

People Management

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The four-day working week isn't as flexible as it seems

14 Dec 2018 By Morten Petersen

Businesses should consider adopting a seven-day working week for true flexibility, says Morten Petersen

The four-day week has fast become a hot topic. The idea is that by compressing the working week into just four days, employees have greater flexibility and more leisure time.

New Zealand-based firm Perpetual Guardian found that worker stress reduced and productivity increased when it [tried a four-day working week](https://www.fastcompany.com/90205776/the-four-day-work-week-works) (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90205776/the-four-day-work-week-works>). On the other hand, education start-up Treehouse [switched back to a five-day week](https://www.businessinsider.com/productivity-tips-four-day-workweek-2018-8?r=UK&IR=T) (<https://www.businessinsider.com/productivity-tips-four-day-workweek-2018-8?r=UK&IR=T>) after a four-day week created a “lack of work ethic”.

There's certainly good reason to oppose the four-day working week – but not just because it's bad for business.

Although the four-day week purports to offer greater flexibility, it's actually just another structure. If the working week opened up to seven days, still based on the current hours worked or maybe even less, it would empower staff to pick and choose the hours that best suited them – and the business – from any time in the week. Unlike a four-day working week, this provides true flexibility.

Typically, the four-day week translates to having Fridays off. This doesn't work for everyone. What if you have childcare issues on Wednesday afternoons? Or want to invest in a personal development course or wellbeing class? The four-day week doesn't help you, but the seven-day working week might.

Why the fuss about flexibility?

Flexibility is one of the most attractive perks businesses can offer employees. Deloitte found that just [43 per cent of millennials](https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html) (<https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>) envisioned staying with their employer for the next two years. However, greater flexibility at work can encourage millennial employees to consider staying with their employer for more than three years. Research from Randstad also found that [19 per cent of millennials](https://www.randstadusa.com/workforce360/managing-gen-y-z/) (<https://www.randstadusa.com/workforce360/managing-gen-y-z/>) view flexibility as the best perk employers can offer.

By allowing employees to schedule work across seven days, businesses can offer their team members and consultants the flexibility they crave, increasing happiness.

What are the business benefits?

Any conversations on the future of work should prioritise employees' work-life balance. But it's worth flagging the business benefits of the seven-day working week concept. Companies are more likely to implement flexibility when they can see how it helps them too.

The greatest business benefit is the impact that happy, engaged employees have on a company. According to research by Warwick University, satisfied employees are up to [12 per cent more productive](https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/new_study_shows/) (https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/new_study_shows/).

With the right team willing to work across a seven-day period, it could even allow your business to increase operating hours. As well as the potential for increased revenue, this could also bring increased customer satisfaction. It would provide customers with more flexibility around when they could use your business's services, better accommodating their own busy lives.

Employees' desire for flexibility can either be ignored, or viewed as an opportunity. True flexibility is an attractive perk that may be used to recruit the most talented individuals. Especially relevant since talent acquisition and retention is a costly struggle for many businesses. It also allows businesses to future-proof their operations. Those that don't adopt flexibility risk being left behind.

Potential challenges

The seven-day working week relies on technology – especially for staff members working flexibly from home. It won't work for companies that are technophobic or resistant to change.

It's not just about the business — the seven-day week requires the right team, too. It takes hard-working employees with excellent communication skills. However, if you're using flexibility as a mechanism to attract higher-level talent, this hopefully shouldn't be a problem.

Businesses increasing flexibility may incur additional costs. For example, extending opening hours increases overheads — even if it's just the cost of keeping the lights on. One study from Sweden trialled a six-hour working day, but found it [prohibitively expensive](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/business/sweden-work-employment-productivity-happiness.html?module=inline) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/business/sweden-work-employment-productivity-happiness.html?module=inline>).

Although the seven-day working week has the greatest potential to enable the true flexibility staff desire, it won't work for everyone. Before implementing any changes to the way your employees work, get a proper understanding of what they want. Understand their challenges, and explore how you as an employer can help overcome them. The right solution must work for both business and employee, but it is possible.

Morten Petersen is co-founder and CEO of Worksome



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