

How to Implement a Four-Day Workweek

By Kylie Ora Lobell

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In early June, more than 3,000 workers in the United Kingdom started working four days a week (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/thousands-of-british-workers-begin-trial-of-four-day-work-week.aspx) as part of a trial program that will last six months. During this time, their pay will stay the same as long as they promise to continue to be as productive as they were when working five-day weeks. The trial is the largest ever held in the U.K. and includes 70 different companies in a variety of industries.

The idea of the four-day workweek has been gaining popularity in recent years, especially given the shift in work schedules and locations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, more companies in the U.S. are testing out the concept to see the impact it may have on employee retention and productivity.

Hospitality has been one of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic, and, in an effort to attract new talent and retain his more than 740 employees, Jason Berry, co-founder and principal of KNEAD Hospitality + Design in Washington, D.C., is testing a variation of the four-day workweek. He started by asking managers and chefs to work four 12-hour shifts each week, then finish other tasks such as staff scheduling and menu planning outside of the restaurant. He said he's testing this model because the restaurant industry is losing employees to jobs that offer greater flexibility and balance.

"We created this program because we wanted to give our teammates a work/life balance atypical of a restaurant leadership lifestyle," Berry said. "We believe that a happy team provides the best guest experience, the best-tasting food and, overall, the best restaurant. We also believe this will cast a wider net and attract more candidates that want to work in this industry but have either left due to the hours required or [were] disincentivized by the typical lifestyle."

Erin Hennessy, vice president of TVP Communications, a remote higher-education business with employees in Colorado and New Jersey, said she is keeping up with trends in her industry by utilizing a four-day workweek.

"Following the pandemic, we realized we had the opportunity to rethink the ways in which we work and implement additional flexibility as our clients in the higher-education industry did the same," she said. "We believe this kind of innovative approach will be an important factor in retaining our current high-performing team and attracting future staff."

At OwnTheGrill.com, a publishing company focused on barbecuing and based in Austin, Texas, with 12 employees, CEO Jimmy Watts is trying out a four-day workweek in an attempt to increase productivity.

"By the time Friday rolled around, everyone was pretty much exhausted and had given all they had to give between Monday and Thursday," he said. "I wanted to try and make sure that my employees had the best possible work/life balance they could and enough downtime to ensure that they were ready to hit the ground running each and every Monday."

If your company is interested in switching to a four-day workweek, here are some steps other companies have taken before making the change:

Set Clear Guidelines

As with any workplace change, it's critical for employers to ensure that rules are in place outlining all aspects of the four-day workweek. That should include updating your employee handbook and new-hire onboarding policies.

Feedback

"We talked to our employees about it; established a set of rules, guidelines and parameters that needed to be in place to make it work; and just stuck to them," Watts said. "We also made sure that the other businesses we work alongside and in conjunction with knew that our operational hours had changed, and so far everything seems to be running smoothly."

Switch Up Schedules

Instead of having everyone take off on Fridays, Hennessy said that at TVP Communications, half of the team is off on Mondays and the other half is off on Fridays. "This enables us to still meet client needs while offering flexibility to staff," she said. "We are piloting the four-day workweek this summer and, should all go as we expect, this will be our new normal."

At Administrate in Bozeman, Mont., employees work a 32-hour, four-day workweek but are compensated at 40 hours, said CEO John Peebles. Peebles experienced what it was like when China, where he spent part of his time growing up, switched from a six-day to a five-day workweek in the 1990s. At Administrate, he said, he implemented the four-day workweek in 2015 "with the goal of protecting work/life balance for employees while maximizing productivity during working hours."

Another option is to extend hours over four days so that employees continue to work 40-hour weeks, said Liz Cannata, vice president of human resources at CareerBuilder in Chicago.

"It's an exciting concept, but it can be complicated to actually administer and implement," she said. "Employees will likely need to be available for longer hours each day, and customers would have to understand the new working schedule."

Employers will need to be thoughtful in creating this type of work, said Cannata, adding that "I think this may catch on for certain industries and companies."

Use Automation and Artificial Intelligence

By the third or fourth quarter of this year, Mediapeanut, a technology content publisher with 25 employees based in Brooklyn, N.Y., will be rolling out a four-day workweek, said Maria Flores, the COO and head of HR. She said chatbots and AI-powered tools that help with customer needs will make it feasible to modify the schedule.

"While the five-day week used to be a great model that got the most out of its workers, it was born in an era where factory work or manufacturing was the norm," Flores said. "However, with machines and AI-powered technology doing mostly repetitive tasks, I think a four-day workweek is the future of work."

Hire Extra Staff If Needed

To help make the four-day workweek possible at his company's restaurants, Berry hired more employees at the beginning of the pilot program.

"To begin the test and reduce everyone's scheduled days onsite, [we added] an extra chef and manager to an already full manager/chef team," he said. "For example, the traditional makeup of our Succotash restaurant is three chefs and three managers. Now we have four of each. Once we were 'extra-staffed,' we began the test."

The four-day workweek test has been running for several months, and Berry said the feedback has been excellent. While it's taken some adjusting, the program has been a win, he said, even though junior managers and chefs don't get as much face time with the general managers and executive chefs as before.

"As everyone adjusted, the feedback turned positive quickly, even more quickly than we expected," he said. "So far, our team has shared that they feel like they have more flexibility over their schedule, more time for their family and less stress overall."

Peebles agreed that having a shortened workweek has been effective. "We found productivity to be unchanged, if not slightly improved," he said. "Our goal was to build a company that brings success to our customers, team and investors, and we believe that sustainable work habits are a key piece of that."

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