

ON-SITE WORKFORCE SHORTENING THE WEEK IN FAVOUR OF FLEXIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency of discussing more flexible working models like a four-day workweek. Many employees with social anxiety still fear staying longer in their office premises but do not want to reduce their jobs and professional activities. For them, reducing the number of days is about working smarter within a more flexible schedule. Is working four days a week but earning a full salary: a dream or reality for many employees? From each participating country (Austria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia), 200 on-site employees participated in this study. The research methodology includes quantitative data using WhatsApp as a research tool. The obtained data shows that a four-day work week is having a moment with a different attitude to a five-day working week. The workers ready to accept it are most frequent in Austria, followed by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In all countries, older employees preferring a shorter workweek prevail over younger ones, as well as men over women.

Keywords: Flexibility; four-day work week; pay cut; Austria; Czech Republic; Slovakia

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the necessity to limit face-to-face contact, the Covid-19 pandemic has been proclaimed a transformer that boosted the adoption of various flexible work formats. The most popular one is e-working. Previous investigations found that it grew slowly in the European Union before Covid-19 (Milasi et al., 2021). Many organizations and policymakers have changed their interest because it brings

flexibility into the workplace. E-working has become a norm (López-Igual & Rodríguez-Modroño, 2020). Global unemployment rises (ILO, 2021), but we see an increase in on-site and face-to-display work combinations (Apollo Technical, 2022; Beno & Hvorecky, 2021a; Microsoft, 2022).

A four-day working week is another tool to limit direct contact. Four-day week formats vary across organizations (Laker & Roulet, 2019), and

so is its definition. We understand a four-day week as a working model for the employees to work for four days instead of five (with fitted full-time working hours into four days) while still being paid full-time. In the past, there was a significant reduction in work time worldwide. Progress slowed down in the second half of the 20th century (Huberman & Mins, 2007). Giattino et al. (2020) further adds that in the last 150 years, working hours have substantially decreased in today's most prosperous countries.

Generally, the pandemic was the crucial event that facilitated considerations of more flexibility (Beno & Hvorecky, 2021b) and experimentation regarding when and where the work is finished. Modern technology is their driver (Gilligan et al., 2019). In this way, the pandemic has brought the digital divide among employees (Lai & Widmar, 2020; Litchfield et al., 2021). As a result, employers and employees understand the pandemic's impact on their business, culture, and workplace. As some professions must be executed at premises together with a particular group of collaborators, responding accordingly with greater flexibility could be a great win-win option.

As a result, the study objective was to examine the acceptability of a four-day week - working for four days a week but being paid a full-time salary or not - in three selected countries (Austria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) in January 2022 with a sole research question addressed to the on-site employees, namely: Can you imagine a *four-day-week* with a *full salary* at *your* current employer? The question intentionally allows a few slightly different interpretations. In Discussion, we explain why the differences among them do not affect our results considerably.

The structure of this paperwork is as follows: defining the four-day working model, methodology of research, analysis of obtained data, discussions and summary findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology, education, continuing economic growth, social changes, wars, pandemics and others influence the working environment. Demand for working week reductions is increasing (Coote et al., 2010; De Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017; Harper & Martin, 2018; NewEconomicsFoundation, 2020; Stronge et al., 2019). According to data from the past, there

were several periods of sharp and identifiable declines in working hours (Coote et al., 2021; de Jong, 2015; OECD, 2021; Whaples, 2001). In the surveyed countries, including the European Union, there has been an apparent working hour reduction over the industrial revolution (Eurostat, 2022a). Tsoukatou (2019, p. 16) emphasizes that "reducing the working week leads to an increase in employment."

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations started experimenting with various formats, including a four-day working model, e.g., in the UK (Jones, 2021), across Europe (Joly, 2022), and even in Central and Eastern Europe (Jedrzejak, 2022). This is very interesting to emphasize because, in countries where the culture of management is based on control rather than on trust, e.g., France, Spain, Italy, Greece, and the former Eastern Bloc, it seems more logical to manage employees' productivity in offices and workrooms (Beño, 2021, p. 30).

As we emerge from the pandemic, more and more employees learn that working outside the office premises works, and more and more organizations recognize the quality of life, reduced hours, and flexibility as a modern frontier for competition. Some aspects of the five-day working week seem to have become obsolete. Several companies worldwide have successfully adapted to a four-day week. This workweek model appears to be slowly gaining traction in surveyed countries, too (Glösel, 2022; Rauch, 2020; Špačková, 2021; Stanko, 2022). Nevertheless, in the surveyed countries, the topic is still less investigated than it deserves. Kroupa et al. (2020) emphasize that reduced working hours are always seen as a benefit for the workforce but not for employers. The authors further calculated a 0.41% annual reduction in GDP over a 20-year horizon, especially in the manufacturing sector (0.83%). There is a risk of increased overtime and illegal overtime (Kroupa et al., 2020). Rauch (2020) highlights that in the last ten years, the number of sick leaves in Austria has increased by more than 30%. According to this author, the main problem seems to be an intellectual hurdle in a long period of experience with the five-day workweek.

A four-day working week can be explained as a condensation or an adaptation of working hours into fewer days. In a workplace with a five-day workweek and an eight-hour daily work time, it

may, for example, mean working four days per 10 hours (with the same total of 40 hours as before) or 32 hours (to work one day less). Hodge and Tellier (1975) explained the four-day week as a social innovation and a management tactic. Fleuter (1975) described this model as a feasible reaction to specific current issues and a part of an extended tendency towards increased leisure and freedom. Nowadays, this working model is gaining traction across the globe. There are already various attempts and experiments worldwide to reduce the working time that present positive benefits instead of significant negative economic consequences (Coote et al., 2021; Gatlin-Keener & Lunsford, 2019; Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Henley Business School, 2019; Perpetual Guardian, 2019;). Additionally, several countries and policymakers support it (Arora, 2021; Bateman, 2022; Christopher, 2020; Flanagan, 2022; Fraser, 2021; Gilchrist, 2020; Kaplan, 2021; Yashiro, 2021).

Hyatt and Coslor (2018) concluded that there was a growth in employees' productivity and happiness of the benefits of a 4/10 workweek. It indicates that introducing the working week is a win-win strategy for both the organization and the workforce (Andrews, 2016; Grosse, 2018; Harika & Pasha, 2019; Hyatt & Coslor, 2018; Osterstock et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the benefits come along with some drawbacks (Gatlin-Keener & Lunsford, 2019; Harika & Pasha, 2019; Osterstock et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

An ad hoc questionnaire was conducted to determine how workplace flexibility is researched and discussed in real workplace environments in various countries with on-site employees.

WhatsApp was used to gather the responses in our investigation because it provides a viable alternative for surveying and panel data collection (Fei et al., 2020). We recruited respondents through snowball sampling (a non-probability sampling technique) using existing social connections and through word of mouth. It means that the first contacts spread the news to the next ones (primarily by WhatsApp). They were then asked to do the same until the sample size was fulfilled.

Participants were individuals over the age of 18. We surveyed only on-site workers (a total of 600 respondents). We communicated with the respondents through text messages and voice calls. For this reason, the sample does not represent the on-site population. We aimed to conduct just a pilot study. Its primary purpose was to outline the situation in the studied countries because – as the reduced number of local papers and other sources indicates – the real situation must be mapped first. The same idea guided us in the questionnaire design as well.

An ad hoc questionnaire was developed for data collection with the closed-ended question with two options: *Yes* and *No*. Three demographic variables were added to the instrument, namely: sex, age, and country of living. A single-answer question was asked of on-site respondents:

- *Can you imagine a four-day week with a full salary at your current employer?*

The data for the investigation consists of a sample of 200 on-site employees from each surveyed country. The sample is made up of females and males in different age ranges from surveyed countries, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Gender and age demographic structures of respondents

Country	Gender		Age groups		
	Male	Female	18-34	35-49	50+
Austria	98	102	82	65	53
Czech Republic	117	83	59	71	70
Slovakia	111	89	59	69	72

Source: Authors' work.

All participants were informed about the investigation's aim, with participation entirely voluntary. The survey was anonymous. The descriptive statistics method was used to analyse and describe the basic features of the data in developing results and drawing conclusions.

RESULTS

With many companies worldwide proposing a 4-day workweek (4DW) for employees, our data demonstrates that almost 54% (322 out of 600) agree to work four days a week while keeping their full salary at their current employer, 278 disagree. Because our sample is not a random one and the proportion is close to one half, one can hardly draw serious conclusions from it.

Table 2: Acceptance differences between the surveyed countries

Country	In favour (n)	Out of 200 (%)
Austria	130	65.0%
Czech Republic	104	52.0%
Slovakia	88	44.0%

Source: authors' work.

In spite of that, the differences become finer when using more subtle distinctions. The first one, as demonstrated in Table 2, shows the acceptance difference between surveyed countries.

Two hundred respondents represent each country. Accordingly, the proportions show significant differences between them. Austria is the leader in a positive attitude, while Slovakia keeps lagging. The second compares gender perceptions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Positive (i.e., *Yes*) responses by males and females per country (n)

Country	Male	Female
Austria	76	54
Czech Republic	65	39
Slovakia	52	36

Source: authors' work.

In all countries, men are more in favour of the 4DW than women. As the numbers of gender representatives vary slightly, Table 4 shows the proportions of persons with positive and negative attitudes in percentages.

Table 4: The proportion of positive attitudes according to respondent's gender

Country	Male (n)	Female (n)	Male in favour (n,%)	Female in favour (n,%)
Austria	98	102	76 (77.6%)	54 (52.9%)
Czech Republic	117	83	65 (55.6%)	39 (47.0%)
Slovakia	111	89	52 (46.8%)	36 (40.4%)

Source: authors' work.

A statistically significant difference was found between Austrian men and women in the 4DW ($\chi^2 = 13.31$, $p = -0.258$, $p < 0.05$) as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.306 ^a	1	0.000		
Continuity Correction ^b	12.246	1	0.000		
Likelihood Ratio	13.553	1	0.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.000	0.000
N of Valid Cases	200				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 34.30.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					
Symmetric Measures					
		Value	Approximate Significance		
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-0.258	0.000		
	Cramer's V	0.258	0.000		
	Contingency Coefficient	0.250	0.000		
N of Valid Cases		200			

Figure 1: Chi-Square Tests (AT).

Source: authors' work.

Women statistically significantly more often disagree with the shortening of the working week than men. A similar statistically significant difference was found between Czech and Slovak men and women in terms of the 4DW (CZ: $\chi^2 =$

1.43, $p = 0.293$, $p < 0.05$, SK: $\chi^2 = 0.82$, $p = 0.446$, $p < 0.05$) as shown on Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.428 ^a	1	0.232		
Continuity Correction ^b	1.105	1	0.293		
Likelihood Ratio	1.429	1	0.232		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.253	0.147
N of Valid Cases	200				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 39.84.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

Figure 2: Chi-Square Tests (CZ).

Source: authors' work.

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.820 ^a	1	0.365		
Continuity Correction ^b	0.581	1	0.446		
Likelihood Ratio	0.822	1	0.365		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.392	0.223
N of Valid Cases	200				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 39.16.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

Figure 3: Chi-Square Tests (CZ).

Source: authors' work.

Overall, both gender in all surveyed countries found a statistically significant difference in the 4DW ($\chi^2 = 8.80$, $p = -0.121$, $p < 0.05$) as demonstrated in Figure 4. Women statistically significantly more often disagree with the

shortening of the working week than men. According to the phi coefficient, the dependence is weak.

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.798 ^a	1	0.003		
Continuity Correction ^b	8.317	1	0.004		
Likelihood Ratio	8.811	1	0.003		
Fisher's Exact Test				0.003	0.002
N of Valid Cases	600				
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 126.95.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					
Symmetric Measures					
		Value	Approximate Significance		
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-0.121	0.003		
	Cramer's V	0.121	0.003		
	Contingency Coefficient	0.120	0.003		
N of Valid Cases		600			

Figure 4: Chi-Square Tests (AT-CZ-SK).

Source: authors' work.

Table 5 shows that differences also appear among age groups-- both internationally and

within all countries. The younger persons are less prepared to accept a four-day workweek.

Table 5: Differences in acceptance of 4DW among age groups.

Country	Age group (n)			Out of them agree with 4DW		
	18-34	35-49	50+	18-34	35-49	50+
Austria	82	65	53	40 (48.8%)	42 (64.6%)	48 (90.6%)
Czechia	59	71	70	14 (23.7%)	34 (47.9%)	56 (80.0%)
Slovakia	59	69	72	7 (11.9%)	37 (53.6%)	44 (61.1%)

Source: authors' work.

Further analysis demonstrates that in Austria, a statistically significant difference was found between the age categories in terms of a pay cut. Workers over the age of 50 statistically significantly agree with a reduction in pay than people at a younger age. The strength of relationship between age and the view of wage cuts is very strong ($p=0.936$). Czech and Slovak on-site workforce over the age of 50 statistically significantly agrees with a reduction in pay than the younger generation. The relationship between age and the view of wage cuts is very strong ($p=1.000$). Overall, all the data of all surveyed countries demonstrates that the workforce over 50 statistically significantly agrees with lower pay than younger people. But the Slovak workforce, especially in groups of 18-34 employees (Cramer's $V=0.424$, moderately strong), is generally against a pay cut. The relationship between age and the view of a pay cut is very strong ($p=0.979$). Unsurprisingly, women are much more likely to oppose pay cuts than men ($p=1.000$). Men and women aged 18-34 are statistically significantly more likely to disagree with the 4-day working week than other age groups. Men and women over the age of 50 agree more significantly with the 4DW.

DISCUSSION

As the economy transforms due to various recent factors, especially Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, so do the rules of working models and salaries. During the previous century, the number of working hours per week declined substantially. In recent years, the trend has considerably slowed down, if not almost halted (Bangham, 2020; OECD, 2022a). In addition, the number of weekly hours varies greatly (Eurostat, 2022b; OECD, 2022b). For this reason, our research question was formulated in the simplest possible way, not addressing any specific format. Presuming a prevailing 40-hour

workweek in the studied countries, it allows at least two basic interpretations:

- Four-day-week with a full salary with the same number of working hours (4 x 10),
- Four-day-week with a full salary with a reduced number of working hours (e.g., 4 x 8 or 4 x 9).

Due to insufficient discussions among experts and in the media, we cannot take any of them as an "incoming standard." It implies that the above findings are based on the respondents' individual interpretations, reflect their current position and type of work, and are not affected by external factors. In general, the public is not very familiar with these external factors and their subtle differences. It is primarily because 4DW models have not yet attracted significant public and political attention in the discussed countries. Flexible working conditions are among the highest employee desires (Wood, 2022). As our above results demonstrate, a wide variety of employees' opinions largely differ among gender and age groups.

The first one addresses differences among countries. The findings of Walker and Fontinha (2021) state that 69% of the workforce in the UK like to work fewer days for the same pay. This is partly in the vein of received data from Austrian employees – 65% of them are of the same opinion. But it conflicts with the data of the Czech Republic (52%) and Slovakia (44%). We agree with the recent research "Four Better or Four Worse?" that the world of work is rapidly transforming (Walker & Fontinha, 2019) and that 4DW won't work for all. Evidently, the Austrian employers willing to shorten their workweek are in a better starting position than those of the remaining two countries.

For this reason, further investigations must be conducted. They should address the positions of men and women. In our findings, women

statistically significantly more often disagree with the shortening of the working week than men. This is an interesting finding because, according to Reynolds (2003, p. 12), “on average, American men and women would like to shorten their weekly work schedule by about five hours.” In Australia, 33.1% of men and 41.1% of women in full-time employment would rather reduce working hours (Breunig et al., 2015). Similarly, workers over 50 years of age statistically significantly agree with a reduction in pay compared to people at their younger age. But Hamermesh and Biddle (2022) results highlight that young employees are more likely to be on a four-day workweek. The reasons behind the difference deserve to be researched. Likely, people consider different values, which then influence their preferences. Research which would list these values and allow their ranking in relationship to 4DW might bring a clearer view to it. In addition, it could offer suggestions to employers on whether to shorten the workweek, to whom and in which format.

Similarly, differences between models should be discussed, in their relationship to peoples' professions. The issue here must be reducing the multiple interpretations specified above. Many of us confuse the 4DW with compressed hours. To achieve the desired effects, a 4DW should consist of working four days for 10 hours (total 40 hours) or 32 hours where the workforce simply works one less day out of the working week without making up the difference in hours as stated in this study. Evidently, working for compressed hours brings other sets of advantages and disadvantages compared to 4DW with shorter working time. The preferences deserve a further study in the future.

Should we adopt the 4DW? Soojung-Kim Pang (2020) presented in his book “Shorter” a myriad of case studies of companies from various worldwide industries that have implemented 4DW. We believe that today's workforce is more open to changing the norm of the 40-hour workweek because of their experience during the pandemic. As indicated in this study, norms are being overturned and questioned globally and nationally. As Brown (1972, p. 114) states, the 4DW is still not understood by many who will grow to appreciate its content, value, and implications soon. This study confirms his statement.

One can guess that most employers will hesitate to experiment with working weeks quickly. In addition to the pandemic, the war in Ukraine brings new instability to markets. In such hazy times, transformations could unbalance their fragile steadiness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Workplace norms have fundamentally changed and shifted over recent years. 4DW will stimulate different economic sectors, increase innovation, protect jobs at risk, keep wages, reduce inequality, and improve work-life balance. Based on Bencsik et al.'s (2020) data, the biggest stress for employees is maintaining a work-life balance. At the same time, employers also need their businesses' steadiness. As demonstrated above, forecasting even a short-term development is difficult today.

It implies that the movement towards shorter working hours will differ nationally and globally and probably will not accelerate – particularly in the studied countries. Quantitative data was used to answer the question: Would the on-site employees accept a four-day workweek with a full salary?

The available data from this study indicates that the answer to that research question is yes. Austrian workers appear to have a significant appetite for reductions in working time compared to Czech and Slovak workers. All women statistically significantly more often disagree with the shortening of the working week than men. Furthermore, data show that people over 50 are statistically more likely to agree to a pay cut than people younger. Men and women age 18-34 are statistically significantly more likely to disagree with the 4-day working week than other age groups.

These results (verified locally) may lead to key learnings for the organizations about the desire to offer a major organisational change and identify opportunities for performance optimization. Due to the non-random sampling, a further investigation should be conducted to verify the statements. The more detailed research exploiting demographic data and their analysis often bring interesting findings, as, for example, the results of Kuba and Milichovský (2019) demonstrate.

On the other hand, and in the case of this task, selecting a relevant sample seems to be

extremely difficult: How to select the respondents who will represent interested groups and how to identify them (and the relevant groups)? It is because a study has to be oriented to a particular (narrower) area in which the responses will better reflect a common opinion of employee's community.

Three countries were used in our investigation, so we treaded carefully when generalizing the findings to other cultural areas. Potential national culture standards may influence the impact of working employees' perceptions. Due to the time constraints and limited resources, more factors must be taken into further consideration, e.g., time management, performance, productivity, strategy, and quality of life. Additionally, a qualitative study may investigate an overview of employees' experiences of a reduced working-hour trial.

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