

The promise of a four-day week? A critical appraisal of a management-led initiative

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Abstract

Purpose – This article critically investigates a management-led experiment to institute a four-day work week with stated intentions of improving productivity and worker wellbeing. The article analyses the framing and implementation of the reduced work hours (RWH) trial, the responses of employees and the outcomes and implications of the trial. It raises concerns regarding the managerial appropriation of employee aspirations for more autonomy over time and improved work life.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a qualitative case study of a medium-sized company operating in the financial services sector in New Zealand. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 employees.

Findings – Our study finds that the promise of a four-day week attracted employee favour and individualised benefits. However, entrenched managerialist practices of performance measurement, monitoring and productivity pressures were intensified. Pro-social and collective interests evident in labour-led campaigns were absent. We urge greater critical scrutiny into seemingly advantageous “business case” initiatives for reduced work hours.

Originality/value – Little is known about what happens to concern for social and employee interests entailed in reduced working hours initiatives when a management-led initiative is implemented. Indeed, the majority of research focuses on the macro-level rather than interrogating the “black box” of firms. Our inquiry contributes to these debates by asking, how does a management-led RWH initiative affect employees?

Keywords Four-day week, Reduced working hours, Wellbeing, Work time reduction, Work–life balance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Questions regarding the extent to which paid work should figure in our lives have recurred over centuries (Darier, 1998; Gorz, 1999). In the last few years, there has been a resurgence in interest regarding reduced work hours (RWH) across political commentators, media, trade unions, political parties and business (Srnicsek, 2018). While France’s government-led initiatives in the 35-h work week is well-known (Askenazy, 2013), other RWH initiatives occur across European Union (EU) member states (De Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017; Stronge and Harper, 2019) and include the EU’s Working Time Directive (2002/88/EC) that requires member states to guarantee workers’ rights to time limited work. The Four-Day Week Campaign in the UK supported by the New Economics Foundation and the Trade Unions Congress (<https://www.4dayweek.co.uk>), and trade-union led agreements such as IG Metall’s 28-h week agreement in Germany (Chazan, 2018) are prominent examples. Media outlets provide brief reports of organisations that have trialled various iterations of RWH around the world such as, Microsoft Japan (Paul, 2019), Svartedalen in Sweden (Heath, 2017) and Vodafone New Zealand (Keall, 2020).

Supporters of RWH propose various benefits to the economy, environment, community, family and individual. Critics raise concerns that the realities of implementing RWH can lead to more work intensification, diminished worker control over work schedules and tasks and greater inequalities between sectors of workers. Scholars, in noting the contested and



typically macro-level of debate, point to a lack of empirical evidence at the organisational level. They call for more in-depth research into experimentation and implementation of RWH initiatives in contemporary organizational and workplace settings (Anttila *et al.*, 2005). Questions remain in regard to the sustainability and social value (specifically to workers) of RWH implementation following promising starts. Nonetheless, desire and aspiration for reduced working time and quality of work life are recurrently evident (Cette and Taddei, 1994; Keune and Galgóczi, 2006).

This article critically investigates a management-led experiment to conduct a four-day work week with stated intentions of improving productivity and worker wellbeing. In early 2018, the company embarked upon an eight-week trial to reduce the work week from five to four days (40 h–32 h), with no reduction in income or detriment to employment conditions. The article analyses the framing and implementation of the RWH trial, the responses of employees and the outcomes and implications of the trial. Our discussion and critical reflections offer further contributions to debates on working time and work–life balance questions. Importantly, this article contributes to discussions that raise concerns regarding the managerial appropriation of employee aspirations for more autonomy over time and improved work life under a discourse of promise and an effect of intensification. The promise of a four-day week may disappoint as collective worker interests including autonomy, cooperative workplace relations and employee voice lose protection, and entrenched managerialist practices of performance measurement, monitoring and productivity pressures are intensified.

The article is structured as follows. We review debates on RWH initiatives, we then describe the organisational context and the qualitative research methods utilised, followed by an analysis and discussion of the key findings. In the concluding sections, we further theorise the complexities of management-led experimentation to reduce working hours while increasing labour productivity.

Reduced work hours initiatives in contemporary contexts

Concerns about the regulation of working time and effort generate much research and public debate. Contemporary discussion locates RWH as a key initiative for addressing contemporary challenges such as the impact of technological developments, non-standard work organisation and arrangements, environmental crises, low productivity, persistent gender inequalities and worker health and wellbeing (Coote and Franklin, 2013; De Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017). To this end, much research investigates the individual, social, economic and environmental outcomes of RWH. While media reporting tends to uncritically celebrate the positive outcomes of RWH, and employees and unions frequently express desire for RWH, academic research reveals a more complex and ambiguous picture of its implementation.

On the one hand, research suggests that RWH can have positive employment effects (through job sharing and job creation) that will reduce unemployment and the uneven distribution of work hours (Ashford and Kallis, 2014; Hayden, 2006; Trumbull, 2002), and encourage greater labour force participation for women (Lehndorff, 2014). RWH may help to reduce or prevent layoffs and “serve as a stabiliser” in periods of economic slowdown or recession (Costanza *et al.*, 2013, p. 59). However, much debate – informed by France’s 35-h work week – contests whether or not RWH weakens firm competitiveness, increases labour costs and yields lower tax revenues (Askenazy, 2013; da Paz Campos Lima, 2015; Hayden, 2006; Lehndorff, 2014). The unclear dynamics of competitiveness, labour costs and productivity benefits are notable factors in France’s experience of introduction, retraction and reinstatement (albeit unevenly) of the 35-h week. In short, factors affecting mutual economic benefits and optimising advantages of 35-h week arrangements are highly complex (Askenazy, 2013; da Paz Campos Lima, 2015; Lehndorff, 2014).

RWH initiatives may also have a positive impact on the environment through lower carbon emissions due to changes in household consumption, transport and leisure choices (Knight *et al.*, 2012; Nassen and Larsson, 2015; Pullinger, 2014; Schor, 2014). A Swedish study (Nassen and Larsson, 2015) quantified that a reduction in working time *and* income by 1% may reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions by 0.7 and 0.8% respectively. Schor (2005, 2014) suggests that RWH will enable individuals to engage in more creative, meaningful and sustainable forms of production and consumption, such as internet-enabled peer-to-peer sharing schemes, urban communal gardening and so forth, and effect a reduction in pollution. However, Druckman *et al.* (2013) argue that certain leisure and household activities (travel, cooking, shopping, etc.) can be carbon intensive, therefore a shift to more leisure time may not be as environmentally friendly as expected.

Positive societal effects are outlined, such as greater civic participation in community and political institutions (Gorz, 1999; Schor, 2014). However, time-use studies of French and German cases suggest that workers use the additional time on extant activities such as family responsibilities, domestic chores and rest (Hayden, 2001). Advocates believe that RWH will result in a more equitable distribution of unpaid domestic responsibilities between men and women. Evidence is mixed on this matter. De Spiegelaere and Piasna (2017) report that RWH can have unanticipated effects that may hinder or undermine policy efforts to improve gender equality in work and employment. Studies of the impact of the 28.8-h work week at Volkswagen Germany (Massa-Wirth and Seifert, 2005) suggest that traditional gender roles shaped how men and women use the additional time off, with women reporting a greater involvement in housekeeping activities such as shopping, cooking and cleaning, and men spending a greater amount of time on home repairs and gardening (Seifert and Trinczek, 2000). Some researchers, conversely, propose that RWH stimulates increased participation of women in the labour market (Lehndorff, 2014).

Improvements to individual wellbeing are often cited as an outcome of working fewer hours. Parents with young children tend to report a positive impact of RWH on their work–family balance, provided that employees are able to negotiate or determine their working hours (Fagnani and Letablier, 2004; Lehndorff, 2014). RWH can have positive effects on health-related behaviours (Akerstedt, 2001; Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014) including, for instance, decrease in the likelihood of smoking particularly among men and increase in exercise particularly for women and older age groups (Ahn, 2016). Some researchers claim that RWH increases both job and non-work time satisfaction (Lepinteur, 2019; Nassen and Larsson, 2015).

However, others caution that the effects of RWH on worker's well-being at work are "ambiguous" (Askenazy, 2004, p. 603). This is particularly evident when RWH initiatives are framed in terms of increasing labour productivity. The relationship between RWH and productivity is highly complex (see De Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017). When accompanied by reduced workloads and additional resourcing, there is some evidence that quality and productivity of work is enhanced (Barck-Holst *et al.*, 2020, 2021). However, in the absence of such facilitating factors, some workers report an increase in work intensification and stress in their working conditions that results from heightened demands for multi-tasking, requirements to perform additional tasks, having less time for the same tasks, no additional staffing or resourcing, difficulty co-ordinating work and private lives and the flexibilization of work hours (Hayden, 2006; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Lehndorff, 2014; Meda, 2013). The intensification of work may in fact "counterbalance the shorter week's positive effects on fatigue, health and quality of life" (Prunier-Poulmaire and Gadbois, 2001, p. 44). Lower-skilled, especially female, workers were more likely to report a deterioration in their working conditions as they were more likely to experience increased variability and unpredictability of hours (Estrade and Ulrich, as cited in Hayden, 2006). Therefore, despite some scholars arguing that RWH is a "deeply egalitarian" means to address income and social inequalities (Dimick, 2016, p. 473), others warn

that RWH initiatives may in fact contribute to entrenched inequalities between groups of workers (Esteveao and Sa, 2008; Fagnani and Letablier, 2004; Hayden, 2006).

Critical analyses of organisational work–life balance and flexible work initiatives would urge researchers of RWH to look beyond “the hype” and question the under-pinning assumptions, on-the-ground realities and interests served of such efforts (Lewis *et al.*, 2007, p. 362). Likewise, discussion on the “well-being economy”, which emphasises ecological and social concerns (Diener and Seligman, 2004; Isham *et al.*, 2020), invites greater critical scrutiny of whether contemporary efforts to intertwine enhanced worker wellbeing with labour productivity are in fact beneficial for workers (Davies, 2015). Scholars argue that business leaders pitch work-life and wellbeing initiatives as socially favourable but their outcomes do not yield claimed plural benefits. Rather, well-being at work initiatives can be readily captured and re-constructed to serve managerial and economic interests that may ultimately undermine worker wellbeing (Dale and Burrell, 2014; Foster, 2018; Harvey, 2019; Moore and Piwek, 2017) and erode employee rights and freedoms within the workplace (Bloom, 2016).

In sum, the research literature suggests that RWH has potential to yield positive economic, environmental and social effects, but such outcomes are not inevitable (Coote, 2013). Much depends on how RWH initiatives are implemented, both in policy and in practice (De Spiegelaere and Piasna, 2017). Labour actors have regularly contended that efforts to reduce work hours must involve workers and their representatives (Pinaud, 2003; Stronge and Harper, 2019), and be part of an integrated social agenda connected with broader deliberations about equality, flourishing, sustainability, slow living and so on (Coote, 2013). In recent years, the “business case” for RWH has been put forward in public discussions, encouraging executives to implement RWH models in order to boost employee engagement and productivity (Jacobs, 2020; Pang, 2020). While benefits to individual well-being and environmental effects are referenced, these are secondary to profit and productivity motives. Little is known about what happens to concern for social and employee interests entailed in RWH when a management-led initiative is implemented. There is a long history of organisational experimentation with RWH (see Hunnicutt’s (1996) study of Kellogg’s RWH in the 1930s), nonetheless, the majority of RWH research tends to focus on the macro-level rather than interrogating the “black box” of firms (Bosch and Lehnendorff, 2001, p. 210). Thus, our inquiry contributes to these debates by asking, how does a management-led RWH initiative affect employees?

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Research context

Labour leaders in New Zealand first raised demands for an 8-h day in the 1840s. Legal institution was achieved for women and minors in the 1870s. A 40-h week was mandated for all workers in 1936. This continues as the maximum number of hours to be worked (excluding overtime), unless the employer and employee agree otherwise and paid at no less than applicable minimum wage. According to OECD figures, in 2019 the “average usual weekly hours worked on the main job” in New Zealand totals 37.7 h (the OECD 40 Country annual survey measures the international average workweek at 36.8 h). Employment legislation in New Zealand provides employees with the “right to request” flexible working arrangements (including changes to the hours, days and place of work) and employers have “a duty to consider” any requests. Under New Zealand employment law, companies have executive discretion over working hours flexibility. The 2018 Survey of Working Life reveals that 50% of New Zealand employees report flexibility in their start and finish times (Statistics New Zealand, 2019).

In 2018, at the initiative of the Founder/Director, a medium-sized company undertook an eight-week trial to reduce work hours from a 5 days, 40 h week (37.5 of which is paid – 2.5 h are unpaid meal breaks), to a four-day, 32-h working week with no reduction in remuneration

nor changes to other employment terms and conditions. The company has been operating in the financial services sector for several decades. At the time of the trial, more than 230 staff were based in 16 offices around the country, and included both high skill (i.e. finance, accounting and legal professions) and lower skill (i.e. administrative) functions. The company has client-facing as well as back-office functions. The majority of employees are employed on a permanent, full-time basis. Work is typically conducted during week days within usual operating hours (8 a.m. – 6 p.m.). Senior leaders described that prior to the trial there were few formal flexible working arrangements in place, such as telecommuting, flexitime, job sharing, etc. Trade union representation in this organisational setting is not reported.

All staff were encouraged to participate in the trial, although staff could opt out with the permission of their manager. Staff were allowed to work shorter days over a five-day period (i.e. 6 h for 5 days) if that was their preference, but staff were explicitly told that the trial was about a reduced, not a compressed, working week. Certain individuals and teams were unable to fully participate in the trial due to work loads, external reporting deadlines and sub-optimal staffing levels. These occurrences were accommodated by the company.

The Founder/Director declared that if productivity levels were maintained during the trial, then a four-day working week would likely become permanent. Managers and employees established productivity measures by which their trial performance would be evaluated. Teams were tasked with defining, tracking and reporting on their productivity measures. Other internal measures were also collected, such as energy usage and absenteeism. The Founder/Director invited a small team of academic researchers to conduct independent and unpaid research into the trial. A public relations company was contracted by the organisation to design and co-ordinate the media engagement. External employment legal advice was sought for the final policy implementation.

In mid-July 2018, the company communicated publicly that the trial had been “a resounding success”. Extensive local and international media interest followed. Company actors discussed the trial with government representatives from New Zealand, Australia and Europe. Local trade unions, who had not been consulted about the initiative, did not provide significant input to media commentary. In early October 2018, the Founder/Director announced that the company would implement the four-day work week, termed the “Productivity Week Policy”, on an individual opt-in, ongoing basis.

Methodology

Informed by a critical-interpretive approach to qualitative research (Prasad, 2015), the design used in this study involved conducting focus groups, analysing relevant organisational documents and collecting the public statements and conversations of the company’s Founder/Director prior to and throughout the trial period. Within one week of the trial’s completion, the first author commenced fieldwork and over a two-week period conducted eight focus groups involving 41 employees and four semi-structured interviews with senior leaders who were unable to participate in a focus group due to scheduling demands. Focus groups were utilised to include as many employees as possible within the fieldwork timeframe. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 30–45 min. The company enabled a range of employees from junior to senior positions to participate in focus groups during work time. The majority of focus groups were conducted in person (two were conducted via conference call in order to include the experiences of regional offices across New Zealand) and averaged 90 min long. The four interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 30–45 min. Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Employees were asked in the focus groups to speak freely and represent their perspective as well as those of their team members. The researcher gained agreement among participants of maintaining confidentiality and non-identifiability of participants. Questions covered the

trial planning process (i.e. What was the process for determining your productivity measures and work roster?); the trial experience (i.e. how did you feel about your work during the eight weeks? What were some of the challenges or concerns you encountered? How did you experience your day off?); and finally, post-trial reflections (i.e. how are you experiencing the return to a five-day workweek? What were the outcomes of trying a four-day week for you?)

Before, during and after the trial, the first author also participated in several meetings (each 1–1.5 h's duration) with the company's HR personnel, which provided valuable insight into the design, implementation and evaluation of the trial. The researcher was also given access to pertinent organisational documents, including emails to employees outlining the trial's procedures and processes, media releases and the policy document for the ongoing implementation.

We regarded the Founder/Director's rhetoric and company documentation, which were the framework for the company's trial, as primary data. Combined with the primary focus group and interview data, we conducted a thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012) that yielded three salient themes: priming employees for productivity gains; promising freedom while activating employee's goodwill; and accepting heightened managerialist control and surveillance. The empirical findings section is structured around these themes.

Empirical findings

Priming for productivity gains

The Founder/Director's primary motivation for reducing work hours was concerns about employee productivity and engagement. In public forums, he tells the story of reading an article in *The Economist* which reported the findings from studies showing that office employees were productive for 1.5–2 h during an 8-h day. He was curious to explore “*why productivity can be so limited*”, asking “*what if we change the way we think about productivity, no longer associating it with hours worked?*” (Company document). While the Founder/Director supported the value to employees of increased non-work time, he emphasised “*productivity is the key issue here. It's not, as it is sometimes portrayed, about work-life balance. . . I'm a businessman first and foremost. I do think it's a good thing and has wide ranging societal benefits, but to be clear: this is about delivering better productivity outcomes*”. Company documents formally outline the two-fold purpose of the trial as communicated to staff: (1) to “generate an empowered, engaged and staff-led discussion and focus on respective team and individual productivity” and (2) to “understand if increased working flexibility and the opportunity to spend more quality time with family and pursuing personal interests is valued such that it not only increases overall staff engagement, but specifically also results in increased productivity”. Hence, the company's effort was to link employee's personal desires with increased labour productivity and efficiency. With no critical questioning or alternative discourses, employees seemed to accept the “quid pro quo” as reasonable. Indeed, many employees saw the reduced working hours as evidence of a company that “*actually cares about your wellbeing*”.

The Founder/Director's trial announcement to staff was videoed and shared online and with media outlets. Much local and international media attention followed. Many managers and employees expressed feelings of disbelief, surprise and excitement about the trial. Senior manager reactions ranged from hopeful and “*excited about the new-found freedom*” to “*ambivalent about whether it would work*” and “*relatively cynical . . . that people can long-term change the way they work*”. Several employees felt a sense of duty to “*make this work because the whole country's watching*”.

The HR director and team were tasked with bringing the idea to fruition within a month. They decided to use an employee involvement approach primarily due to the short timeframe for preparation. Teams were tasked with collectively deciding upon (a) their new work rosters, (b) how their productivity will be measured, (c) what, if any, additional support they will require, (d) the process for capturing their learnings during the trial and (e) what

innovations they would implement to work in a more productive and efficient manner (Company document to staff). This level of employee involvement was unusual for the company, which one senior leader described as favouring “*traditional, top-down management*”. Teams were also responsible for defining, tracking and reporting on their productivity measures, which introduced a granular level of monitoring that was new to many divisions. Managers explained that “*empowerment*” and “*delegation*” were crucial because they believed a four-day week would only work successfully if staff “*put the effort in*” and made “*personal changes*”.

Employees viewed their involvement in designing and measuring their work in favourable terms. Many described how the planning phase stimulated their intellectual engagement in ways that “*we’ve never had to before*”. They had to “*really get our minds working*” and “*be reflective*” about what productivity means to them, how they contribute and what innovations they could implement. One manager describes her pre-trial impression that staff are “*really regimented with how they actually work. It’s just a job. They do not challenge themselves in terms of their thinking and their potential and their capability*”. She was surprised by the attitudinal change of staff who became “*energetic and enthusiastic*” during the planning discussions prior to the trial’s commencement. In sum, personnel felt that the pre-trial preparation period generated positive engagement and considerable hope for positive effects in regard to employees’ interests and the promise of “*an extra day off every week*”.

Promising freedom: tapping in to employees’ aspirations and goodwill

The team-approach continued throughout the trial, and employees spoke of co-operative, reciprocal and interdependent relationships that were fostered. Employees who usually “*do quite individual roles*” had to “*work collaboratively to figure out how we can overlap and help each other out*”. Employees appeared agreeable to the additional work demands placed on them due to practices of work sharing: “*If I was learning someone else’s responsibilities then it’s equally they were learning mine. I did not think for a minute, I’m doing extra work. I was just thinking ‘we’re helping each other’*”. Employees speak of an openness to “*go the extra mile*”. Some managers also noticed that “*there were a lot of people that actually really genuinely felt, what I can do to give back?*” For one manager, this meant organisational changes were readily adopted and “*did not have to be micro-managed or pushed for*”. This reciprocity was evident in the willingness expressed by the majority of staff to perform work tasks on their day off, and who emphasised that this “*give and take*” was necessary for the success of the initiative.

In order to accomplish the work in a reduced amount of time, employees tried to optimise their working habits and practices, “*putting your head down and just doing it*”. Rather than having “*chit chats*” over a “*cup of tea*”, employees quickly returned to their desks during tea or meal breaks. Some second-guessed whether it was acceptable to take a short break. There was a feeling of “*a bit more urgency*” and “*speeding up your processes*”. Some liked what they felt was a quieter and more relaxed climate, whereas others enjoyed the “*exhilarating*” and “*full on*” pace. One senior leader perceived that the “*quality of some of the work deteriorated*” as a result of staff “*trying to jam 100% into 80%*” of time.

Others regarded the urgency and pressure was causing “*heightened stress levels*”, leaving them in need of the additional day off to recover from work intensity. One senior leader reflected that “*the time for niceties was compressed*” and staff became more instrumental with each other: “*what do I need and when do I want it?*” He “*saw some friction*” develop between staff, who felt they were “*making up for their day [off] as well as covering for someone else*”. As such, some employees enjoyed the return to a five-day workweek as they could “*pace themselves*”, “*take a bit longer on things*” and “*do the crossword*” during lunch break. This foreshadows concerns about the personal toll RWH models may have on workers if it isn’t accompanied by efforts to redesign or resource work demands beyond increasing individual

labour productivity. These employees would prefer “*more freedom to partake how we wanted*” in a reduced hours model, including determining week-by-week whether or not to take the additional day off based on work demands and personal preference. This desire to work a full five-day week stands in contrast to much of the literature that states workers would prefer shorter working hours. It suggests that for some workers what matters most is having the autonomy and discretion to design their working time to meet both personal and organisational interests and to avoid intensification of demand and effort.

The heightened productivity and pace at work also spilled over into non-work lives. Employees talked of “*writing lists*” and “*planning what I’m going to do weeks in advance*”: on their day off. Very few reported “*sitting around on the sofa all day*”. Driving this will for productivity was the commonly-held belief that the day off was a “*gift*” that should not be “*wasted*”: “*you set yourself tasks not to waste the time because it was given to you*”. For some, this feeling spilled over to the workplace as an overarching feeling of motivation and enthusiasm, as one employee reflects, “*the three days off [including the weekend] is really productive personally as well. So overall you just feel . . . actualised. You feel good generally*”. Alternative social discourses of idleness, recuperation and slowness offered in philosophical arguments for reducing work were crowded out in a landscape where productivity dominated.

As expected, participants enjoyed the additional day off work. Participants spoke about reactivating multiple dimensions of their lives, such as becoming more involved in family and domestic life (child care, chores, home renovations, caring for elderly parents, etc.), exercise and wellbeing activities, community and volunteer activities, formal and informal study and learning and travel and leisure activities. Often these were relegated relationships and activities that “*were suffering and I wanted to bring them back into my routine*”. For others, these activities were often described as “*crammed in*” or “*rushed between*” in the busyness of a five-day workload. Many reported the “*pure indulgence*” and scarcity of having “*you time*” in amongst the various demands of modern life: “*And one day – it was a guilty pleasure – I spent time by myself. No husband, no kids, just me, myself and I. It was just so good*”. Their weekends during the four-day trial were “*freed up*”, “*less psychologically rushed*”, “*a time to relax*” and “*to make more of an effort with family*”.

Working parents expressed great pleasure in being more involved in children’s daily lives. A working mother describes:

I was able to be involved in pet day and catch my children’s softball final. Just those kind of things that I do not normally get a chance to be involved in. . . They [children] absolutely loved it. . . they’re like “oh, you’re always at work, you never come to our things”. Having me there was a real boost for them.

One father describes how he accompanied his young son to school in the morning during which he had a moment of “*sobriety*” realising “*that one-on-one time is cool. . . I enjoy spending time with him . . . he needs his dad*”. Other working fathers reflected upon how their availability meant that the mothers “*did not have to take time out of her job*” during school holidays or after-school times.

These favourable reports of employees’ experiences offer a glimpse into the potential benefits to workers of a RWH initiative that involved workers in immediate decisions about redesigning work tasks and schedules. However, these beneficial outcomes of a short trial were reported in the context of employees’ knowledge that a full roll-out of the in-principle desirable four-day week structure depended upon the trial’s success. In addition, the presence of intense international public interest and normative expectation of favourability and success was evident in all focus groups and media material. Employees needed and wanted to make the trial work otherwise management would take it away. The desire for more

discretion over their working time was so valued that employees were prepared to sacrifice other qualities and craft compromises to ensure a four-day week would remain in place.

Accepting managerial surveillance and control

The data indicated a general agreement among employees and managers that labour productivity was seen as the most important rationale and goal for implementing the four-day work week. One employee recalled feeling “*really frustrated*” by media headlines that focused on the wellbeing benefits of less work time: “*the focus [of the trial] is to be more efficient at work*” not to “*have a three-day weekend*”. The policy for the ongoing implementation of the four-day week enshrines productivity in its name and purpose, calling it the “productivity week policy”. The policy reinforces a clear exchange relationship: “*it’s all about maintaining productivity. If productivity dips then the Productivity Week is removed until the employee can again show productivity gains that meet our expectations*”. Employees appeared to be agreeable with or accepting of this quid-pro-quo. As such, they focused on making changes to their individual behaviour in order to be more productive. Indeed, the majority of employees believed they should be available to conduct work tasks on their day off. While managers were more divergent in their thinking – with some emphatically stating that staff should not be contactable on the day off, let alone required to work – the eventual policy requires staff to “*remain available to attend work*”. There was little consideration of drivers of economic productivity beyond individual labour, such as technological development and improved work organisation. The employee and management consensus on the primacy of productivity was significant. No participant articulated complementary, additional or even opposing purposes for the four-day work week that often appear in research and union advocacy, and implicitly underpinned the initial excitement and positive response to the four-day week trial announcement. Business interests prevailed.

Coupled with the cementing of productivity as the *raison d’être*, employees and managers also firmly believed that the day off is a “*privilege*”, a “*gift*” – not a “*right*” or “*entitlement*”. As such, employees believed they should individually earn the day off by meeting performance and productivity requirements: “*when your work is done for the week, you can have [the day off]. And if it’s not, then you cannot have it*”. They suggested increased performance monitoring and measurement: “*it’s great to have that [day off], but it’s not a given, [and there should be] real, clear expectations on achieving those outcomes and being continuously monitored*”. Senior leaders who were “*disappointed*” with a perceived lack of “*innovation, drive and focus*” from staff during the trial, believed that a four-day week should be a “*reward and recognition*” initiative for high-performing staff only – yet realised that “*those are the people who [are working so hard that they] do not have the time to take it*”. Some staff highlighted the importance of cultural control and self-regulation, of looking out for a number of “*dangers*”, such as “*people feeling like they’re entitled to this [day off]*”, “*falling back into bad habits*” and “*slacking off*” (defined as taking meal and social breaks, checking online newspapers, etc.) This is cause for concern not least because the critical gaze is turned onto one’s self and others, but also because the sociality of working relations – the moments of group cohesion shared coffees and friendly chat – and pauses for restoration, become coded as bad behaviour.

The policy document for the formal implementation, which employees did not report their consultation, reflects a managerialist approach to RWH, reconstrued in line with performance management, individual accountability and managerial prerogative. Whereas employees had to “opt out” of the trial, in the ongoing implementation employees apply to “opt in”, a request that is approved (or declined) by immediate and senior management based on a number of performance-related criteria. The employee will be accountable for their productivity measurements, which will be formally and continually reviewed with their manager.

Management reserves the right to “vary or remove” the policy “for any reason”. However, as demonstrated earlier, the trial generated rudiments of important socially advantageous values and relationalities for employees such as interdependence, sharing, trust, reciprocity and goodwill. The successful enactment of a RWH model, as employees implicitly recognised, is a collective accomplishment – as one employee says “*we all need to work together to achieve it*”. These sentiments of collective interest could provide a different basis from which to consider questions about motivating, sustaining and measuring behavioural change, yet were notably absent from employee and management data. Rather, a four-day week on these terms appears favourable to employees at face value, but its enactment intensifies a structural advantage to the company, and an individualisation of employee responsibility for its failure.

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week?

Discussion

The promise of valued non-work hours and better work arrangements for employees that accompanied the launch of the four-day week trial, then implementation, clearly attracted employee favour. Of note, the trial entailed some employee participation in work planning, fostered some improved collaborative relations and enabled employees to activate multiple dimensions of their non-work lives. The collective goodwill and reciprocity emergent during the preparation and the trial was due to employees’ hope in the promise of “a day off” and to their feeling valued and appreciated as more than “just” workers – as people with full and rich lives deserving of time and space to be honoured. The willingness and ability to work more productively was fostered by the promise of greater freedom from work. While some raised concerns about heightened stress levels, on balance, the majority of research participants expressed a desire for the four-day working week to be implemented on a permanent basis. To this end, participants were prepared to make a number of agreements and promises to bring it to fruition. Therefore, our study extends research that examines the trade-offs employees make for greater access to flexible working arrangements (such as trading their work effort/intensification for access to flexible work, [Kelliher and Anderson, 2010](#)), by proposing that in order to gain an additional day off work (albeit one in which they are still required to be available to work), employees were willing to trade newly recovered rudiments of discretion, autonomy and control over their work that arose through the trial, for heightened managerial measurement and monitoring. In other words, in order to gain some freedom *from* work, employees were prepared to relinquish some freedom *in* work. Hence, this version of the four-day week joins a long line of other work-life flexibility initiatives that promise freedom and yet ultimately serve to strengthen employees’ investment in capitalist work and organizations ([Bloom, 2016](#); [Fleetwood, 2007](#); [Gattrell and Cooper, 2008](#)).

Our analysis also questions the feasibility of wellbeing and work-life initiatives that claim to offer “mutual gains” or meet a “dual agenda” of both business and social benefits ([Guest, 2017](#); [Lewis et al., 2007](#)). The trial was initially presented to employees and the general public as an opportunity to explore whether working more productively, for fewer hours, could yield economic and social gain. However, the initial attractiveness of those broader pro-social features faded. Realisation of pro-social potential was not enabled or supported due to a lack of employee power resources to negotiate and shape their enactment. The undertaking, while welcomed and used by employees, was prescribed and circumscribed by an unchallenged managerial prerogative. The business productivity case with individualised benefits was accepted and extolled. Notably absent in this experiment was a social rights and collective interests perspective – long advocated in trade union campaigns – that would promote prosperity, fairness and flourishing as necessary outcomes of RWH initiatives. The absence of trade union representation in this company was telling. Employee involvement and voice were “given” by executive largesse and limited to discretion regarding localised work concerns.

The privileging of individualised benefits in “business case” RWH models obscures scope for the development of social outcomes in terms of collective employee social rights and voice in the regulation of effort, time and organizational life. Significantly, the employees appear accustomed to the absence of such substantive collective participation, signalling a normalisation of the individualized, de-collectivized and managerialized workforce. In short, the promise of benefit to employees, along with the productivity imperative, is presented as unequivocally pro-personal – and welcomed by employees as such. That continues the path of individualized, rather than collectivised, employee interests that is pervasive in much of the employee wellbeing and work-life literature (Brown *et al.*, 2000; Guest, 2017). The concerns sketched here demand much greater critical scrutiny of the “on the ground” implementation of RWH initiatives.

Finally, our study contributes to emerging curiosity and debate about the practical accomplishments of new forms of institutional and organizational experimentation for “better work” (Ferrerias *et al.*, 2020; Murray *et al.*, 2020). Scholars note how such experimentation has the potential to lead to forms of regulation that “address fundamental power imbalances in the employment relationship” (Wright *et al.*, 2019) but stress the need for accompanying forms of “experimental governance” that can shape the “goals being pursued by management” (Kristensen and Morgan, 2012, p. 434), including especially the direct involvement of workers (Ferrerias *et al.*, 2020). Our study highlights the need to interrogate institutional experimentation, perhaps especially those with a *prima facie* promise of socially desirable outcomes. Furthermore, it reinforces the need for sustained and multilevel dialogue among different actors, including labour actors, for the forging and implementation of mutually beneficial regulation of working time norms in organizations and in society.

Conclusion

This article has brought to light critical concerns regarding the introduction of a four-day work week. In particular, the management-led initiative posed from the outset limited and circumscribed input from employees on the ideation of the “productivity week” and mixed hopes for employee benefits in increased non-work hours with more productive workplaces. It finds that the normalised absence, in this company, of employee voice in substantive decisions poses significant questions in regard to sustaining a RWH model that carefully respects worker interests and benefits alongside productivity objectives.

Building a RWH institution that provides benefits to employees with fewer negative trade-offs would require carefully calibrated dialogical interaction between management and employees. Far from executive largesse and decree, it requires effortful transformation of conventional organizational practices and management–employee relationships. That includes substantial change to entrenched managerial practices of performance measurement and monitoring, intense productivity pressure and weak employee voice. Substantive organizational and management development, alongside employee involvement, is required to forge this transformation. Including joint participation in setting productivity measures and employee appraisal, and flexibility in the shaping and enactment of the reduced hour framework, are necessary first practical steps.

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