazards in the workplace that contributes to headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, and anxiety.

Offering employees an option to work a shortened workweek is one way to tackle this life-work imbalance, keep employees' stress levels low and help them avoid burnout and other physical and mental health problems.

Higher job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is tied to giving employees what they want, and what they want is a flexible working schedule and a compressed workweek. According to a survey by consulting firm Robert Half, these are among the most desired perks among workers.

Flexible working conditions have become especially important after the pandemic. Having had the chance to experience the flexibility and comfort of the home office, people now aren't willing to give them up. At the same time, 50% of companies want to see employees back in the office, despite the resistance.

A four-day workweek could, therefore, be a way to navigate this tension and compensate for the loss of benefits the home office provided. By providing employees with more flexible schedules and giving them more time for themselves, companies can keep employee job satisfaction high and retain the talent that would otherwise leave.

Equality in the workplace

In 2021, British women were, on average, paid 15.4% less than British men. Despite this pay gap decreasing – it's down from 20.2% a decade ago – this is still a significant difference.

For women who have children, this pay gap is even more dramatic and can reach up to 30% over a period of 10 years, as noted by the UK's Institute for Fiscal Studies. One of the main reasons for such a difference in pay is that women are more likely than men to adjust their careers for family life.

Some companies that participate in the 4-day workweek experiment see a shortened workweek as a way to reduce the gender pay gap. The Wellcome Trust, for example, believes that one extra day off will allow both parents to have time during the week to perform their childcare responsibilities, such as making doctor's appointments at public hospitals that usually don't work during weekends. This will allow women to have equal economic opportunities to the rest of their colleagues.

Final thoughts

A workweek reduction might seem radical, and one of the risks is that employers will be tempted to simply squeeze five days' worth of work into four days. But that's not how shortened workweeks work.

A four-day workweek is about prioritising and just doing less in general, crossing out the unimportant tasks from the to-do list in the first place. It's an opportunity for businesses to finally automate processes that are still done manually and reset their focus on value-added activities.

At the end of the day, it's crucial for employers to realise that their business is not the centre of this experiment – it's their employees. The aim is to make sure they're well-rested, happy at their jobs, and with a decent work-life balance. This is the way to ensure long-term success of your business.

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