Is it time to move to a four-day working week?

From June to December 2022, 61 UK employers participated in a four-day working week pilot scheme organised by the "4-day Week Campaign". A report detailing the findings of the pilot suggests that the scheme was a success for both employers and workers, with 92% of employers continuing with the arrangement. Is it time for more employers to give this way of working a go?

What did the four-day week pilot scheme involve?

Under the scheme 2900 workers from 61 different UK organisations were asked to deliver 100% of their normal work output over 80% of full-time hours in exchange for 100% of pay. The pilot scheme ran for seven months, between June and December 2022.

The participating organisations spanned a range of sectors including retail, professional services, finance and insurance and manufacturing. However, two thirds of the participating organisations were small businesses with 25 members of staff or fewer. Only 12% of organisation had more than 100 employees.

Organisations could choose the non-working day, with Fridays being the most popular choice followed by Mondays. Only a few employers opted for a variable non-working day or a combination of two non-working half days.

What did workers say about the pilot scheme?

The participating workers reported that the shorter working week had a positive impact on their work/life balance and overall wellbeing. Notably:

- 71% reported lower levels of burnout.
- 62% found it easier to balance their work and social life.
- 60% were better able to manage their caring responsibilities.
- 54% found it easier to balance their work with household jobs.
- 40% said they were sleeping better.
- 38% said they were less stressed.

Workers reported using their day off for a range of different activities including getting on top of “life admin”, volunteering, playing sport and helping elderly relatives. Workers were also able to save on commuting and childcare costs – something of particular value during the current cost of living crisis.

What did employers say about the pilot scheme?

Crucially, employers reported that revenue was unaffected, and even improved slightly. On average, revenues increased by 1.4% over the trial period. In addition, absenteeism and staff retention rates improved: sickness absences dropped by a massive 65% and resignations dropped by 57%. Employers also reported that the four-day week arrangement made recruitment easier – one company reported an 88% increase in applications during the pilot.

Overall, the pilot scheme has been a hit with employers with 18 of the 61 organisations committing to make the change permanent and a further 38 intending to continue with the four-day working pattern at least in the short-term.

Should more employers give it a go?

The 4-Day Week Campaign says that the pilot scheme has been a "resounding success" and it has called for more employers to embrace the change.

Employers considering giving it go should ponder carefully how any such change would be viewed by existing part-time workers engaged on an 80% FTE basis. It is far from unusual for part-time workers to work in excess of their contractual hours. Workers in that boat may well feel aggrieved that they are paid only 80% pay for 80% of full-time hours, where they believe that they are delivering value to the business in excess of this. Not only could this damage employee relations, but it could also lead to grievances and potentially even Tribunal claims, for example, for equal pay. Employers would need to consider offering such employees the option of changing to the "five days' pay for four days' work" pattern, on the understanding that they would be given a full-

time workload.

It should also be recognised that once the move to a four-day working week has been made it will be quite difficult to undo without damaging employee relations. Employees could simply refuse to agree to step back to the old ways of working, leaving employers wishing to backtrack with little option but to dismiss. Indeed, the pilot scheme showed that 15% of workers said that “no amount of money” would induce them to return to a five-day working pattern. For this reason, if employers do not want to make the change permanent initially, it should be made clear to employees that the arrangement is offered on a trial basis only and there has been no permanent change to terms and conditions of employment.

The UK’s Four Day Week Pilot, February 2023.

BDBF is a leading law firm based at Bank in the City of London specialising in employment law. If you would like to discuss any issues relating to the content of this article, please contact Amanda Steadman (AmandaSteadman@bdbf.co.uk) or your usual BDBF contact.