
POWER TO THE WORKERS? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF A 4-DAY WORKING WEEK

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ABSTRACT: *The pandemic has resulted in seismic shifts to all aspects of our lives, including views concerning the organisation of work. One impact is the acceleration of workers questioning traditional life stages, of work then retirement, and what they want out of life (Cable & Gratton, 2022) As quality of life is acknowledged as a driving force for many employees leaving their current jobs (Fuller & Kerr, 2022), the implications of a four-day working week are currently being investigated (Miller, 2022). Drawing on a small-scale study at an automotive supplier, based in the North-East of England, this case study will present findings from qualitative interviews conducted with employees who are experiencing a newly established 4-day working week. From the findings presented, discussions will highlight implications of this shift in the organisation of the working week for employees across the organisation. It is intended that the findings and discussions will raise relevant, contemporary questions for the business community more generally.*

KEYWORDS: four-day working week, work-life balance, organisational and employee benefits

The world of work is changing fast. To recruit and retain the best talent in the workplace, organisations are under pressure to put in more effort into understanding the aspirations and desires of their employees. If organisations can succeed in doing this, they will create an environment where employees are more satisfied, and happy employees will be more productive in the workplace (Walker & Fontinha, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, most organisations were forced to operate remotely. The transition to remote working during the pandemic presented the benefits of a more flexible approach to work. This accelerated previous discussions around flexible working from the last couple of decades. If you ask anyone today what is meant by flexible working, the four-day working week is likely to be mentioned. Many organisations are currently trialling this and have seen clear benefits in the recruitment and retaining of talent, rise in staff morale, improved productivity, and reductions in absenteeism. However, the four-day working week may not work for all organisations as this has had practical implications to their operations: availability to their customers, and the perception peers may have of colleagues who opted to work four days in a week as lazy (Boneva *et al.*, 2020). Considering the literature, this paper will present thematically organised findings from a qualitative study conducted at a North-East manufacturing plant where the four-day working week has been trialled.

WHAT IS A FOUR-DAY WEEK?

In most countries, the standard working week is set to be around 36 to 40 hours over five days and this should be reduced to a four-day or 30 to 32 hours a week without a reduction in salary the employees receive (Pang, 2019; Coote *et al.*, 2020). It does not necessarily mean that workers must work four days, but it is more about the general idea that there should be a reduction in the number of hours workers work to be considered “full-time equivalent”. Thus, the four-day-week can be distinguished from part-time work in that the latter entails a reduction in the number of hours of work but with a proportional reduction in the pay received – e.g., four-day’ work for 80% of a full-time pay (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021). It can also be distinguished from a condensed work week, where a full-time equivalent hour (e.g., 40 hours) is conducted in fewer number of days (e.g., four days), where although there is a reduction in the days worked, there is no reduction in the notions of what constitute full-time equivalent hours (Chung, 2022: 552-553).

Benefits of a Four-Day Week

The four-day working week has proven to be beneficial to both employers and employees (Walker & Fontinha, 2019; Pang, 2019; Chung 2022). Well-being has been one of the major contributors towards work related illness due to increasing workload and longer working hours. Four-day working week has improved the well-being of employees (Kelly & Moen, 2021). Employees’ well-being is not just improved because they have more time to recover but it also provides them the opportunity to participate in activities outside of work, such as spending additional time with friends and family. This can also positively impact on the well-being of family members (Chung, 2021), promote community activities (Putnam, 2000), reduce carbon emission (Knight *et al.*, 2013), help individuals to make good decisions (Kallis *et al.*, 2013), reduce inequalities in the labour market (Coote *et al.*, 2020), increase social cohesion (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021) and values more non-work activities as individuals did during the pandemic (Chung *et al.*, 2020; ONS, 2020).



Figure 1: Benefits of a four-day week (Walker & Fontinha, 2019)

Figure 1 highlights the results of a survey conducted by Walker and Fontinha (2019) in relation to the benefits of a four-day week.

Challenges of a Four-Day Week

Despite the benefits highlighted earlier in this case study, the four-day week has experienced some resistance as it could impact on the operations of certain organisations. A reduction on working days or hours and availability of employees can impact on organisations that would need to provide customer service beyond standard business hours (Walker & Fontinha, 2019). Staffing such shifts can be incredibly challenging for employers. Employees would also be reluctant to opt for a four-day working week if they feel employers may not be supportive of such a decision as this might impact on the operational needs (Kelly, *et al.*, 2020).

This clearly indicates that any shift in working practice would need to be well planned and clearly thought out. This would depend on the sector the organisation is in and the type of work which needs to be conducted. Once size fits all approach might have consequences to both employers and employees.

METHODOLOGY

Framed as qualitative in its approach, this study aims to gain insight into the experiences of workers involved with the trialling of a four-day working week at one company. Data was collected for the qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) through unstructured interviews with 5 employees who gave their informed consent for the interview data to be used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thematic analysis was undertaken to interpret and construct key themes which emerged from data collected (Kuckartz, 2014).

The company (a car parts manufacturer) started a 4-day working week in October 2020, initially as a trial, although as it became more popular with employees it is now widespread. Employees who work in the offices and in the factory can sign up for this, with employees choosing to work either Monday to Thursday (8.30-6 p.m. with a 30-minute break) or Tuesday to Friday (same hours). The company prefers employees come to the office for 2 out of the 4 days (they place a great deal of importance of team spirit). Those who work in the factory must be on site for 4 days due to the nature of their work. The working week used to be 37.5 hours and has reduced to 36 hours with the new working schedule. Despite the reduction in hours, there is evidence of increased productivity and turnover has substantially decreased. Across the workforce, it is reported that the organisation is a more attractive place to work due to the new arrangement and the overall benefits for well-being.

For this study, 5 employees were interviewed: Distribution Manager (Interviewee A), Warehouse Manager (Interviewee B), Logistics Co-ordinator (Interviewee C), Warehouse Operative (Interviewee D), Administrative Assistant (Interviewee E). Whilst the interviews were conducted with each of the employees listed above, greater emphasis was placed on Interviewee A due to the professional experience and depth of participation of this individual in the initiative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the findings analysed, seven key benefits were identified; better retention, ease of recruiting new staff, reduced stress, more time with family, increased employee engagement, increased productivity and fewer sick days recorded. Resonating with the work of Walker and Fontinha (2019), the findings from this study suggest that the introduction of the four-day working week is improving the working environment of the organisation; in addition to the research undertaken elsewhere concerning quality of life for individuals (Fuller & Kerr, 2022).

Better Retention Due to the Flexibility it Offers

Interviewee A was positive about the flexibility that was offered by the four-day working week:

“Since we started the four-day working week in October 2020 staff retention has been great. We haven’t had anyone want to leave which is unusual in our line of work. I think it’s made a big difference to our retention statistics as morale is much better. We are a place where people want to work.”

This point was also made by Interviewee B who stated that it was much more straightforward to retain warehousing staff:

“We used to have a lot of trouble keeping hold of staff for the warehouse. Its hard work and the pay isn’t great but since we’ve started the four-day week we haven’t had anyone leave.”

Easier to Recruit Talent

Interviewee A articulated that staff recruitment is now much easier than it used to be:

“I’ve found it much easier to get the staff I need. I used to rely on word of mouth and agencies but now I get prospective employees contacting me directly asking if there is any work. I’ve never experienced this in my 35 years working in manufacturing, at least not at this extent. I probably get 3 or 4 emails per week”

Interviewee B also stated that recruitment was now simpler than previously as the company now had a reputation for innovation and focusing on work-life balance:

“If I’m honest I don’t find it difficult at all now. We recently received a new contract, and I needed ten lads through the door in about a week. I had over 150 applicants for that. In the past I had to use agencies.”

Less Stress

Interviewee A asserted that he felt less stress when working a four-day week:

“I know it’s not just me. All the lads agree that it’s a much more relaxed and less stressful place to work. We know we have got 4 days of work with 3 days off every week. That’s a great feeling on a Monday morning. Although the working day is a bit longer than before that extra day off makes such a difference.”

Both Interviewees C and D also talked about the work now being more enjoyable, and the atmosphere being more positive than it was previously. Interviewee E described the change in the working week as a “game changer”. These findings provide further evidence to the work of Kelly and Moen (2021) who write about positive wellbeing owing to the four-day working week.

More Time with Family

Interviewee A added that the initiative afforded him more time with his family which he really enjoyed:

“One of the best perks is taking my daughter to school on Fridays. I was only able to do this before when I was on holiday. Having that one-to-one time with (daughter’s name) is something to look forward to every week. I’ve even started cooking for my wife although the feedback is still out on that!”

Interviewees B, C, D and E all mentioned more time with family as being one of the most attractive aspects of the four-day working week, echoing the work of Chung (2021).

More Engaged Employees

Engagement was another perceived benefit with Interviewee A stating that:

“I have noticed that the lads are more relaxed, happier and seem to be more engaged in their work. They are a good bunch of lads, but this initiative has really added an extra bit of motivation. On occasions they did complain in the past, often for minor issues. I haven’t noticed much of that recently”.

Interviewee C concurred when elucidating that he feels more motivated and engaged to do a better job.

Increased Productivity

Interviewee A was also impressed that productivity had improved:

“One of the gaffers (managers) told me productivity is up 22.5% this year. I found that quite surprising as we are actually working fewer hours than when we worked 5 days. But after thinking about it, it made a lot of sense. We feel more motivated than before. That’s the main reason I think.”

Similarly, Interviewee B commented that:

“The warehouse has never been this efficient. The pickers (warehouse operatives) are all working to capacity. The carrot of the extra day off really pushes them on.”

Fewer Sick Days

Finally, similar to the findings from Walker and Fontinha’s (2019) study, Interviewee A stated that the number of sick days had decreased:

“We had a bit of a problem with lads having a day off on the sick. This was usually before or after a weekend. This has dramatically decreased as I think the lads know they now have that extra day off anyway. That’s another reason why productivity is better. The number of sick days is really low nowadays.”

Interviewee B also mentioned sickness, stating there had only been “a handful” of sick days in the past 6 months and this was “mainly due to Covid”.

Similarly, to discussions within the literature (Walker & Fontinha, 2019), although the findings indicate the four-day working week is extremely popular and effective, several issues were discovered. These were feeling as though the days were long, Fridays being a popular day to take off, and parity of time off.

Long Days

For some, days can be long, and they are not as productive towards the end of a longer day. Interviewee A stated that the longer working day (8.30-6.00 p.m. with a 30-minute break) was not for everyone:

“I think a few of the older lads find the shorter breaks and longer days a bit difficult as they are not used to it. Not everyone has mentioned it, but I think it’s fair to point out some of them get tired.”

Interviewee B mentioned a similar point when stating:

“Wednesdays and Thursdays can be a bit knacker (tiring), especially if you are doing heavy lifting all day.”

Fridays are Popular

Another issue mentioned was the importance of balancing out those who take off Fridays (the most popular day) as this can lead to understaffing and customer complaints, resonating with the argument made by Boneva *et al.* (2020).

Balancing those who get Fridays off was important as discussed by Interviewee A:

“The biggest problem we have had is Fridays. Everyone wants Fridays but it’s not possible. We still need to staff them to deal with customers. Those who work on Fridays get Mondays off instead. We have started doing a rota, so everyone has a fair schedule. It seems to be working well so far.”

The same point was made by Interviewee B who discussed the importance of “keeping it fair and transparent.”

Parity

Interestingly, Interviewee A also stated that not everyone wants to participate in the 4-day working week, mentioning those with children, who may prefer not to due to childcare costs. These employees work as usual and can feel excluded and resentful as they work 1.5 hours per week more for the same salary. Therefore, the final issue was one of parity with certain employees not participating in the initiative and others having issues with childcare:

“There have been a few moans from people who are used to working Monday to Friday. I think it’s taken them a bit by surprise. Some just like to finish at the same time every day and they are not happy they have to work more hours for the same pay. I’ve also heard a few of the female employees complain that they needed to pay for a childminder due to the new late finish times, but these are few and far between” (Interviewee A)

However, Interviewee B did not discover these issues as everyone who worked in the warehouse wanted to work a four-day week.

CONCLUSIONS

As the organisation of work undergoes significant consideration, debate, and investigation (Miller, 2022), this small-scale qualitative study provides further evidence of workers’ experiences of a four-day working week. This case study has presented findings from unstructured interviews conducted with employees who are based at an automotive supplier, based in the North-East of England. Although there are important benefits of the four-day working week for employees and organisations, there are also areas which require further investigation in terms of challenges posed concerning employee fatigue, business continuity and parity. As the landscape of work continues to shift, this study provides evidence of one way in which employees are taking opportunities to not only consider what work means to them, but also experience for themselves the implications of an altered working week. Such evidence, coupled with literature emerging about the altered organisation of work, is enabling discussions to progress about our conceptions of work in a contemporary environment which is categories by its volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

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