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How far-reaching could the four-day workweek become?

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How Far-Reaching Could the Four-Day Workweek Become?

Once seen as an impossible fantasy, the four-day workweek has slowly begun to gain traction in recent years. Though it might still seem like a distant dream for many workers, some forward-thinking companies have already adopted shorter working weeks to keep their employees happier and more productive.

The world's most extensive four-day workweek trial to date — in which 2,900 workers from 61 companies in the U.K. participated from June to December 2022 — has released its full findings. Various four-day-week models, such as Fridays off, staggered, decentralized, and annualized, were followed. The trial found that the four-day workweek significantly increased job satisfaction, improved work-life balance, and reduced employee stress. The results also showed improved product quality and customer service, and a significant reduction in absences and sick days.

These findings support the idea that the four-day workweek is becoming an increasingly attractive proposition for employers looking to reduce costs, retain staff members, and enhance workers' well-being. This could possibly become the new standard, given that more companies are now considering offering their employees four-day weeks permanently — not just on an experimental basis.

Of the 61 companies that took part in the experiment, an impressive 92% are continuing with the four-day week, and 18 of those organizations have declared that it will be a permanent change. The research conducted before and after the trial revealed that 39% of employees experienced lower stress levels and 71% noticed less burnout while working shorter weeks. Anxiety, fatigue, and sleep issues all decreased while physical and mental health significantly improved.

During the trial period, work-life balance improved in many ways. Specifically, it became easier for 54% of employees to balance their jobs with household duties and responsibilities. In addition, satisfaction regarding both financial stability and relationships increased due to people's ability to better manage the amount of time allotted for each activity. Similar experiments in Belgium, Spain, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand have produced equally impressive results.

Although the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of a four-day workweek, the reality is that not all industries are currently able to make the switch. For example, the health care industry must ensure that staff members are always available, given that many medical conditions require around-the-clock care and emergencies can happen at any time. Another issue many employers worry about is how their business could be affected by such a change. Although several prominent worldwide companies, such as Microsoft in Japan and Unilever in New Zealand, have conducted trials for the four-day workweek with positive feedback, many large organizations have been slow to embrace this trend, partially because their complex, inflexible structures can impede progress. Although the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of a four-day workweek, the reality is that not all industries are currently able to make the switch.

So while the evidence in favor of a four-day workweek is strong, some challenges still need to be considered before it can become widely adopted. Organizations need to weigh the pros and cons while considering their staff members' individual needs when deciding whether this would be the best option for them. Fortunately, we're seeing small and midsize businesses take the initiative to experiment with the shortened workweek, since they are

much more adaptable and able to quickly act on ideas sponsored by their CEOs or founders. In addition, leaders at small companies likely encounter less bureaucracy. As a result, they can better anticipate the effect that widespread change will have on their entire organization and more easily implement such changes than large, multinational corporations with less flexible structures can.

Instead of reducing their employees' hours, some companies may soon shift to more creative means of promoting work-life balance, like no-meeting days. I anticipate that changes will occur gradually as more large and small companies begin experimenting with the four-day workweek. While there may be a few bumps in the road, I firmly believe we're on the brink of a significant shift. With so many successful tests conducted around the world, the proof is in the pudding.

For now, the shorter workweek may not be widespread, but there's momentum around the globe to keep the experiment going. Small and midsize businesses are leading the charge, and large companies are beginning to take notice. It's up to everyone — employers, employees, and leaders alike — to continue pushing for change if we want to see more widespread adoption of the four-day workweek.