

The World's Largest Four-Day Workweek Trial Is Going Well, But Don't Jump for Joy Just Yet

HR Brew | Sam Blum | September 27, 2022



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This HR leader says there are many pain points to be aware of when implementing a four-day workweek.

The world's largest four-day workweek experiment reached a milestone last month: the halfway point in its six-month trial. And participants are singing its praises. Some 86% of the 70 participating UK companies said they are "extremely likely" or "likely" to continue with a 32-hour week after the trial's conclusion, according to a survey conducted by 4 Day Week Global, the organization running the pilot program.

Although cutting the week by 20% might seem simple enough, headaches and snags are to be expected, Jo Deal, CHRO at software developer GoTo, explained to HR Brew. Certain industries, especially those centered around customer service and client-based work, might have a more difficult time adapting.

"I think customers expect five-days-a-week support, sometimes seven days a week, 24/7," she said. As the four-day week becomes more viable for employers, HR will have to wade through the hype and consider scheduling, fairness, and business needs, advised Deal.

What's up with the UK trial? The nonprofit 4 Day Week Global launched its UK pilot program in June, in partnership with the think tank Autonomy and researchers from Cambridge University, Boston College, and Oxford University. It involves over 3,300 workers across 70 companies who've been working four days a week with no pay reductions.

Working less hasn't cratered productivity, the survey suggested, as 46% of respondents said that productivity has stayed the same, 34% said it's "improved slightly," and 15% reported a significant increase.

And executives at participating companies have heaped on praise. Claire Daniels, CEO at marketing agency Trio Media, called it "extremely successful," while Sharon Platts, chief people officer for family services organization Outcomes First Group, heralded it as "transformational" in a press release.

Looking beyond the gloss. Pivoting to a four-day week isn't a seamless endeavor, stressed Deal, where employees hold hands under halcyon skies Monday through Thursday. For one, deciding what day of the week to discard might be a tough call, since every employee's needs are different.

"The thing I don't love about the four-day workweek is there's always an assumption that it's going to be Friday," she said. "As an HR leader...how would you fairly do that? Where some people would get Friday, others wouldn't, and some [roles require] 24/7 or 24/5 support. So, it depends on your business."

As employees juggle a range of demands, from childcare to eldercare and beyond, a four-day mandate could prove complicated. "That's the whole challenge of HR in a nutshell. How do you solve everybody's needs?" Deal asked.

She suggested offering flexibility as an alternative to four-day orthodoxy, noting as an example how she might prefer having Tuesday afternoons off so she can take one of her kids to soccer practice.

In the future, Deal doesn't see many firms pivoting from five days to four, but could see new companies starting out on the four-day paradigm. "There will be CEOs like, 'I'm going to do the four-day work [week]'...and they'll build it from scratch. The expectation is that people know what they're getting."

On the contrary, she added, "It's really hard for companies to be a giraffe and then say, 'We're going to become a zebra.'"—SB