The four-day working week

A guide to understanding how a four-day week works and how different businesses have implemented one.
While the Covid-19 crisis tested UK businesses like nothing ever before, in 20 years from now the virus itself may not be the legacy that people are still talking about.

Why? It’s because the global pandemic has paved the way for entirely new ways of working.

You will have read about – or even tried – some or all these new working modalities by now. At the very least, “working from home”, “hybrid offices” and “virtual meetings” will have entered your business vocabulary.

Many of these aren’t entirely new. Neither is the four-day week, the subject of this guide. Adoption of all these “alternative” ways of working, however, has been significantly accelerated by the pandemic. This is because each of them allows a business to continue operating in a way that puts less emphasis on spending as much time in the office and acknowledges the increasing importance of a work/life balance and overall wellbeing.

They also represent a growing acceptance that right now seems to be as a good time as any to shake up the traditional way of doing things.

The UK is less productive than many of our European neighbours despite working longer hours. Government figures show that a quarter of all working days lost in 2018 were caused by overworking.

The 4 Day Week UK Campaign believes that the current five-day week system is “broken”. The organisation’s campaign director, Joe Ryle, also thinks that workers themselves are “breaking” too.

For this guide we spoke to a number of businesses which have either partially or fully implemented a version of the four-day week. Each helps explain exactly what the four-day week is, how it can work in practice, the measures that are being used to track if it is successful or not, and more. Be the Business is not here to advocate for the four-day week, rather give companies an insight into how the method of working looks in practice.

Even if it transpires that a four-day week is not right for your organisation right now, by the end of this guide you will have a clear understanding of how it all works and why your suppliers or customers may already be putting it into place.
The four-day week, as its name suggests, is a way for employees to work four days a week instead of five – but there are different interpretations of this and how it can be applied.

There are generally considered to be three different approaches to the four-day week:

1. Working longer hours across four days

Sometimes called the compressed model, this is the interpretation of the four-day week that is currently making headlines in Belgium after its government announced in February that any employee could ask to work their allotted 38 hours across just four days.

One potentially appealing aspect of this option to employers is that they are not giving their employees anything “for free”. In our February 2022 poll of 1,000 UK SMEs, this model proved to be the most popular choice (39 per cent) when respondents were asked what kind of four-day week they would consider implementing or had already implemented. There are variations on this theme, such as the 5-4-9 work schedule, in which employees work nine hours per day for five days, followed by nine hours for four days in week two.

2. Working shorter hours across five days

A second way for employees to work the equivalent of four days is to work five shorter days – a move that frees them up for things like school runs, medical appointments and so on. The downside
of this model is that it still requires a daily commitment from people and doesn’t reduce their weekly commuting time. Salaries can either be maintained or cut to reflect the new hours, depending on company policy.

3. Working four regular days instead of five

Though one way of doing this would be to cut wages by 20 per cent to reflect the reduction in hours, relatively few businesses seem to be pursuing this route. What is gathering momentum instead is sometimes called the 100-80-100 approach, which is based around the idea of staff doing 100 per cent of the work in 80 per cent of the time at 100 per cent of their pay.

This version is attracting the most media attention – not least because well-known companies such as Microsoft, Unilever and Wanderlust have all either trialled or implemented it. Interestingly, this model was the third most popular option (30 per cent) in the Be the Business poll, just behind a simple reduction in hours for less pay.

This guide will mainly focus on option three, because this is where there is most pilot study-based analysis being carried out. It’s also of particular interest to Be the Business because it promotes the idea of greater productivity – getting more done in fewer hours – alongside improved staff wellbeing and happiness.

One of the businesses signed up to take part in a UK pilot is MBL Seminars, whose chairman Morgan Rigby said that the chance to be part of something new and exciting is a significant attraction.

“If we do make a success of it, it would be something that the team can feel proud of – that they are part of something even wider than our own business,” he added.

Data from earlier trials suggests a more productive four-day working week is within our grasp. Between 2015 and 2019, the country of Iceland ran two large-scale trials of a reduced working week (35-36 hours) with no reduction in pay. These were considered to be an “overwhelming success”, with productivity remaining the same or improving in most cases.

In 2018, a New Zealand company named Perpetual Guardian trialled a four-day work week and reported a 20 per cent increase in productivity and happier staff. The country’s prime minister Jacinda Ardern went on to encourage other businesses to try it.

Throughout our exploration of the four-day week we will hear from several UK small and medium-sized businesses that have already implemented a four-day week, or are about to start one, to discover what is driving the change and how this all fits into the new, post-coronavirus business landscape.
Chapter 2:  
The motivation for UK businesses

There are two key driving forces behind why most of interested organisations and businesses – including the 4 Day Week UK Campaign – want to challenge the long-established five-day week model: a quest for improved productivity and a boost to employee happiness and wellbeing.

Studies show that when we are and healthy and happy, we perform better. A Henley Business School study in 2019 found that 250 firms participating in a four-day week saved an estimated £92bn a year because employees were happier, less stressed, and took fewer sick days.

The 4 Day Week Campaign maintains that even though people are working fewer hours, this need not have a negative effect on business. However, it does mean that employers switching to a four-day week will need to ensure that employees are working more efficiently than they were before.

Working smarter

“One of the values that we have as a business is about working smarter,” said Andrew Dipper, head of marketing at Sunderland-based virtual hybrid events platform streamGo, “and that got us started on a conversation about how we could be more productive. The four-day week is quite a big talking point right now, so we started thinking about our roles.

“Most people could probably pick out quite a few meetings that they attended when they weren’t needed and someone could have just sent them the actions by email. That led to us thinking that there was probably a decent amount of time in our week that we could be using more efficiently – and that would enable us to go down to a four-day week.”

The 18-strong streamGo team are currently transitioning from five working days to 4.5 days – at the same pay – with the aim
of switching to four days quite quickly. Morgan Rigby, chairman of Worsley-based MBL Seminars, a company of 72 people which provides training courses for the professional services sector, was already considering a four-day week before the pandemic hit. Having survived the crisis by changing his business from an in-person training company to a digital one, he revisited the idea and signed up to a pilot programme.

“The basic idea is to use this to make us look at everything in our business and re-evaluate it,” he explained. “We want to be able to provide the same level of service and quality with everyone working four days rather than five. Hopefully, in the long term, it will make us more productive.

“It will help us recruit, and it will help with the wellbeing of the team who will hopefully be more energised and focused. I think it can help take us to another level.”

**Work/life balance**

Rachel Garrett, MD of Woodbridge-based CMG Technologies, specialists in 3D metal moulding, was ahead of the curve when she and her fellow director Phil Marsh decided to move the entire 30-strong team to a four-day week in 2015. Her late father was also involved in the transition. “We felt that it could be really good for our business because of staff wellbeing, staff morale and just trying to promote a better work/life balance – keeping stress levels to an absolute minimum,” she commented.

CMG management also realised that a four-day week would help employees save one-fifth of their travel costs. In fact, there are many other potential benefits. Among those flagged up by the 4 Day Week Campaign are:

- Improved gender equality, with men able to take up some of the care and household duties that still often fall to women
- A more sustainable lifestyle, with time-rich employees better equipped to make environmentally-positive choices
- A reduced carbon footprint – a four-day week across the UK could cut emissions by 127m tonnes per year

**Recognising resilience**

For Dominic Chandler, internal sales manager at communications company Yo Telecom, where the 90-strong team is split between sites in Southampton and Manchester, the desire to try a four-day week came after a taxing two years during the pandemic. The entire team has been “on overdrive” helping customers to transition from traditional working environments to a more hybrid setup.

“It showed us that our staff are super-resilient, and that they can perform to a very, very high level when they need to,” he said. In other words: if anyone could rise to the opportunity of shifting to a four-day week, it was Yo Telecom.

“When we first looked into this last year,” Dominic added, “there wasn’t a huge amount of data or case studies, so we put it on a back burner. But coming into the latter end of 2021, we saw the success of companies like Atom Bank and countries like Iceland that showed some very promising results, and that brought it back onto the table for discussion.”

Dominic listed a better work-life balance, employee engagement and improved staff retention as three of the positives that Yo Telecom envision.
As with many major business decisions, it makes sense to trial a four-day week before fully adopting it. The 4 Day Week Campaign recommends a six-month trial if there are concerns about a permanent commitment and, as Neil Knowles, creative director of London-based Elektra Lighting, pointed out, you can always revert to five days if four isn’t working.

“You don’t have to think about ‘forever’,” he said, “because it’s reversible. When we started a four-day week back in 2019, we said we would review it after months one, three and six, because it was possible that we’d completely messed up here. We actually wrote in our new contract that we would go back to a five-day a week if it wasn’t working.”

The way that four-day weeks play out can differ greatly between organisations. The Elektra team, who retained their pay levels, were given every Friday off. Closing the office on a Friday wasn’t a problem for clients, said Neil, because his firm’s work is very much project based. The business charges a fixed fee and then delivers on an agreed date.

Additionally, a member of the team can be made available if necessary for a Friday client meeting in much the same way they would avail themselves for a Saturday or a Sunday meeting. Most clients, Neil said, have been very supportive.

Open every day

For Rachel Garrett at CMG Technologies, the four-day week works slightly differently. “Before we did it, everybody was working a 40-hour week over five days,” she remembered. “We condensed this down to four days, reducing everybody’s time to 35 hours, while retaining their pay.”

CMG is open seven days a week, with structures in place so that each end of the week is covered in every department. “So we have people who work Mondays to Thursdays, Tuesdays to Fridays and then..."
we have a weekend shift to work Friday to Monday,” Rachel revealed. “We’ve got full coverage throughout the whole week.”

Andrew Dipper and the streamGo team currently get Friday afternoons off, with the whole of Friday anticipated within a few months. The staff’s salaries, benefits and perks will remain at the same level as when they worked five days.

To ensure the move didn’t leave a trail of disgruntled customers, streamGo’s management team made sure that they contacted them to explain why they were doing it. They also summed up what they were doing on the staff’s email signatures as a back-up.

“Quite a few of our customers have shown an interest in implementing it themselves,” said Andrew.

**Employee involvement**

One thing the 4 Day Week Campaign highly recommends is that leaders consult with employees before rolling out a four-day week. Rachel at CMG agreed with this recommendation. “You have to get staff buy-in and get their input into how it’s going to be structured,” she said. “Ensure that people understand they aren’t losing money and talk to them about the benefits that it can potentially bring.”

She also feels that flexibility is key. Some members of her team are working parents, and they preferred five shorter days instead of four full ones. “I guess a better way to look at what we’re doing is that it is a reduced-hours week,” she said.

**Fine detail**

Neil at Elektra Lighting also made sure that staff were onboard with the change. “We sat down and agreed a lot of things – such as what happens if you want to have time off because you’re having a boiler serviced and all that ‘life’ stuff,” he said. “What we decided was that our time was now much more precious, so if you wanted to do those things you’d have to do it on a Friday when we’re not working – and if you didn’t want to do that then you’d have to take time off.”

He can’t stress enough the importance of hammering out every point with employees. “We had to adjust the number of holiday days down from 20 a year to 16,” he said, “and I had to get everyone to agree to that. You might think that would be straightforward given that everyone was getting every Friday off, but actually it wasn’t.”

It’s for reasons like this that the 4 Day Week Campaign urge companies to ensure the human resources side of the business are involved from the very start.

Now that they are several years into their respective four-day week schemes, neither Neil nor Rachel can imagine ever going back. “Since we’ve done it, we’ve seen significant improvements in productivity and staff morale,” revealed Rachel. “Everybody’s really motivated to achieve targets and hit deadlines within those four days.”

It’s true that people are having to work “smarter”, she said, and there’s a need for everyone to be a lot more organised, too. These are the fuel, in many ways, for increased productivity – and most employees seem happy to surrender water cooler chat in exchange for a three-day weekend.
One of the key aims of pilot programmes like the 4 Day Week UK Campaign’s is to amass data. After six months of working fewer hours, the 50 firms involved will be able to show in some detail what worked and where there have been bumps in the road.

No matter which kind of four-day week a firm opts for, it is essential that tracking of some kind – whether that be laser-focused or more informal – is built into the scheme from the start.

Dominic Chandler at Yo Telecom has been pitching the firm’s participation in a pilot to employees as an opt-in programme, which staff will be eligible to take part in for as long as they continue to have high productivity and achieve their KPIs.

“For some departments this will be very easy to track,” he said. “With sales, for example, we’re a profit-driven business. So, ultimately, as long as they’re hitting their profit targets then there’s absolutely no reason why they shouldn’t be able to do it.”

Things will get a little more complex, he feels, when trying to assess the effect that a four-day week has had on departments whose output is less concrete. “I think for some of the departments we’re going to need to spend a little more time working out how things can be measured,” he said, thinking in particular of project-based teams. For these, he feels, there will need to be additional communication from them about what they feel is optimal.

“One of the things I said from the start,” added Neil Knowles at Elektra Lighting, where the four-day working week began...
in 2019, “was that we were going to monitor this and if our invoicing dropped by 20 per cent we’d stop doing it. But we tried it and it didn’t go down, so we carried on.”

Measuring another key metric – staff happiness – is not, he feels, something he can easily do. “But I think everyone is motivated and happy and we have a lot less turnover of staff,” he said. “I mean, who’s going leave here and go to work for another firm where they have to work five days a week rather than four?”

**Small vs. large**

Neil’s informal approach to measuring staff happiness can work well with smaller teams – his workforce comprises just 12 people – but for larger firms there are tools available that can monitor such things.

“We do regular employee feedback surveys,” said Andrew Dipper at streamGo. “They’re anonymous and they go out roughly once every two weeks. We get a pretty clear idea quite quickly of whether people are generally happy at work or not, and if not then we can do something about it.”

The response to the firm’s new, four-and-a-half-day week schedule has so far been really positive. “A lot of people are using the time to do more of the things that they enjoy,” said Andrew. “Things like visiting family or friends, or spending time on their hobbies. One colleague of mine runs an Etsy craft business and now uses Friday afternoons to look after that.”

**Have clear goals**

It is vital that both revenues and staff happiness are maintained if a four-day week scheme is going to work, and employers need to give them equal billing. It may be, for example, that revenues can be maintained, but staff actually find fewer working hours to be more stressful.

“One of the key reasons we’re doing this is so that our staff can have a better work-life balance,” said Andrew, “so if it’s not delivering on that, then why are we doing it?”

For Morgan Rigby, chairman of MBL Seminars, success will depend on whether or not the whole team embrace it. “This is a company-wide initiative, and it will take all of us to work together in harmony to make it work,” he said. “If some people are not rowing as hard as the others, it won’t work. But I don’t think that will be the case.”

Rachel Garrett, meanwhile, now has seven years of experience to fall back on for proof that CMG Technologies’ four-day week is working. “We don’t measure anything formally,” she said, “but we don’t lose staff members, and I feel there’s a real reason for that.

“Employees also come to us when there’s a job going and say ‘I know someone who would like to work here’. I think when you’re getting that word of mouth from your staff who are promoting us as a good place to work, then that’s quite a key indicator that people are happy.”
Chapter 5:
Ten lessons and tips

1. Invite the team to participate in the planning stages
   “We said to the team that we’d like their input into how to structure a four-day week. They went away and had a think about it and came back to us with their proposals, and we could then see that it would work. Because we had their buy-in, it worked really well.” Rachel Garrett, CMG Technologies

2. Explain the new four-day week to clients – flagging up how it may even be to their benefit
   “One of the reasons we are doing this is that we think we can be more productive as a business. We think it will make our staff happier and more engaged in the work that they’re doing, which will benefit our clients. And we communicated that to all of our customers.” Andrew Dipper, streamGo

3. Don’t think of it as a free day off for everyone
   “One of the things that often comes up when talking to other business owners is this idea that we are going to give everyone a free day off in return for substandard performance. They say, ‘How does that make business sense?’ I think you have to reframe it as, ‘No, this is actually a productivity tool’.

   There is no way that every single person is 100 per cent productive every day. I think in most businesses people are probably about 60 per cent productive. So, if you could take that up to 80 per cent over four days, or even 85 per cent, you’re in a better position.” Dominic Chandler, Yo Telecom

4. Make sure that you mould a four-day week around your firm’s needs
   “There’s often a misconception around people thinking that there’s a ‘one size fits all’ approach to this. If you think about a five-day week, some people work weekends, some people work weekdays, some are on shift work. There are so many different ways that companies can approach a four-day week.” Andrew Dipper, streamGo
5. Don’t underestimate the value of a happy workforce

“If you don’t have happy staff, you don’t have a productive workforce. By allowing them to have an additional day off, I think it not only helps them be happier but to have a better work-life balance in general. People need to really think about the knock-on effect this has on a business, because if you’ve got more productive staff, your business is only going to get better.”  
_Dominic Chandler, Yo Telecom_

6. Remember that it may take some getting used to

“One of the things that we do try and do regularly is to encourage people to definitely take the time off, because I think it’s quite easy to go, ‘I’ll just finish this bit of work’ on a Friday lunchtime, and suddenly it’s three o’clock. One thing that helps is to have a chat about it in our internal group chats on a Friday morning, saying things like ‘What have you got planned for this afternoon?’.”  
_Andrew Dipper, streamGo_

7. Remember that productivity will need to improve if you are to maintain revenues

“We looked at lots of productivity optimisation, trying to reduce operations where we could, so that everything goes through the system a lot quicker. There’s been a whole circle of improvements that weren’t necessarily anticipated, to be honest.”  
_Rachel Garrett, CMG Technologies_

8. When measuring, look beyond the black and white

“There are a lot of other hidden benefits, things like how much you don’t have to spend hiring someone because you’re retaining good people who want to stay with you. You’re spending less on training, less on onboarding. Offering a four-day week is also a really big benefit if you want to attract the best talent.”  
_Andrew Dipper, streamGo_

9. Embrace the opportunity

“We’re going into the unknown, but after the pandemic, how bad can it be? It’s more exciting than daunting, I would say.”  
_Morgan Rigby, MBL Seminars_

10. Accept that a four-day week may, in fact, be long overdue

“One thing people don’t realise is that the five-day week is not some ‘written in stone thing’ we’ve had since time immemorial. Way back in the 1830s people used to work seven days a week and they were given the right to have Sunday mornings off so they could go to church. That gradually became all of Sunday, and then factory workers started getting weekends off in the 1930s, but the five-day week wasn’t widespread until the 1950s. We’ve dropped from seven days to six to five – and it’s about time we dropped to four.”  
_Neil Knowles, Elektra Lighting_
According to a 2021 McKinsey Future of Work report, the pandemic accelerated existing trends in remote work and automation.

It stated that:
- Remote work and virtual meetings look set to continue, although less intensely than during the peak of the pandemic
- Demand for office space may decline
- Around 20 per cent of business travel may not return
- Investment in automation and artificial intelligence (AI) has risen

Deloitte, meanwhile, said that: “The digitisation of work enables us to ‘unbundle’ the workplace and put it back together in more effective ways.” Clearly, the world of work is changing at a rapid pace – and comes with a wealth of new opportunities. But how does a four-day week fit in?

“Prior to my current job, I worked in marketing for a recruitment business for five years,” said Andrew Dipper at streamGo, whose colleagues are currently working 4.5 days a week with a view to going to four days if the approach works. “It’s absolutely fascinating how the world of work has changed in the past two years.

“Before the pandemic, some companies started offering remote and flexible work and that was seen as a huge perk: today, that’s almost expected. What was once a set of really excellent benefits is now just standard, and I think that’s probably where things like the four-day week come in. It’s a way for companies to differentiate from others. I think that has really been a big driver behind people rolling out a four-day week.”

Morgan Rigby, whose company MBL Seminars is taking part in a four-day week pilot programme, agrees that the pandemic has turned the way we used to work on its head. Since March 2020, his own business has had to transform from an in-person company to a digital one.
“We got everyone out of the office about three hours before the actual lockdown came,” he said. “I was the only person working remotely then, and now everyone does. We’ve still got the offices, but we’ve not been in there for two years.”

He sees virtual offices, hybrid setups and four-day weeks as being part of a completely new world that businesses will be able to tap into to find solutions that work for them. “I think the pandemic has forced us to think about what the future of work will look like,” he said. “It’s given us the opportunity to say, ‘Let’s take the best bits of the old world and think about how we can create a new one’. And I don’t think there’s any going back.”

**Rapid adoption**

Dominic Chandler at Yo Telecom said that employee happiness is one of the key things that advocates of the new world of work are aiming for.

“If that means allowing them to work remotely, if that means hybrid working, if that means being able to work from different countries or on a four-day week, whatever it is, I think it’s important that people really take a look at that and ask, ‘How does this fit into our business?’,” he said.

There is no doubt in his mind that the pandemic has made all of these changes happen much faster than they would have otherwise. “I think people were forced into a situation where they had to adapt, which ultimately has led to innovation,” he said. “The whole world has had to innovate in terms of finding ways that you can still get the performance out of your staff that you want, but also trust them to get on with their day and do it in a way that suits them.”

Rachel Garrett, MD of CMG Technologies, whose employees have been working a four-day week since 2015 added: “I think the fact that there seems to be this movement where people are realising that you can trust your staff and you can still get the throughput and the production that you need on those reduced hours is really positive.”

**Environmental considerations**

It’s also worth nothing here that the firm of the future is far more likely to be concerned by its environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) obligations than ever before. McKinsey’s report stated that these have become “increasingly salient since the pandemic”. What better way for a progressive, socially-responsible firm to prove that it takes the wellbeing of its employees seriously than by offering a wealth of flexible working solutions?

Joe Ryle at the 4 Day Week UK Campaign agrees. He said that the new working options on the table – the four-day week among them – are a great way to show the world that you are a forward-thinking, ethical company.

“The prime minister is saying that we need to build back better after the pandemic, and one of those things has got to be the four-day week,” he said. “A four-day week is all about creating a better work-life balance for everyone – what’s not to like about that?”

**Next**

Five steps to getting started
Five steps to getting started

1. **Ascertain which model is right for your business**
The compressed model – as supported across Belgium – could work well for energetic teams who can do four longer days, but to capture the spirit of the four-day week movement then the 100-80-100 model is one which truly encourages greater productivity. If it works, it will result in happier staff working efficiently – and with no loss of revenues.

2. **Bring the staff onside**
It’s not just about giving them a free day off – staff need to understand that they will need to streamline the way they work if the scheme is to be a success. Also, remember that not everyone will be completely sold on the idea. Neil Knowles at Elektra Lighting was surprised to face some pushback to the idea that annual leave should drop to 16 days – even though everyone was getting every Friday off.

3. **Work out your KPIs**
Before you begin, you need to know how you will measure a variety of metrics, from sales to customer satisfaction to employee engagement and happiness. Shop around for the right tools to help you do this.

4. **Spread the word**
If a four-day week means that your businesses will henceforth be closed every Friday, for example, it is important that you explain to clients what you are doing, why it will hopefully be a good thing for your company, and how they can continue to work with you in as seamless a manner as possible. If, however, you’re continuing to offer seven-day service – like CMG Technologies – you may not need to alert your clients at all. MD Rachel Garrett said that around 90 per cent of their customers probably still don’t know that employees work a four-day week.

5. **Establish a safety net**
If you see revenues slide by “x” per cent, or staff are suddenly taking more sick days due to burn-out, it may be your cue to reverse the clock. As all of our four-day week advocates have insisted, nothing has to be forever. With good planning and a willing team, however, you’ll have a strong chance of making a success of it.