

Trialling a 4-day work week

Results from around the world and how to try it for yourself



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The future of work?

When the movements for a 5-day work week swept across the world from 1918-1940, the notion was seen as a radical idea. Today, we can safely take it for granted. A hundred years later, workers in many countries are calling for reducing work to four days per week^{1,2}, and many companies and national institutions are considering adopting the initiative^{3,4}.

In recent decades, a surprising number of tests and trials have been conducted on a 4-day work week setup in a variety of organisations and countries. These trials on the 4-day work week report very positive results for both companies and employees^{5,6}, and the vast majority of companies are choosing to continue with some variation of the 4-day work week after trials have ended^{5,7}.

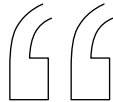
So is the 4-day work week a feasible idea in our modern, hyper-efficient societies? Is it really possible to achieve the same results in less time than we spend now? Is it realistic to introduce the 4-day work week in modern businesses and organisations?

Perhaps an idea that seems radical today may have more potential than at first glance.

This article will provide you with an overview and introduction to the key results from testing the 4-day work week and show you how we believe it could be tested in *your* organisation.

What is a 4-day work week?

Firstly, the definition of a 4-day work week must be established. This has been contested and varied but is reaching a consensus on the definition provided (and trademarked) by the organisation 4 Day Week Global:



Employees receive 100% pay for 80% time worked with 100% productivity targets achieved⁸.”

This 100:80:100 principle focuses on time in percentages instead of days and allows organisations to structure their work setup to best fit their needs. In this way, the 4-day work week is not necessarily about the individual weekdays but instead about the total time worked.

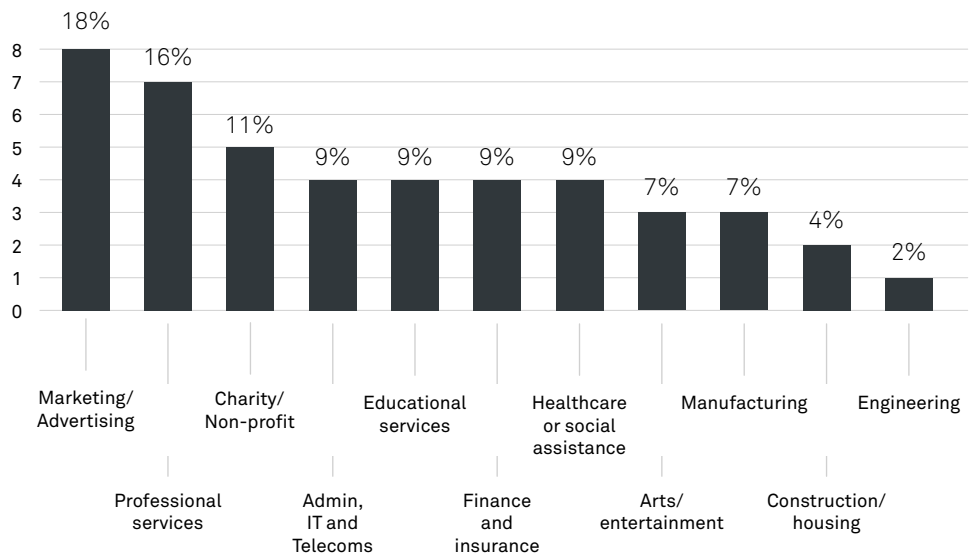
Where has it been tested?

Currently, main trials of the 4-day work week have almost exclusively been tested in Western Europe, North America and Australia, with a few trials outside these regions in major economies like Brazil and South Africa⁹.

Within these geographies, however, the initiative has been tested in a wide range of organisation types and sectors. A major trial in Iceland between 2015-2019 tested the initiative with civil servants and government employees amounting to 1.3% of the workforce of the country (in total, 100 workplaces and +2,500 employees)⁶. The most recent major trial in the United Kingdom tested the initiative primarily with SMEs and NGOs⁹, and major private corporations, such as Unilever¹⁰, Panasonic¹¹ and Microsoft¹² have tested it independently.

Distribution of sectors in the latest UK trial⁹

Number of companies



The 4-day work week has been tested in a wide variety of sectors, both blue-collar and white-collar. The chart shows the distribution of sectors in the UK trials from 2023.

What were the results?

In sum, the results of trials have been extremely positive, with the majority of organisations choosing to continue with a 4-day work week setup^{9,10}, most notably in Iceland, where union negotiations following the trials secured a 4-day work week-inspired setup for 86% of the working population⁶.

Organisations have maintained the 4-day work week setup for a variety of reasons, most focused on employee wellbeing, retention and easier talent recruitment. Most notably, employee wellbeing and work-life balance increased across the trials. Employees felt “better, more energised and less stressed”⁶ and experienced widespread benefits in psychological and physical health, which in turn had positive effects on their work. Positive effects on work also included more support from colleagues and management and a greater commitment to the workplace⁶.

How does a 4-day work week affect productivity?

Perhaps surprisingly, the 4-day work week setup **did not affect productivity negatively** but instead maintained or increased productivity as a result of new ways of working and better employee engagement^{6,9}. In addition, revenue rose by 1.4% on average in the UK trials and by 35% when compared to a similar period from previous years⁵.

So it seems that less time at work does not necessarily equal less productivity, and the results of these trials may challenge our understanding of how to optimise our work.

Where the 4-day work week did not fit

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 4-day work week does not fit all organisations, sectors or employees. Looking at the UK trial from 2023, the organisations who had to abandon the 4-day work week during testing had three things in common¹².

1. Businesses with **fixed opening hours** and required staff on site had difficulty decreasing working hours without hiring additional staff, e.g. call centres and customer-facing stores.
2. Organisations **rushed the implementation** of a 4-day work week and failed to implement necessary optimisations, which resulted in an increased workload during the remaining working hours.
3. Organisations that **did not adapt the 4-day work week to the specific needs of the organisation** attempted to fit their activities into a structure that did not fit their organisational needs and possibilities.

Even with these limitations, it is important to note that **the 4-day work week has been proven to work in many more organisations and contexts than most people would have thought possible.**

92%

of organisations in the UK trials continued with a 4-day work week⁹.

86%

of employees in Iceland are now on a reduced time scheme⁶.

57%

fewer employees left the workplace with a 4-day work week setup in the UK trials⁵.

90%

of UK trial employees say that they definitely want to continue the initiative⁵.

71%

of employees in UK trials had reduced burnout⁹.

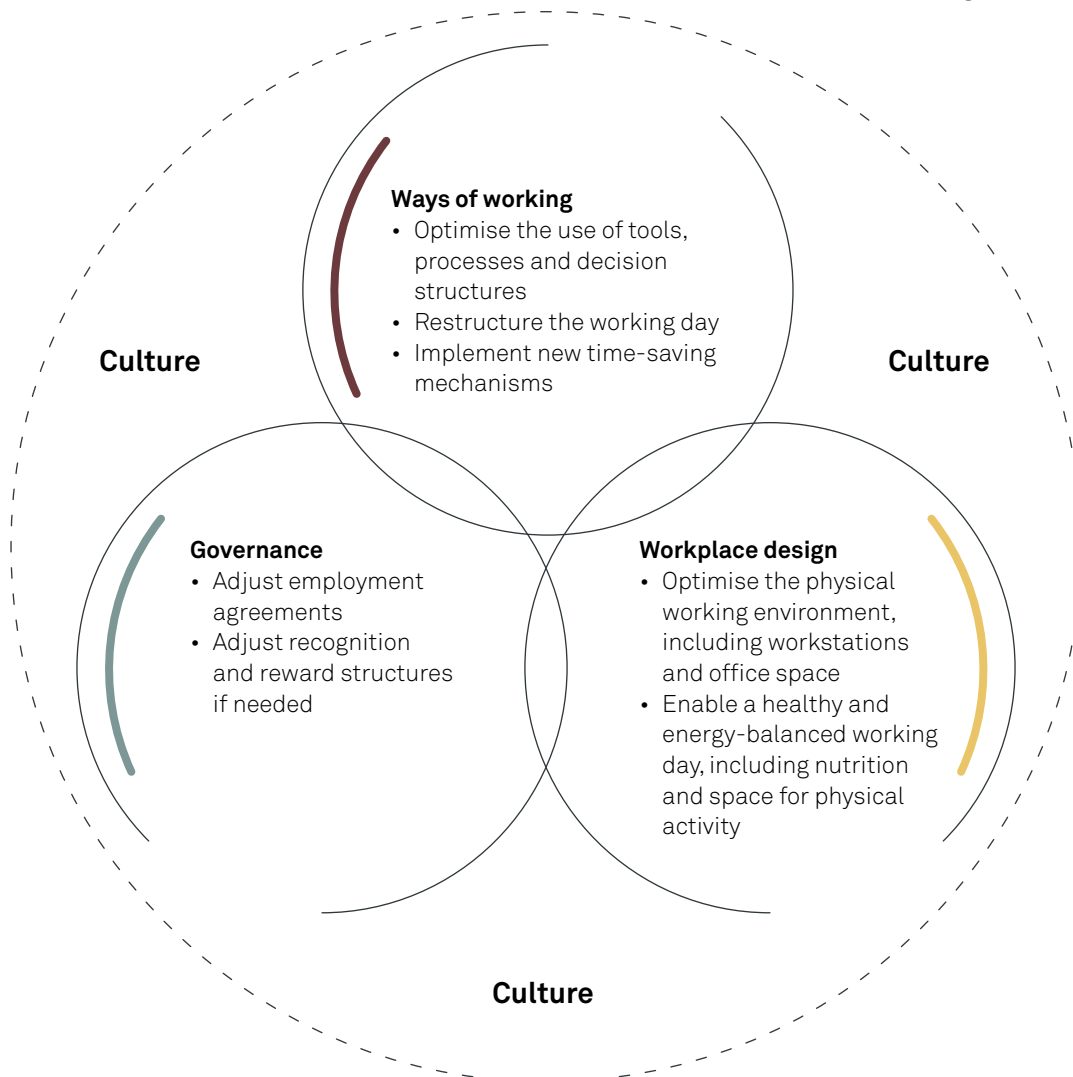
So how do you succeed with a 4-day work week?

Succeeding with a 4-day work week boils down to **improving effectiveness** through **small-scale optimisations** and improvements. While it is not possible in all organisations, anyone who has been in a meeting that could have been handled with an e-mail can attest to the potential of small-scale optimisations.

The implementation of an optimised way of working **requires a focus on three areas.**

1. **Improving ways of working and interacting in the workplace.**
2. **Designing the workplace to support an optimised way of working.**
3. **Adjusting workplace governance and incentives to support an optimised way of working.**

And finally, these three areas must be **supported by** an aligned **company culture**. It is impossible to succeed with a 4-day work week if it goes against the very DNA of the organisation.



Top 4 tips for succeeding with your implementation

1

Clearly establish and frequently communicate the purpose of implementing a 4-day work week.

Whether the change is related to well-being, productivity, talent retention and attraction or minimising the organisation's footprint on the world, our interviews with trial companies show that frequent communication of the purpose is critical both before and during the change.

2

Plan for flexibility and continuous support in challenging mindsets and breaking habits.

Changing deeply established working patterns and routines is not easy. While many people welcome the idea of a shorter work week with enthusiasm, the reality is that we are creatures of habit, and any disruption will create some degree of confusion and frustration. There is no equation that fits all. That is why companies need to take the time to truly understand what motivates and enables employees to become more effective.

3

Develop a growth mindset and intentional approach to testing, learning and iterating along the way.

Trialling a 4-day work week requires creating a test environment. For that purpose, interviews reflect on a need to take into account the cultural context in which a trial takes place. Do participants embrace a growth mindset? Is there psychological safety and a strong feedback culture? Can the participants tackle tensions in a healthy and constructive manner? If the answer is no, there is a need to assess if the cultural context will be a good fit.

4

Maximise the use of existing tech tools to achieve efficiency

Before implementing a 4-day work week, take a look at the tech landscape and usability. Consider what would increase the usability metrics and improve the employee experience. If there are any new AI or automated features, make sure to enable them as part of the trial.

To improve your tech efficiency, track all activity in a transparent way, promoting KPIs linked to productivity and the use of tools.

Would you like to know more about the 4-day work week and our approach to testing it in organisations?

We help organisations identify the most suitable implementation approach with focus on early benefits realisation.

What we do

In essence, we transform business through people. We build processes and structures to manage, engage and empower people to perform at work. We enable data-driven people leadership through HR technology and people analytics. We design organisations to become fit for humans and fit for the future, and we create the future of work to maximise the relationship between people and digital technology.

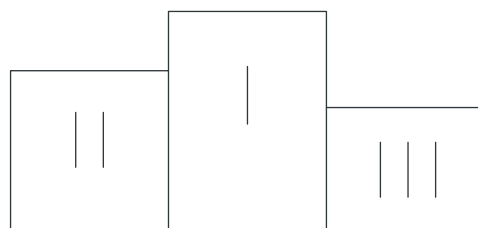
How we do it

We strive to enable people and impact early in the change process.

We adjust and build on what is already working, starting from where the value is highest.

We co-create solutions to ensure transparency, accountability and sustainable changes for the business.

We follow benefits realisation from the start to ensure that we gain the expected value and cost effect.



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Fast facts about Implement

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