



Nathalie Lees

The Big Idea Series / Rethinking “Back to Work”

A Guide to Implementing the 4-Day Workweek

by Ashley Whillans and Charlotte Lockhart

September 28, 2021

Summary As organizations continue to explore a variety of flexible work options

Summary: As organizations continue to explore a variety of flexible work options, one promising avenue is the four-day workweek: The standard 40 hours per week is reduced to 32 hours, with the same pay and the same productivity expectations. Research suggests... [more](#)

In June of this year, Kickstarter became the latest in a string of organizations to announce they are experimenting with a four-day workweek. Its employees will be working 32 rather than 40 hours per week, while being expected to achieve the same productivity levels and earning the same pay. Though some recent studies on the efficacy of the four-day week have been overblown in the media, research suggests that reducing work hours can decrease employee stress and improve well-being without impacting productivity — but only when implemented effectively.

So, what does that look like? One of us (Ashley) is an academic researcher focused on time, money, and happiness, and the other (Charlotte) is CEO of a global nonprofit that funds research on four-day workweek practices and the future of work. We've created a six-step guide to help organizations plan and roll out a reduction in working hours. While our focus in this piece is on office-centric knowledge jobs, we believe our recommendations can apply to any company where adjusting work hours is possible.

[**Step 1**]

Shift Your Mindset

Psychological research suggests that most of us are “medium maximizers” — we tend to focus on objective, easily quantifiable success metrics such as hours worked, rather than more qualitative metrics such as productivity or well-being. As a result, many companies use immediate responsiveness and time at the office as proxies for employees' commitment levels, even when those measures seldom correspond to actual value added to the organization.

For a four-day workweek to be successful, leaders must shift their mindsets to value actual productivity, not just hours worked. They must ensure that employees aren't worried they will be

penalized for prioritizing work-life balance, and that starts with modeling a healthier work-life balance themselves. Ashley's research has found that explicitly framing a reduced-work initiative as a companywide policy rather than an informal or optional project can go a long way in encouraging this critical mindset shift.

In addition, leaders must embrace the uncertainty that comes with trying out a new initiative. The first mistake we've seen many managers make is attempting to anticipate all possible problems and eliminate all possible sources of risk before the pilot even begins. While planning is important, falling into decision inertia helps no one — and real problem solving is only possible through trial and error, not in closed-door conversations among leadership.

This also means accepting that some people won't like the changes and some might even quit as a result. That's OK. Managers should openly acknowledge that the new plan might not work for everyone. Remember: When one employee leaves, it creates room for others who buy into the new culture, ultimately strengthening the team and the business.

[**Step 2**]

Define Your Goals and Metrics

Once you've decided that your organization is ready to make a change, it's time to start planning. Both employees and leaders should be actively involved in a number of critical decisions. One company Charlotte and her team worked with formed an employee-driven subcommittee to spearhead the rollout of its reduced-hours program. The small working group (lovingly nicknamed the "pessimist committee") met for an hour each day for six weeks to discuss potential problems before launching the pilot.

Based on this and other case studies, here are some questions that we've found can be helpful to consider:

Questions for employees:

- Should we work four eight-hour days, or reduced hours on five days?
- Which days or hours should we take off?
- How can we keep the change from negatively impacting our clients, customers, and other stakeholders?
- What steps can we take to increase our productivity?
- How will we share our ideas for process improvements with one another?

Questions for leadership:

- How will the organization measure productivity?
- What support will employees need to make this pilot a success?
- How long should the organization run this pilot?
- Are there any legal concerns we should be aware of?

As a part of these conversations, it will be critical to consider how you will measure the success of the program in relation to the goals you identify. That includes outcomes you hope will change,

such as employee happiness, as well as outcomes you hope *won't* change, such as client satisfaction and productivity.

[Step 3]

Communicate Internally and Externally

Next, think through your communication plan. There are a number of concerns that are likely on the minds of internal and external stakeholders, and it's important for leaders to be proactive in addressing them.

Internally, the biggest questions will probably be around how the change will affect people's jobs. Be clear about your reasons for trying out the four-day workweek, and assure your employees

that they will not be laid off, experience a pay cut, or lose out on other benefits like paid vacation.

In addition, it's likely that reducing work hours will necessitate changes to some internal processes and norms, so it's important to discuss that up front. For example, at one organization we worked with, employees introduced weekly 30-minute meetings to cover everything that had previously been discussed in less efficient, ad hoc meetings, which reduced interruptions and thus increased "heads-down" work time. In fact, Ashley's recent research found that the pandemic made some knowledge workers more efficient, in part because it forced them to be more deliberate in scheduling collaboration time.

Every organization is different, so encourage conversations about how to get more done in less time — whether that's by implementing new tools, eliminating unnecessary meetings, or making existing meetings more effective.

The same is true externally. Many companies worry what their clients will think if they reduce hours, but those worries can often be assuaged with a simple conversation. Identify which

customers, partners, or other stakeholders might be affected, and work with the appropriate internal representatives to ensure the scheduling change is communicated clearly.

In many cases, you'll be surprised by how receptive the external party is. During one of Ashley's studies, employees engaged in a time-blocking experiment that made them unavailable to everyone, including their clients, for hours or even full days at a time. Despite managers' fears, both the employees and their clients reported higher levels of satisfaction than before the shift.

[**Step 4**]

Run a Pilot

You've decided, you've planned, you've communicated — it's time to act! Remember that in the pilot stage, the goal isn't to get everything right from the start, but rather to identify the tools and processes your organization needs to make reduced work hours possible. You will likely need at least a few months to implement a full-scale pilot study. During this time, problems will arise. Try your best to address them as they happen, knowing that full-scale solutions might have to wait until the pilot is over. View any issues not as indicators of failure, but as opportunities to improve and fine-tune your implementation plan. Some questions we've seen come out of pilot programs include:

- What are the boundaries I need to put in place for myself and my team?
- What assistance do I need from leadership to accomplish a reduced work schedule?
- What will happen to team activities like “cake Fridays”?

Creating an environment in which people feel safe asking these questions — yes, even about your workplace dessert rituals — is an essential ingredient for a successful pilot. Trust that your

employees are doing their best to make good decisions, and support them as they try out different methods to increase their effectiveness.

[**Step 5**]

Assess the Pilot

Once the pilot is complete, there are a number of ways you can analyze the results. First, there are both qualitative and quantitative metrics that can help you understand how the pilot impacted employee well-being. Qualitatively, group interviews can provide insight into employees' experiences with the four-day workweek, and more-formalized job satisfaction surveys can identify trends and changes in self-reported levels of stress, work-

life balance, and quality of life. Quantitatively, there are other metrics you can look at. For example, did employees take fewer sick days during the pilot? If so, this might suggest that employees felt less burned out.

As far as productivity, the relevant metrics will depend on the team. On sales teams, it might make sense to focus on the number of deals created, conversion rates, or average closing times. On creative teams, you can monitor subjective areas of performance, such as the quality of internal and external content, by conducting 360-degree reviews or collecting data on the number of click-throughs for online posts.

Watch HBR editor Ramsey Khabbaz's conversation with Ashley Whillans on the 4-day workweek:



harvard_business_review
2.5M followers

[View Profile](#)





[View More on Instagram](#)

1,262 likes

Add a comment...

Data can also help you understand how employees are optimizing their work: Are they working more overtime, cutting meetings, taking fewer breaks, working faster? You don't want people sacrificing breaks, rushing their work, or being on the clock longer, so if you see evidence of these behaviors, you might need to have conversations about reducing individual workloads or finding ways to make the work itself more efficient.

Most importantly, there is no need to reinvent the analysis wheel. While the specifics will be unique to your organization, there are numerous white papers, reports, and case studies you can look to for inspiration when making sense of your results. It can also be beneficial to partner with an academic or other specialist who can help you identify the most useful metrics and crunch the numbers.

[Step 6]

Scale Up – but Don't Stop Iterating

After you've evaluated the pilot and addressed any issues that emerged, take steps to make the schedule change permanent. Leaders will need to work across the organization to embed new practices into their workplace culture, ensure that people don't slip into old habits (no emailing on days off!), and remain focused on productivity — not hours worked — as the metric of success.

At the same time, it's critical to track success metrics over the long term and to adapt your processes according to what they show. One effective strategy is to maintain employee-led working sessions and focus groups even after the initial pilot results are analyzed, to help identify and overcome ongoing challenges. For example, after rolling out a four-day workweek, one company Charlotte worked with discovered that employees were suffering from a challenge known as the mere urgency effect: They became overly focused on urgent but less important tasks at the cost of

long-term, more important ones. Based on this insight, the company scheduled monthly meetings to discuss long-term strategic plans, helping to keep priorities aligned.

The company also found that existing incentive structures were not as effective with the new working schedule. Specifically, sales teams, which were rewarded based on the number of deals closed, began prioritizing smaller accounts in order to close more deals in less time, rather than focusing on larger, strategically important accounts. As a result, the company reorganized the sales teams into dedicated small and large account specialists to ensure that equal resources would be spent on both areas of the business.

Of course, it's not just about productivity. Another company Charlotte worked with found that employees had begun working

10-hour days to fit work into a four-day week, significantly impacting job satisfaction and well-being. To address this, the leadership team restructured some divisions to make sure employees were focused on the right tasks, created new positions to focus on tasks outside the scope of existing teams, and used temporary contracts to ease the burden on full-time employees during rush periods.

Every organization will uncover its own challenges when it comes to scaling up a reduced work hours policy. Constant experimentation and iteration will be essential to any successful long-term rollout.

...

Workplace norms have fundamentally shifted over the last year and a half. Today we find ourselves in a liminal period: We now have the chance to remake our models of work before things go back to the way they were — and that’s an opportunity leaders must not squander. While no change comes easily, leaders willing to embrace models like the four-day workweek will find the experimentation well worth the effort.

Ashley Whillans is an assistant professor in the negotiations, organizations, and markets unit at the Harvard Business School School and teaches the “Negotiations” and “Motivation and Incentives” courses to MBA students and executives. Her research focuses on the role of noncash rewards on engagement and the links between time, money, and happiness. She is the author of *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time & Live a Happier Life* (Harvard Business Review, 2020).

Charlotte Lockhart is a business advocate, investor, and philanthropist with more than 25 years of experience in multiple industries both locally and overseas. As CEO for the 4 Day Week Global campaign, she promotes the benefits of a productivity-focused and reduced-hour workplace. She is on the board of the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford University and the advisory boards of the U.S. campaign and the Ireland campaign for the four-day week.