



The Four-Day Workweek on Worker Burnout and Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

Worker burnout devastated a majority of U.S workers, especially low-income and long-hour workers. The COVID-19 Pandemic severely heightened worker burnout by severing the divide between work and home. The COVID-19 Pandemic, coupled with the outdated Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and poor working environments, creates severely devastating conditions for workers. This begs the question: what causes worker burnout and strained work-life balance, and what is the most effective way to address these issues? In Europe, leaders and decision-makers have implemented a four-day workweek, and saw incredible results. However, the U.S has yet to implement a four-day workweek, despite these results. In the U.S, a four-day workweek will improve employee well-being, increase productivity and revenue, and address widespread societal issues.

Keywords: worker burnout, Great Resignation, COVID-19 Pandemic, four-day workweek, employee well-being

Introduction

Social responsibility, mainly in economic distress, advocates for social reform in an unjust system. Consider Elouise Cobell, who identifies economic distress in Blackfoot Indian funds and calls on the federal government's social responsibility to address this injustice (Janko 29). Similarly, FDR identifies economic distress in the U.S, where a "great number toil with little return" and struggle with employment; he highlights the importance of social responsibility to properly address these poor working conditions (Roosevelt 22). Similar working conditions are observed following the COVID-19 pandemic. Anna North, a senior correspondent for Vox covering American family life and work, reports that in 2014, "the average salaried worker worked 49 hours per week," with 25% working over sixty hours and an overall increase in working hours during the pandemic (4). Juliet Schor, an

American economist and sociologist researching the four-day workweek, claims these working conditions resulted in the Great Resignation, a mass of four-million monthly job resignations (0:23), and a considerable rise in worker burnout, with over 50% of employees stressed most of the day (0:17). Cobell and FDR's call for social responsibility to address economic distress, along with FDR's consideration of poor working conditions, stress the need for social responsibility for modern and similarly poor working conditions. This begs the question: what causes worker burnout and strained work-life balance, and what is the most effective way to address these issues? Through a comprehensive analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic's lasting impacts, the Fair Labor Standards Act and its weaknesses, and the impact of employers' work environments on worker burnout, it is evident that a shortened, four-day workweek

will prove most effective, as it will improve employee well-being, increase productivity and revenue, and address widespread societal issues.

Impact of Covid-19 on Worker Burnout

Experts explore the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on worker burnout and well-being. Cristina Lluch, from the Department of Methodology for the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Valencia, claims that COVID-19 has “worsened the quality of life of professionals, aggravating pre-existing problems such as burnout” (1). Juliet Schor concurs, highlighting the severity of pandemic-induced stress and recording over 50% of workers feeling stressed for a majority of the day, as well as four million monthly job resignations known as the Great Resignation (0:17). Marie-Reine Pugh, a human resources and workplace flexibility researcher graduating from BYU, agrees with Schor on the Great Resignation and how it “proves people are still dissatisfied with their work arrangements,” as 25% of U.S. workers are considering to leave their current job for a mental health break (1). Ahmed El Sayed, a mental health researcher in Sudan, agrees with Schor and Pugh, noting the pandemic’s long-term consequences, including “decreased work productivity and less efficiency in the workplace” if not mitigated or properly addressed (320). Experts collectively assert how the Covid-19 Pandemic has instigated a surge of worker burnout and a disruption of the work-life balance of employees, leading to a wave of job resignations experts term the Great Resignation.

Fair Labor Standards Act and its Weaknesses

Experts also examine the Fair Labor Standards Act and how its observed weaknesses have elevated worker burnout levels. Anna North mentions that while the current Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) provides overtime pay for hourly employees, salaried workers do not share this benefit “and employers have taken advantage of this to require more and more hours of these workers” without just recompensation (3). Lauren Cohen, a professor at Harvard Business School, agrees with North, noting that employers’ behavior is intentional and done “to exploit [the FLSA’s] regulatory thresholds” through salaries and managerial

titles (4). Conversely, E.R Wruck, a St. Patrick Hospital researcher, focuses on the FLSA’s recent amendments which “have made it increasingly unresponsive to ... employers’ and employees’ needs,” mainly by reducing the scheduling flexibility employers need (1). Experts agree that the Fair Labor Standards Act has both weaknesses in technicalities including job titles, as well as timeliness through the increased weekly hours worked, connecting these weaknesses to worker burnout and lowered job satisfaction.

Employers’ Work Environments on Worker Burnout

Experts also focus on the effects of employers and their personal work environments on employee performance and worker burnout. Ivan Borrelli, an occupational health researcher for the Center for Global Health Research, communicates that employees possess work overload, which “has been reported to be positively associated with all burnout dimensions,” stating the link between work overload (a sign of an unfair work environment) and burnout, leading Borrelli to stress the importance of having a fair working environment (410-411). Moreover, Borrelli notes that “positive ethical climate and leadership” protected against burnout in all but one of his team’s studies, further emphasizing the necessity of a fair work environment to prevent worker burnout and maintain employee well-being (410). Clara Angela and Andi Ina Yustina, President University researchers, assert the positive relationship between work environment and employee engagement (which negatively affects worker burnout), supporting Borrelli’s notion that a fair work environment is crucial to protect against worker burnout (48). Experts attest to employers’ crucial role in establishing a fair work environment for their employees, claiming that since such an environment is currently lacking, employers must take the initiative to improve their work environment and become more flexible.

Solution

A shortened, four-day workweek is when employees work less hours per week, while making the same weekly income. This approach follows the 100:80:100 model, where employees maintain 100% of their pay while working only 80% of their time. However, the exchange’s most crucial element is that employees must maintain 100% of their productivity, as businesses would not

implement a four-day workweek at their own financial expense (Pugh 3). A shortened, four-day workweek can be implemented at the individual business level, where business owners and other decision-makers offer the 100:80:100 model and increase scheduling flexibility. The increased revenue and maintained productivity will cover the expense of paying employees for less hours, and if questions may arise, decision-makers can reach out to 4 Day Week Global (a not-for-profit supporting businesses considering a four-day workweek) for personalized assistance, consulting, research reports, and pilot programs. A four-day workweek addresses worker burnout by improving employee well-being, increasing productivity and revenue, and addressing widespread societal issues.

Improved Employee Well-Being

A shortened, four-day workweek directly reduces worker burnout through improved employee well-being. Rex Facer II and Lori Wadsworth, BYU professors exploring alternative work schedules, report ~80% of employees in their trial had a positive experience with the four-day workweek, encapsulating the vast support employees have for a four-day workweek (1036). Juliet Schor communicates that employees receive major benefits from a four-day workweek, as they “are less stressed, value their jobs more, and have better lives outside of work,” displaying the variety of benefits a four-day workweek offers to employees (1:32). 4 Day Week Global registers 71% of employees reducing burnout, a 39% stress decrease, decreased “anxiety, fatigue and sleep issues,” and improved mental and physical health, revealing the impact a four-day workweek has on employee well-being (6). Additionally, 4 Day Week Global reports a 57% decrease in job resignations over the trial period, demonstrating how the four-day workweek improves job satisfaction and employee well-being (7). 4 Day Week Global also claims that “employees also found it easier to balance their work with both family and social commitments,” as 54% found it “easier to balance work with household jobs” and employees were increasingly “satisfied with their household finances, relationships and [time management], furthering supporting the four-day workweek as a work schedule beneficial in a variety of environments (6). Clearly, a four-day workweek has the capability

to improve the psychological well-being of employees by reducing their stress levels.

Increases Productivity and Revenue

A shortened, four-day workweek also increases productivity and revenue, allowing employers to maintain their employees’ pay while working less hours. Rex Facer II and Lori Wadsworth report 62.5% of employees asserting that “as a result of the [four-day] work week, they were more productive at their job,” thereby displaying the extensive impact a four-day workweek imposes on employee productivity and output (1036). Juliet Schor agrees with Facer II and Wadsworth, noting that “CEO Adam Husney reports that people are dramatically happier, and have never been more productive” after implementing a four-day workweek in his education company Healthwise, further establishing how a four-day workweek positively influences output and productivity (2:27). Conversely, 4 Day Week Global mentions the 35% increase in revenue, “which indicates healthy growth during this period of working time reduction,” revealing the substantial fiscal benefits of implementing a four-day workweek (7). Moreover, Facer II and Wadsworth record “a 12% reduction in energy consumption” and improvements in air quality, service delivery and employee recruitment and retention after applying a four-day workweek, arraying the diverse advantages a four-day workweek presents businesses with (1043). In his Inaugural Address, FDR communicates that while “we have still much to be thankful for” when “compared with the perils which our forefathers conquered,” there still remains “a host of unemployed citizens ... and an equally great number [who] toil with little return [that] only a foolish optimist can deny” (22). Similar to FDR’s confrontation of unemployment and work undercompensated, the federal government must effectively address these concurring issues, and the four-day workweek provides a framework for this objective. Evidently, the four-day workweek offers divergent perquisites through increased productivity and revenue while simultaneously decreasing business costs.

Addresses Widespread Societal Issues

A shortened, four-day workweek has the ability to address widespread societal issues, even those like climate change. Charles Catlin, a researcher from the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), records a 20% decrease in auto use following

the implementation of a four-day workweek in their case study, which benefits the environment “by the reduction of automobile emissions and fuel conservation” (12). Juliet Schor concurs with Catlin, appending that the four-day workweek creates “a long-term dynamic of decarbonization,” as people “tend to choose faster, and more polluting ... daily life activities” when under time pressure, and vice versa (8:35). Schor claims that “by opting to work less, countries are choosing not to expand production to its max, thereby avoiding additional emissions,” as observed in “carbon success stories like Germany and Denmark” (8:57). Ultimately, Schor stresses the necessity of “restoring the quality of life and our social fabric, especially in wealthy countries where we already produce enough for everyone to have a good standard of living” and claims that a four-day workweek performs this by addressing the pandemic’s lasting “burnout and depression, inequalities of race and income, and the climate crisis” through increased flexibility and financial liberty (10:04). Thomas and Chaleff coin this advocacy for reform “intelligent disobedience,” involving “an ability to work within the system to maintain standards and uphold moral values” which “will support the courage needed to do what is morally and ethically right” (58-59). This intelligent disobedience is vital for societal progress, providing a moral basis for reforming the detrimental broken systems of modern society that a four-day workweek addresses. Plainly, the four-day workweek has the capacity to tackle diverse sociocultural issues, including climate change, racial income inequality and worker burnout, progressing our society upon ethical grounds.

Limitations and Implications

Although the four-day workweek poses potential psychological, economic and social benefits, its feasibility and effectiveness remain uncertain. Eugene Calvasina and W. Randy Boxx, economic professors at universities in

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Mississippi, report that shifting to a four-day workweek “did not materially affect employees’ productivity” (609). Furthermore, Janice Hedges, an economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, notes that even if the trials exhibited increased productivity, it does not necessarily indicate long-term productivity increases (35). Additionally, Michelle Travis, a professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law, mentions that “workers with the most acute work/family conflicts,” who would receive the most support from a four-day workweek, “often will be among those least likely either to obtain or to benefit from a four-day work week” (1226). However, 4 Day Week Global declares that the four-day workweek is an effective model for businesses to implement, with “improved well-being and productivity in the organisations and employees,” along with “improved recruitment and retention among staff, and even improved revenue” (67). Moreover, Juliet Schor declares that a four-day workweek confronts several sociocultural issues, ranging from “burnout and depression, inequalities of race and income, and the climate crisis,” through flexibility and financial liberty which poses psychological and social benefits (10:04). While the four-day workweek has specific uncertainties in accessibility and effectiveness, it has repeatedly improved employee well-being and productivity, combating social issues in the process.

Conclusion

Worker burnout affects employees across the globe, tearing at our social fabric and depressing working-class citizens. To ensure the well-being of our employees and our society, we must consult and examine other nations, such as Iceland and Germany, and their four-day workweek trials to gain an understanding of the implementation and pilot program process.

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