



March 2021

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Recommended Citation

Evans, Joseph (2021) "It's Time to Retire the Five-day Workweek," *Marriott Student Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol4/iss2/15>

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It's Time to Retire the Five-day Workweek

Five Reasons Why Companies Should Switch to Four Workdays

Joe Evans

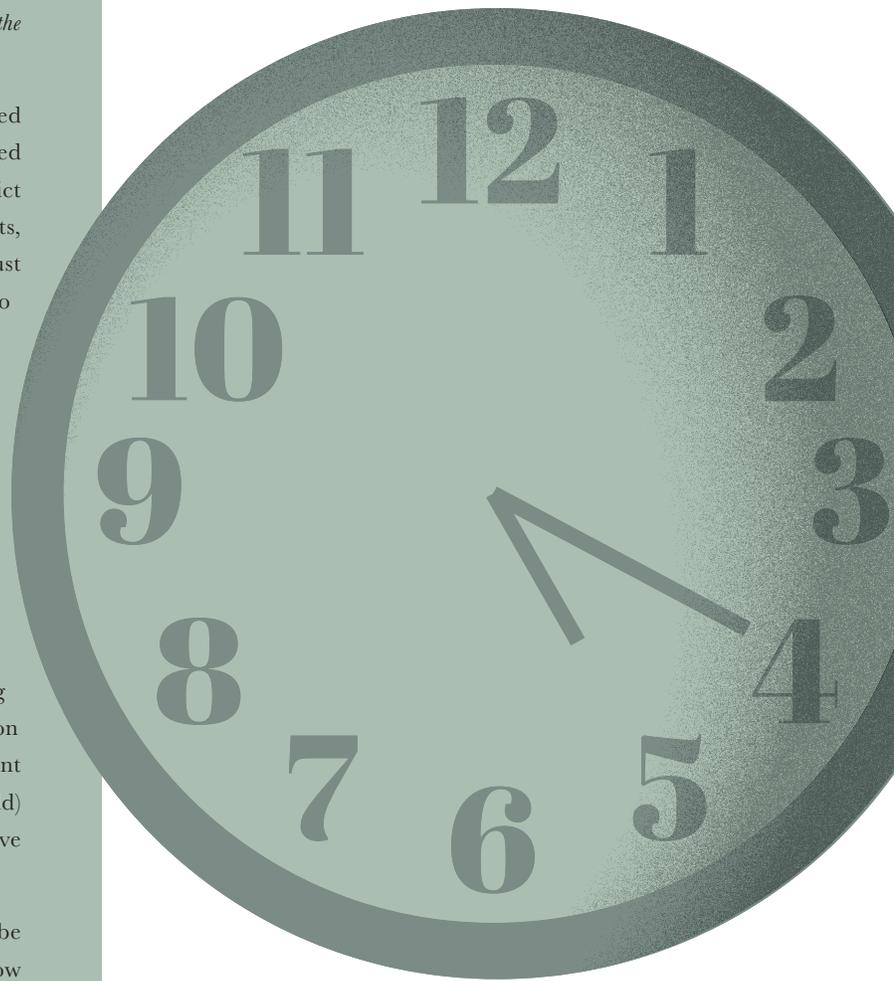
Little innovation has taken place in the work schedule of employees in the past century. This could be because many companies fear the idea of the four-day workweek. Here are five reasons why the four-day workweek can benefit both companies and employees and make the switch less terrifying.

In the past century, the world has seen unprecedented levels of innovation. Phones, which once had to be shared between entire neighborhoods, can now accurately predict your daily routines and set reminders for you.¹ Thermostats, which were once a miracle in their own right, can adjust temperature based on the current weather conditions to maximize your energy efficiency.² Today, you can even toss your dog a treat from across the planet.³ With all of this innovation, why are companies still adhering to a workweek model implemented over a century ago?

How did we get here?

In 1908, a mill put the five-day workweek in place to allow its Jewish employees to observe their Sabbath. Other companies, such as Ford Motor Company, followed suit.⁴ This trend continued through the following decades until it cemented itself into the American tradition with the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.⁵ From this point forward, Americans (and much of the rest of the world) began working 40-hour workweeks—eight hours a day, five days a week.

John Maynard Keynes predicted that individuals would be working as few as 15 hours per week by the year 2030.⁶ Now it is 2020, and that prediction is as far from reality now as it was when Keynes made it.



Recently, a new trend has begun to take hold in the American work psyche—the four-day workweek. It’s been both heralded as a boon for workers and decried as a killer of productivity. Nevertheless, since the idea is gaining traction, it can no longer be ignored. It may be time to let the five-day workweek follow the example of other longtime employees and retire. Naturally, such change can be scary—especially for large companies. To ease the fright, here’s a list of five reasons why companies should implement the four-day workweek.

1 The four-day workweek decreases worker burnout

Worker burnout is a growing problem that is now considered a diagnosable issue by the World Health Organization.⁷ A recent Gallup poll found that 23% of employees either always or often feel burned out at work, and that an additional 44% feel burned out at least sometimes.⁸

Burnout in workers, while primarily detrimental to individuals, can also create dire consequences for the organizations for which these affected individuals work. Researchers have found that employees working excessive hours experience a “deterioration in cognitive performance, including impaired grammatical reasoning and alertness.”⁹

Such a decline in cognitive performance can lead to serious issues and additional costs in any industry. For the service industry, it could mean the difference between obtaining and losing a client. For those in manufacturing, it could cause increased worker-caused accidents and safety protocol breaches. Thus, alleviating burnout could cut down on these costs and promote a safer work environment both physically and mentally.

2 The four-day workweek improves employee retention and recruitment

Kronos, a world leader in workforce management, surveyed over 600 human resource leaders and found that “burnout is the reason behind up to half of their yearly workforce turnover.”¹⁰ With the decreased levels of burnout among employees brought on by the shorter workweek, companies could reduce a large amount of employee recruitment costs.

After all, these recruitment costs are not negligible. Some estimate the costs of hiring new employees to be at “50% of salary [at entry level]; mid-level at 125% of salary; and senior executive over 200% of salary.”¹¹ Trimming down these costs could leave companies with increased financial flexibility and profitability.

Aside from decreasing worker burnout, the four-day workweek has proven to be a major benefit in hiring and retaining employees. These days, the greater part of the workforce is occupied by “Gen Zers” and millennials, who are increasingly looking at work-life balance as a key factor in deciding where to work. They are “not about jumping up titles, but moving into better work environments.”¹²

Companies that have implemented the four-day workweek have seen an improvement of 45% in perceived work-life balance in employees.¹³ Employers who can prove to potential employees that they take work-life balance seriously will have the advantage going forward.

3 The four-day workweek increases employee productivity and output

Many believe that the loss of one day from the traditional workweek would hamper productivity. The reality of the situation, however, is that the current method may already be hampering productivity. A recent report states that under the current model, the average employee spends only about three hours a day performing substantive work.¹⁴ Many employees have excess time at work that’s spent on socializing or is simply wasted.

Reducing the amount of time spent at work, it seems, is the best way to increase the amount of work that’s completed in the office. The two most cited examples in this discussion are Perpetual Guardian and Microsoft Japan, both of whose results paint this counterintuitive picture about workplace productivity.

Perpetual Guardian performed a test run of the four-day workweek back in March and April of 2018, and the results were staggering. Even though the employees had 20% less time to complete their work, the company reported an increase in productivity of 20%.¹⁵ The employees also reported an improvement of 24% in their work-life balance. Microsoft

Japan saw similar results in August of 2019, reporting a productivity increase of up to 40% while operating under a four-day workweek schedule.

These compelling studies demonstrate that companies leveraging the four-day workweek can expect to see similar productivity results.¹⁶

4

The four-day workweek saves monthly overhead expenditures

With less time spent in the office, less money is required to keep the office running. Oftentimes, to maintain regular operations under the four-day workweek, companies stagger the days in which employees come into the office or choose a day where the entire company doesn't come into the office at all. This has helped such companies decrease electricity expenditures and even paper usage.

Through their experiments, Perpetual Guardian and Microsoft Japan have observed these same results. Upon implementing the four-day workweek, Perpetual Guardian substantially decreased electricity costs by having 20% fewer employees in the office on any given day.¹⁷ Microsoft Japan was also able to quantify its energy use, which ended up decreasing by 23.1%.¹⁸

Microsoft Japan's savings went beyond just electricity costs. Because of the reduced hours in the workweek, meetings were capped at 30 minutes and other secondary activities were pared back. These changes, at least to some degree, led to a decrease in paper usage of 58.7%.¹⁹

Because of this implementation of the four-day workweek, not only was the employees' time used more efficiently but the companies' resources were as well.

5

The four-day workweek benefits the environment and surrounding community

In recent years, customers and companies alike have taken to attacking the issue of climate change and air quality. Reducing the commute of employees by one day a week can do wonders in improving local air quality, decreasing carbon emissions, and preventing congestion during peak commuting times.

A recent study found that if companies were to cut 10% of employee work time, their carbon footprint would decrease by 14.6%. That ratio only gets better as more time is removed. In fact, with a 25% time reduction from the workweek, the carbon footprint is slashed by 36.6%.²⁰

Additionally, with fewer hours spent in the office, less energy will be consumed by large office buildings. Researchers have found that "state-level carbon emissions and average working hours have a strong, positive relationship."²¹ Essentially, the more hours employees work, the greater the carbon footprint of the company becomes. Some research has quantified the decrease due to the four-day workweek to be about 20%.²²

One common method of implementing the four-day workweek is to stagger the additional "day off" that employees receive. As fewer employees commute to work on any given day, the amount of congestion during peak travel time substantially decreases. This benefits not only the employees of the company but the entire community as well.

Innovate Now

No "one-size-fits-all" solution exists to implement the four-day workweek. One method to compress the workweek may succeed for one company and fail entirely in another. The successful implementation of the four-day workweek will depend on management and employees working together to find the best solution to fit the organization.

It's time to innovate and let the five-day workweek enjoy its retirement. Companies that incorporate the four-day workweek can expect to see similar results to those that have already attempted it, and the benefits are far-reaching and substantial.

Together we can bring about this great innovation.

Business leaders, please speak with your human resources leaders and brainstorm ways you can implement the four-day workweek and reap its benefits. Students, employees, and future employees, speak with your managers and express your support for the four-day workweek. Together we can bring about this great innovation and enjoy its benefits to our lives, our companies, and our environment. 🏠

For tips on how to implement the four-day workweek at your company, check out the recently published article “5 Steps for Adopting a Four-Day Workweek” by Lin Grensing-Pophal at shrm.org.

Layout by Priscilla Wright Barker

Notes

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