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Less is more: Organisational and employee outcomes of reduced working hours

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Purpose: The study explores factors and consequences of reduced working hours as an example of flexible work policies, in particular assessing whether global findings observed also manifest in the South African (SA) context, and provide key considerations to inform strategies in organisations looking to adopt such policies.

Design/methodology/approach: Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with senior managers who participated in the 4-Day Week South Africa trial. Data were analysed thematically.

Findings/results: Findings affirmed that benefits experienced in SA companies trialling reduced working hours were similar to those in developed countries. The 4 Day Week SA pilot programme largely appealed to people-centred leadership in smaller companies offering specialised services. Furthermore, results confirmed that favourable working conditions increased employee well-being and engagement, which could drive productivity and business outcomes. Favourable working policies could also lead to increased worker retention and talent attraction, creating a sustainable advantage for organisations. Lastly, increased flexibility and work–life balance appealed to men and women, indicating that such work policies could contribute to a more equal society.

Practical implications: The study provides guidelines for companies considering adopting flexible work, and more specifically, reduced working hour policies. Because the study is based on real-life experience, it highlights considerations not available elsewhere that will help companies plan and implement steps when introducing new work policies.

Originality/value: This research uncovered in-depth information not fully addressed in the publicly available reports on 4 Day Week Global trials. Some previously underexplored aspects of implementation could lead to better policy adoption strategies.

Keywords: reduced working hours; flexible policies; well-being; work–life balance; employee and employer benefits; productivity.

Introduction

Several years after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, companies are still battling to find suitable return-to-office strategies that will appease all stakeholders. While executives prefer that employees spend more time at the office, a recent Bankrate survey in the United States found that 68% of employees surveyed prefer to split their time between home and the office, confirming employees' desire for location flexibility (Gillespie, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2024).

Coronavirus disease 2019 acted as a catalyst for adopting flexible working policies, which yielded unintended positive outcomes for employers and employees. Even though interest in non-traditional work policies had existed for decades, the pandemic forced organisations to change from the traditional 40-h, 5-day workweek to more flexible models to reduce face-to-face contact (Beno et al., 2022; Bosch & Lehndorff, 2001; Memis, 2016; Walker & Fontinha, 2022). Before the pandemic, some companies experimenting with flexible work models also reported promising results. Microsoft Japan, one of the earliest experimenters, recorded a 40% increase in productivity during its 1-month trial period (Paul, 2019).

During the pandemic, two prevalent approaches were remote work and a compressed workweek, where employees worked the same number of hours over fewer days per week. Research found that employees had positive attitudes towards both flexible methods when implemented during a time of crisis (Atiku & Ganiyu, 2022). Furthermore, Beno et al. (2022)

reported that renewed interest in flexible work was sparked by the increased productivity and other benefits experienced by organisations and employees during the crisis, as well as employees' increased pursuit of improved work–life balance.

Post-pandemic, multiple trials across countries and industries were spearheaded by the prominent non-profit organisation 4 Day Week Global. These trials focused specifically on reducing working hours, and similar benefits were reported in many of these territories (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a). But while most of these trial participants were committed to retaining their flexible working hour policies, other companies were taking different approaches. Although companies returning to the traditional full-time in-office model remain the exception for now, a survey conducted in August 2023 among 1000 business decision-makers reported that 90% already had partially or fully returned to the office or were planning to do so in 2024 (Munk, 2024; Resume Builder, 2023).

Given that 89% of full-time working adults in the United States prefer some level of flexible work and 51% of these are willing to switch jobs or industries to retain it, Gillespie (2023) asserts that there is a clear mismatch between employer and employee needs. Greater awareness of employee preferences creates opportunities for businesses willing to consider flexible work policies to retain and attract talent and realise benefits similar to those reported by other organisations that adapted their way of work.

Therefore, this study explores factors involved in implementing and adopting flexible and, more specifically, reduced working hour policies. Knowing how to implement suitable policies best and mitigate arising challenges will help organisations maximise benefits and remain competitive in the business landscape.

Flexible work terminology

Flexible working arrangements describe variations in where, when and how much employees work (Beno et al., 2022; Davidescu et al., 2020). It describes alternatives to a traditional work arrangement of working 40 office-based hours a week spread over 5 days with predetermined start and end times each day. Figure 1 depicts different iterations of this flexibility.

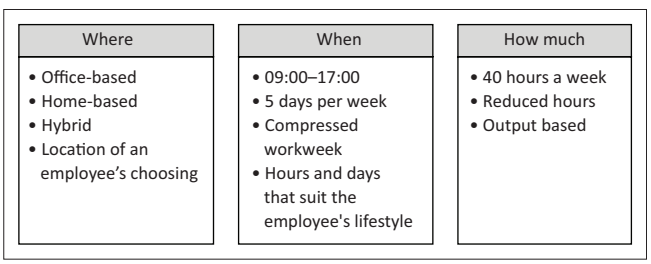

FIGURE 1: Different iterations of location, time and duration of work.

Common terms used to describe the location from where employees work include *office-based work*, *remote work* (in which employees work from a location of their choosing, including their home) or *hybrid work* (in which employees spend a specified or unspecified number of days in an office and the remainder working remotely). A *compressed workweek* describes a working format in which employees work a reduced number of days per week, typically four instead of five. A reduction in total hours worked per week is not implied. Conversely, *reduced working hours* describes a working arrangement in which fewer than 40 h are worked per week. In this approach, fixed hours may be spread out over any number of days. Flexible policies may yield a myriad of different flexible working arrangements using variations of location, duration and scheduling parameters. For example, policies may specify flexibility parameters spanning location, schedule, duration or days worked. Organisational policies should, therefore, clarify the interpretations and expectations regarding each parameter when developing flexible work policies.

Tailored approaches

The 4-day workweek premise in the contemporary context most often refers to a combination of a compressed workweek and a meaningful reduction in working hours. The 4 Day Week Global trials used the 100–80–100 model based on the premise of delivering the same output in 80% of the time for full compensation (Lewis et al., 2023). Global trial participants implementing reduced working hours tailored their policies to their needs (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a). The tailored approaches are grouped as follows:

- Reducing the number of days worked from five to four. Variations of this approach included a fifth-day stoppage, where all employees worked the same 4 days; a staggered approach, where some teams worked from Monday to Thursday and others worked from Tuesday to Friday and a decentralised approach across functional departments, which was a mixture of the first two approaches.
- Adopting an annualised approach to reduced working hours by organisations operating in industries affected by seasonality, such as the hospitality industry. Employees worked more during busy months and less in slower months to work 32 h per week when annualised.
- A conditional approach to reduced working hours where the reduction in work hours was conditional to an employee's performance.

The variety of policies adopted highlights the possible complexities embedded in adapting to work policies such as reduced working hours but also the adaptability offered.

Organisational profile

Company size and type of work performed were two important characteristics of companies that participated in the 4 Day Week Global trials.

In all three trials, more than two-thirds of participating companies had 25 or fewer employees – 68% of UK companies, 73% of Australasia companies and 79% of companies in the US and Ireland trial had a maximum of 25 employees. Of the companies participating in the three pilot programmes, only 22% in the UK trial, 12% in the Australasia trial and 9% in the US and Ireland trial had more than 50 employees (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a).

Knowledge work was prevalent across these three trials too. Sixty-two per cent (62%) of UK companies, 64% of Australasia companies and 67% of USA and Ireland companies taking part in the trials offered services that could be classified as knowledge work (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a).

Reported benefits of reduced working hours

Research performed on organisations that had trialled or fully implemented reduced working hours found many possible and realised benefits to employees and employers alike. Moreover, many of these benefits were found to persist beyond the trial period (Schor et al., 2023b).

Employee benefits

Across the global trials analysed, numerous wellness benefits have been reported by employees in reduced working hour pilot programmes (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a; Walker & Fontinha, 2019). These benefits include improved overall well-being, reduced work stress and burnout with reduced working hours, improvement in sleep issues, decreased fatigue and anxiety contributing to widely reported increases in mental health, an increase in employees' ability to perform in their role and improvements in physical health. Trials also found an increase in employee satisfaction, lower absenteeism and increased job satisfaction and productivity (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a). Furthermore, employees' reduced work hours reportedly benefited them financially by reducing the cost of caring for children and elderly family members (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022). Some employees enrolled in secondary sources of paid employment, thereby increasing their income (Walker & Fontinha, 2022). While previous research suggests that these benefits should not be surprising (Kallis et al., 2013; Lepinteur, 2016; Shao, 2022), the findings are not uniform. Research carried out in Korea found that reducing working hours did not positively affect employee well-being and job satisfaction (Rudolf, 2014). They reported that employees' satisfaction with their working hours significantly increased but was offset by the negative impact of shorter working hours because of job intensification. Clark (1998) found that a shorter workweek could also negatively impact perceived job quality.

Employer benefits

Benefits reported from international trials extended to employers as well. During a 2022 trial of 33 companies referred to as the US and Ireland trial with employees in the United States, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada, companies reported a weighted increase in revenue of 8.14% during the 6-month trial or an increase of 37.55% when compared to the same period the previous year (Schor et al., 2022). The UK trial reported a 35% increase in revenue compared to the same period the year before (Lewis et al., 2023). However, the revenue reporting in these two trials had obvious drawbacks. Firstly, not all organisations in the trials reported on changes in revenue. Secondly, no control measure existed for the specific sample. Therefore, it was not possible to determine what the change in revenue would have been if no change in work policy had been implemented. Staff-related benefits that may indirectly impact revenue have also been reported by companies offering a 4-day workweek. These include an increased ability to attract and retain talented employees, a resulting saving of approximately 2% of annual turnover and a reduced likelihood of resignations (DeVaro, 2022; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2023a; Walker & Fontinha, 2022). Research in the Malaysian banking industry also showed that flexible work policies could contribute to employee retention (Idris, 2014).

Output-related benefits reported by organisations participating in the UK trial further included increases in both the quality and quantity of work produced (Walker & Fontinha, 2019). This increase in productivity was an anticipated and important consequence of higher employee satisfaction (Kessler et al., 2020), although the observed increase was not immediate. These reported employer and employee benefits observed in the global arena indicate that the organisational success may be partially influenced by the working policies implemented. Furthermore, they warrant exploration of potential connections between employee and employer benefits.

Factors of productivity

Exploring these possible links requires attention to productivity factors, particularly the role of technology and the ways employee and employer benefits may interact during the adoption of reduced working hours.

Technology

With the premise of reduced working hours relying heavily on increased productivity to maintain or increase employee output, technological factors become vital enablers of flexible and reduced working hour policies. It follows that investment in technology and a workforce's ability to use it effectively can be expected to make reduced working hours more feasible by supporting increased productivity. Technological considerations include technological innovation, development, advancements and the adoption thereof (Mbithi et al., 2017). Kallis et al. (2013) argue that productivity is impacted by the investment in and use and integration of employee tasks with technology, as using technology reduces the cost of production of goods and services. Adopting and optimising the use of ever-advancing technology will further increase the productivity of organisations (Taylor et al., 2014).

However, technology is no longer a competitive advantage because of the ease with which it can be acquired and implemented in the modern world (Eldor, 2020). Companies therefore have to look at their human capital for sources of sustainable success.

Employee well-being and engagement

Research supports the link between employee well-being, productivity and organisational success. Favourable working conditions such as reasonable hours, weekends and limited overtime were proven to positively influence employee well-being, while employee well-being was found to impact employee engagement (Marin-Garcia et al., 2020; Rasool et al., 2021). Research linked employee well-being to more motivated employees, regardless of seniority (Arenas et al., 2015). Eldor (2020, p. 181) described collective engagement as 'a firm-level descriptive indicator of the overall motivational environment' and argued that an engaged workforce created a competitive advantage for organisations. Harter et al. (2009) asserted that, as engagement drives business outcomes, organisations with above-average engagement were about twice as likely to succeed than those with below-average engagement. These dynamics suggest that improved employee well-being and engagement may be central mechanisms through which reduced working hours could enhance organisational performance.

Research has also found a negative correlation between engagement and absenteeism and a positive correlation between engagement and task performance (Neuber et al., 2021; Tanwar, 2017). Indeed, increased engagement has also been found to increase performance and productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction and loyalty (Basahal et al., 2022; Motyka, 2018; Tanwar, 2017). This reinforces the idea that the benefits of reduced working hours are likely to translate into tangible organisational outcomes.

In addition, flexible work offers employees a better work–life balance (De-a-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021). Both men and women prefer shorter hours, with women's preferences linked more strongly to work-family issues. Long hours are often a barrier for women wanting to return to work (Thornthwaite, 2004), which suggests that flexible, inclusive work policies may lead to a higher participation rate of women in the workforce, economic growth and a more equal societal environment. Reduced working hours can therefore be seen as not only improving balance for individual employees but also contributing to broader societal and economic outcomes, which strengthens the business case for such policies.

Staff retention and attraction

The cost-saving effects of staff retention have already been considered as a benefit because of reduced hiring and training spending, as well as the loss of productivity during the recruitment and training processes. Studies also highlight the negative effect of departing employees on the workforce of those remaining, the potential for decreased staff morale and the possible impact on product and service quality (Mahadi et al., 2020). These considerations are particularly relevant when assessing reduced working hours, as improved well-being and engagement may help lower turnover and mitigate these costs.

Talent attraction is an important aspect for organisations, especially in competitive industries and where skills shortages exist. Research has shown the correlation between effective leadership and employees' intention to stay at an organisation (Maphanga et al., 2024). Furthermore, optimising recruitment processes, which include strong employer branding, has been shown to increase organisational performance (Cheraisi & Busolo, 2020). It follows that Beechler and Woodward (2009) rightly state that organisational policies must be restructured to attract, engage and retain employees to ensure sustainable business success. Flexible work policies are a way companies can obtain brand strength and build a competitive advantage in the modern working world. Reduced working hours can therefore function not only as an internal engagement tool but also as an external differentiator that supports talent attraction.

Reflecting on how the benefits reported positively impact employee and organisational health and performance, the study has sought to understand how to best implement reduced working hour policies to gain a competitive advantage.

Methodology

Research approach

The 4 Day Week Global organisation has initiated 4-day week trials in multiple countries since 2019. Their South African trial report was released a few months after the completion of their study. Set metrics were recorded through interviews, and all participants within each participating company completed pre- and post-surveys. The South African leg, 4 Day Week SA, launched its 6-month pilot programme comprising 28 companies on 01 March 2023. Participating companies volunteered to be included in the trial. The study reported in this article was performed independently from the 4 Day Week SA pilot programme but drew on the experiences of participants in these companies. Interviews were conducted for this study shortly after the trial ended but before the official report for the larger project was released. This study adopted a qualitative research approach by interviewing the director of 4 Day Week SA and senior management from the available population of companies that had participated in the South Africa trial of reduced working hours, regardless of whether they chose to continue after the trial period. The population was chosen as the South African trial was public, allowing most of the participating companies to be identified through media coverage. It was also structured, ensuring that organisations shared a common timeline and framework for implementation. The director was contacted via her publicly available e-mail address, and an interview was requested to capture her informed opinions

because of her close involvement with the process and the participants. This led to a richer understanding of the trial results than interviewing participants only. She also agreed to distribute invitations for interviews to pilot participants. Senior executives from participating organisations who were responsible for pilot implementation within their respective companies were initially invited to participate via e-mail. After no responses were received, participating companies whose names were known publicly through various press releases were contacted directly. The intention was to interview between a third and half of the 28 South African companies taking part in the trial. In total, data were gathered from participants representing 8 of the 28 companies (29%). Of these, seven were interviewed virtually and one submitted written answers to the interview guide (P8). Data saturation was achieved by the seventh interview.

Sample and data collection process

Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted. Interview questions covered company services offered; basic employee and company information; and implementation challenges and outcomes. Additional questions asked of the director included information about the selection process; support offered to participants before, during and after the trial period; and general feedback and results reported by pilot participants. Selected interview questions were distributed beforehand to improve the quality of the information gathered. This allowed senior managers time to consult with other employees, where necessary, to provide rich answers. Audio files from the recorded interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai (https://otter.ai) and verified for accuracy by the researcher.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method for thematic analysis guided the examination of interview data. Initially, transcripts were thoroughly reviewed multiple times to note initial ideas. Subsequently, initial codes were generated based on relevant sections in the transcripts, which were then organised into meaningful groups to identify overarching patterns in the data.

In the fourth phase, code groups were systematically reviewed and refined, focusing on frequency and prominence across the dataset. This process distilled the essence of each emerging theme. By phase five, these themes became clearer, revealing distinct topics that bridged gaps between findings and existing literature. The themes with the highest frequencies became the discussion points of this research.

To enhance rigour, several validation strategies were employed. Firstly, data saturation was reached by the seventh interview, ensuring that the insights reflected a comprehensive range of perspectives. Secondly, transcripts were verified manually against recordings to ensure accuracy, and selected questions were provided in advance to improve the depth and reliability of responses. Thirdly, the iterative coding process was conducted systematically using ATLAS.ti software (version 23), which improved transparency and consistency in analysis.

In the final phase of analysis, a coherent narrative was crafted to highlight key insights and implications for management and practice. This method facilitated a nuanced interpretation of interviewee perspectives and informed recommendations grounded in identified themes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Stellenbosch Business School Research Ethics Committee (No. 28888). The study was considered low risk, as participants were senior professionals engaging in discussions about organisational practices. All interviewees received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Written consent was obtained before data collection, including permission to record interviews. To preserve confidentiality, identifying details such as company names or individual job titles are not disclosed, with the exception of the director of 4 Day Week SA, who explicitly granted permission for her title, an identifying detail, to be used. All data were stored securely in password-protected files and will be permanently deleted after 3 years.

Results

The findings from the collected data are presented and discussed in this section. Firstly, to contextualise the thematic analysis, an overview of the participating organisations is provided. Secondly, the findings are organised into six themes that capture the main patterns observed in the data: (1) company culture and people-centricity, (2) preparation and implementation, (3) employee well-being and work–life balance, (4) organisational performance and talent outcomes, (5) employee apprehension and misperceptions and (6) executional and practical hurdles. Together, these themes provide a nuanced view of both the enablers and constraints experienced by organisations participating in the 4 Day Week SA pilot.

Context: Profiles of participating organisations

Participants were asked about their organisation's profile (see Table 1). The services offered by organisations taking part in the pilot programme were mostly knowledge work requiring a tertiary education or a specialised skillset. Company size ranged from 4 to 107, with an average staff complement of 42. Only two companies had more than 40 employees, with the eight pilot participants' organisations employing a total of 334 staff members. Female representation within these organisations ranged from 38% to 100%.

Six (75%) of the companies represented in the study had 50 or fewer employees. In the US and Ireland pilots, 91% of participating companies had fewer than 50 employees; in

TABLE 1: Details of interviewees and representative organisations.

Participant number	Interviewee role	Company services offered	Number of employees	Gender representation in company		Company average education level
				Male (%)	Female (%)	
P1	Co-founder	Advertising	22	50	50	Tertiary
P2	Marketing manager	Web and graphic design	5	60	40	Tertiary
P3	HR manager	ICT services (hardware, software, hosting)	16	63	37	Specialised diplomas and certifications
P4	Managing director	Market research	107	± 30	± 70	Tertiary
P5	Senior management	Exercise and training services	39	54	46	Post-matric certifications
P6	Founder	Consulting	47	28	72	Tertiary
P7	Founder	Accreditation services	4	0	100	Post-matric certifications
P8	Head of human capital	Property management	94	28	72	Post-matric certifications
P9	Director: 4 Day Week SA	Non-profit	-	-	-	-

ICT, Information and Communication Technology; SA, South Africa.

the Australian pilot, 88%; and in the UK pilot, 78% (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a). Companies with smaller staff complements likely found it quicker and less disruptive to change scheduling approaches and operational processes, while it was easier to communicate and measure outcomes. However, a larger workforce did not necessarily hinder success – Microsoft Japan, with 2300 employees, successfully trialled reduced working hours, although this experiment was valid for only 1 month in 2019 (Paul, 2019). In line with other global trials, knowledge work was prominent in the South African company trials. Seven interviewees said that almost all work could be performed with only a computer and internet access. All interviewees said the average employee performing knowledge work had tertiary education or specialised certifications. Globally, 68% of UK trial participants and 72% of the US and Ireland trial had at least an undergraduate degree (Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022). The link between specialised work and tertiary education is not new, and the findings suggest that many instances of knowledge work performed by participating companies can be classified as specialised work. It is possible that companies performing knowledge work and requiring few resources were more drawn to the concept of reducing working hours. However, the findings could also suggest that education and skills development, including the optimal use of the available technology, may equip employees sufficiently to offset reduced hours with an increase in productivity. Lastly, the high female representation in participating companies could have partly enabled the successful adoption of reduced working hour policies, as Thornthwaite (2004) asserts that women are disproportionately disadvantaged by long working hours. Benefits could have incentivised these women to increase their efforts to adopt reduced working hours successfully.

Against this organisational backdrop, the discussion of the six emerging themes now follows.

Theme 1: Company culture and people-centricity

Data from interviews with participants and the director of 4 Day Week SA revealed multiple leadership and organisational culture factors contributing to the success of the pilot programme within companies.

Organisations' leadership teams emerged as arguably the most important contributing factor to pilot success. As confirmed by Maphanga et al. (2024), leaders are responsible for creating and driving company culture in many organisations. This is perhaps particularly true for smaller organisations where leaders are often closely involved with operations, as has been the case in the companies' leadership interviewed (P1:Q6, P2:Q4, P3:Q4, P6:Q8). One interviewee called it a 'leadership type … a hands-on leader' (P9:Q16). The intentional culture created by involved leaders in the participating organisations impacted the openness and level of trust, which was crucial in successfully implementing reduced working hours. This was illustrated in their willingness to allow employees to plan, implement and pivot their approach to reducing work hours in a manner that worked optimally for the team – and this level of employee involvement was also recommended as part of the pilot preparation (P1:Q8, P2:Q61, P5:Q45, P6:Q23). As one founder stated, 'All you have to do as a business owner is just to be open-minded enough to try it and to listen…' (P1:Q117), capturing how leadership openness created space for experimentation and employee-led solutions. Furthermore, leadership within organisations was observed to be people-centric and focused on both their employees' well-being and the financial health of their company (P1:Q10, P2:Q72, P4:Q15, P6:Q6). This people-centricity was also prevalent in Iceland where reduced working hours have been widely adopted throughout the country (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021). People-centricity manifested concern for the health of their employees and the intentional creation of a culture that supported a healthy work–life balance. One founder repeatedly stated their intention to create 'a place where people want to work' (P1:Q30). Another interviewee credited the company founder's openness and empathetic leadership, noting:

> 'The company's culture is one where we want everybody to be happy and we want everybody to go to the boss to speak to him about things that are affecting them personally and professionally, because that impacts each other, which is why work life balance is so important for us.' (P2, male, marketing manager, small web design company)

The findings suggest that leaders who understand the importance of employee well-being and empowerment were more willing to experiment with new ways of creating company cultures in which employees and businesses could

thrive. Furthermore, employees' close involvement might have contributed to implementation success.

Theme 2: Preparation and implementation

Companies participating in the 4 Day Week SA pilot programme had the benefit of support from 4 Day Week Global, the international organisation responsible for structuring pilot programmes in various countries (P2:Q45, P3:Q50). Interviewees indicated that this support was vital to successful policy implementation. Pilot participants also had access to a network of support from other companies and resources such as policy templates and videos during implementation (P2:Q42, P6:Q83, P9:Q37, P9:Q43). Employees were given a choice to participate (P3:Q52, P6:Q72), and expectations were clearly communicated, often in writing (P2:Q36, P5:Q48). Leaders allowed teams to set their own schedules within agreed parameters (P1:Q23, P2:Q9, P7:Q12) and solve challenges collaboratively. As one founder described, illustrating the role of transparency in reducing uncertainty:

> 'We basically had this opt in form… We just set out whether we will consider it a success, if, and whether we'll consider it a failure, if. Thus, people knew how we were going to be measuring it, which is very important.' (P6, female, founder of consulting firm)

Implementation support from 4 Day Week Global was common among trials in the United Kingdom, the USA, Ireland and Australasia. The collective knowledge obtained through trial and error by 4 Day Week Global seemed to have offered significant value, especially in helping pilot participants overcome implementation challenges. This points to the importance of preparing well by doing initial research, analysing case studies, speaking to others with practical experiences and being open to addressing challenges as they arise.

Theme 3: Employee well-being and work–life balance

Within the broader findings related to employee benefits, one of the strongest themes to emerge was the link between reduced working hours and improved well-being. Employees reported various benefits of reduced work (see Table 2) with the most mentioned aspect being rest.

Stress and burnout were mentioned as two of the leading reasons for companies' decisions to take part in the trial (P1:Q11, P3:Q81, P7:Q6, P9:Q25), partly because of the potential negative impact that the lack of well-being could have on company performance. The health benefits observed implied that reduced working hours effectively reduced both problematic factors of stress and burnout. One interviewee noticed how the changes were 'phenomenal… in terms of [employees'] wellness, their energy at work, [and] their attitude towards work' (P5:Q70), illustrating the observed shift in morale and vitality. Employee benefits reported by South African pilot participants interviewed reflected benefits reported in other pilot programmes performed globally (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022, 2023a; Walker & Fontinha, 2022). Moreover, a follow-up study found that employee benefits were maintained 1 year after the end of the pilot (Schor et al., 2023b). Reported research thus suggests that reduced working hours benefits such as improved general well-being and work–life balance can be experienced in the long-term. As outlined in the literature review, employee well-being is a vital factor of productivity – better well-being is linked to improved employee engagement, which in turn directly impacts productivity and the probability of a company's sustained success (Harter et al., 2009; Marin-Garcia et al., 2020; Rasool et al., 2021). Overall, the findings highlight rest, balance and wellness as the most immediate employee benefits, underscoring well-being as a key pathway to sustained organisational performance.

Theme 4: Organisational performance and talent outcomes

Employers likewise enjoyed a range of benefits after implementing reduced working hours. These centred on organisational performance and talent-related outcomes, as shown in Table 3.

The practical implications of adjusting work to reduce hours resulted in important benefits. Redesigning processes to free up time increased organisational efficiency, allowed teams to work better together and led to employee cross-skilling and upskilling to reduce dependencies on certain team members (P1:Q101, P6:Q93). Furthermore, all but one of the pilot participants interviewed said company revenues were maintained or increased during the trial period. Globally, neutral or positive revenue results were reported in the UK, Iceland as well as the US and Ireland trials (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2022; Walker & Fontinha, 2022). Reduced working hour policies were further seen as an employee value proposition that enabled

TABLE 2: Reported employee benefits.

Employee benefit	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
Rest	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	**7**
Balance	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	**5**
General health and wellness	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	**5**
Employee engagement	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	**4**
Free time	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	**3**
Reduced sick leave	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	**3**
Reduced stress	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	**3**
Family time	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	**2**
Happiness	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Total	**6**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**3**	**4**	**2**	**4**	**33**

P, Participant.

TABLE 3: Reported employer benefits.

Employer benefit	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
Increased teamwork	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	**8**
Talent attraction	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	**8**
Efficiency gains	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	**6**
Employee value proposition (EVP)	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	**5**
Improved communication	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	**5**
Cross- and upskill	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	**3**
Staff retention	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	**3**
Total	**6**	**4**	**3**	**3**	**6**	**5**	**5**	**1**	**5**	**38**

P, Participant.

companies to attract and retain talent (P1:Q54, P4:Q19, P5:Q39). These benefits echoed findings in pilots in the United Kingdom, Iceland and Australasia (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Schor et al., 2023a; Walker & Fontinha, 2022). Given these reported benefits and the research supporting their correlation to sustainable business success, the impact of flexible work policies on talent retention and attraction makes it a viable option for building a competitive advantage (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). The findings further suggested that the inefficiencies eliminated through process improvements contributed to improved productivity without sacrificing output, as companies could maintain at least the same revenue by working fewer hours. And, given that reduced working hours retained and attracted talent, a flexible working hour policy could be an effective policy for companies to implement in industries experiencing skills shortages. In summary, the reported outcomes mirror international findings, but in South Africa, the potential for talent attraction and retention appears especially valuable in industries facing acute skills shortages.

Theme 5: Employee apprehension and misperceptions

Among the challenges mentioned by 4 Day Week SA pilot participants, as summarised in Table 4, those related to misperceptions and apprehension were repeated frequently.

Interviewees indicated that a misperception of the concept of reduced working hours and the practicality of implementation were two of the main challenges faced during the initial exploration periods. One participant found that it was often assumed that a reduced work week simply meant 'Fridays off' (P9:Q5), underscoring how narrow understandings of flexibility fuelled early resistance.

Furthermore, initial employee apprehension was the only challenge mentioned by all interviewees. Although all participants reported excitement (P3:Q34, P4:Q6, P6:Q12, P8:Q3), employees were uncertain whether they could deliver the required output in a shortened time. One participant observed that their teams were 'quite scared that they were going to be expected to do five days' worth of work in four days', (P2:Q7), highlighting how misperceptions about reduced work policies contributed to employees' anxiety about transitioning. With the traction that well-being and work–life balance are enjoying globally, some of the misperceptions might be addressed as leaders and employees form a better understanding of what flexible policies entail. Leaders could also educate employees by providing relevant information and case studies to reduce employee apprehension.

TABLE 4: Challenges reported.

Challenge faced	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	Total
Employee apprehension	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	**9**
Execution (the how)	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	**6**
Productivity measurement	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	**5**
Industry norms	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	**3**
Equal access	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	**3**
Misperception	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	**3**
Perceptual differences	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	**3**
Entitlement	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	**3**
Value of money vs. time	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	**3**
Managing discontinuation	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	**3**
Billable hours	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	**2**
Leave accrual	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	**2**
Commission earners	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Employer resistance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	**1**
Total	**6**	**2**	**5**	**9**	**8**	**8**	**3**	**1**	**6**	**49**

P, Participant.

Theme 6: Executional and practical hurdles

While initial uncertainty and misperceptions reflected attitudinal barriers, interviewees also highlighted a series of more structural and practical challenges that complicated implementation. These included administrative issues such as the accrual of leave and other benefits, as well as ensuring equal access within organisations because of an overreliance on key employees. These employees were typically senior staff members or, in smaller organisations, especially, a single employee with a specialised role or function. A similar challenge was reported by managers in Iceland where some managers were reportedly unable to work shorter days during the trial (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021). Interviewees also reported struggling with measuring productivity practically. They found that potential reasons could be the complexity and a lack of universal standards, as tasks and definitions of productivity differed across industries and even between departments within the same organisation. They added that the required shift from measuring productivity in hours to output might also prove difficult for employers, employees and clients. One participant reported that 4 Day Week Global had few guidelines, suggesting that industry verticals should rather develop their own productivity metrics (P9:Q60). This challenge underscored leadership's responsibility to define and communicate expectations when implementing flexible policies clearly. Reducing working hours in cases where hourly billing is applied or commission is earned was also regarded as a challenge, as they directly impacted company revenue and employee income. Billable hours were seen to be especially tricky, as increasing hourly rates could impact a company's competitiveness in the market, while billing fewer hours could create the perception that the work delivered would be substandard. As one interviewee observed, 'Anyone that's working in billable hours environments have a real difficulty getting their head around, how do we continue to charge the same but work 20% less' (P9:Q27). Interviewees observed that the prevailing economic conditions and the rising cost of living affected the value employees attached to reduced working hours. If employees valued money more than time, they might still prefer to accept a higher salary at a different place of employment. One participant explained, 'it's not a powerful enough lever to retain talent when economics is at play' (P4:Q20). Some interviewees also reported a sense of entitlement from their employees. One interviewee said employees had to be reminded that 'it's a privilege, not a right' (P1:Q25). This suggests that employees might not be

sufficiently incentivised to increase productivity if reduced working hours became standard practice within a firm. Alternatively, the onus might fall on managers to better measure and observe productivity levels. The challenges hint at why smaller companies are more likely to participate in pilot programmes.

The challenges outlined and the solutions implemented by interviewees – experimentation, information sharing, clear goals and expectations – are often more manageable in smaller organisations. Alignment across all employees can be easily achieved, especially when leadership is closely involved. Nevertheless, understanding the organisational challenges present during and after the implementation of reduced working hours should enable organisations looking to implement reduced working hour policies to mitigate potential pitfalls better as they arise. Ultimately, while cultural readiness is critical, long-term success depends on managing operational realities in a way that sustains both productivity and employee trust.

Managerial implications

Building on these findings, several managerial implications can be drawn to guide organisations considering the adoption of reduced working hour policies.

The organisational factors influencing the outcomes experienced by companies that have implemented reduced working hour policies, together with the challenges faced during implementation, provide businesses interested in achieving similar benefits with key considerations. These findings highlight practical lessons drawn from the South African pilot, showing how leadership, culture, preparation and operational realities can collectively shape implementation success. Across interviews, upfront preparation and clear communication emerged as critical factors to implementing reduced working hour policies. Organisations looking to adopt similar policies can benefit from conducting their own research and consult available resources during the preparation process to guide proper implementation and ease employee apprehension. Furthermore, informing clients about the organisation's proposed decision as part of the preparation process also proved helpful, as it allowed organisations to surface and address potential uncertainties before rollout. The study highlighted that defining and measuring productivity remains one of the more complex aspects of implementing reduced working hour policies. Leaders therefore need to be clear on how productivity is conceptualised in their context, especially when moving from hours-based metrics to output-based metrics. As seen in the pilot, transparent success criteria helped reduce anxiety and foster accountability, implying that clarity in evaluation processes was a critical enabler.

Policies proved most effective when clarity was balanced with flexibility. While clear parameters created a shared understanding, flexibility allowed employees to co-design solutions that suited their teams' needs. Organisations looking to implement reduced working hour policies may benefit from involving employees in a collaborative bottom-up approach to policy design, especially around scheduling hours. Allowing teams to solve their own scheduling needs within reasonable parameters can strengthen ownership and alignment. Importantly, flexibility should make space for experimentation, particularly in the early stages of implementation. The study further showed that efficiency gains often came from redesigning operational processes, making better use of existing technology and introducing new tools where appropriate. Organisations looking to implement their own policies can similarly review operational workflows and identify skills gaps that may need to be addressed to sustain productivity. Employee involvement in this process can help identify team needs and ensure that changes to technology use or workflows are practical and effective.

Leadership clarity on motivations is essential. In the study, organisations adopting reduced working hours benefited most when leadership had a clear understanding of their underlying reasons for pursuing the policy. For companies looking to follow suit, leadership teams should therefore clearly articulate their motivations. While improved productivity and stronger employee value propositions were consistently reported outcomes, the study suggested that lasting success is more likely when employee well-being is the primary adoption driver rather than productivity alone. Not every business, department or employee found reduced working hours feasible in the study, regardless of leaders' willingness to experiment and pivot. As suggested, the strengths of an organisation's leadership teams and company culture must be considered when evaluating fit. Managers who emphasised people-centricity and trust were better equipped to manage the uncertainties of change, highlighting the importance of leadership quality alongside structural preparedness.

Conclusion

Flexible work policies implemented in response to restrictions brought on by the pandemic yielded positive consequences that benefited employees and employers. However, many organisations are planning to return to office at least partially, while employees remain resistant. This study sought to understand how organisations could best satisfy employees' increasing desire for better work–life balance and well-being while still achieving the benefits observed during the COVID-19 pandemic and serving the needs of the business.

The 4 Day Week Global trials subsequently aimed to help willing organisations to implement reduced working hour policies during experimental trials, with similar benefits reported across them. The South African pilot programme that took place in 2023 was the first undertaken in a non-developed country and showed that employees and employers could benefit from flexible work. By applying a qualitative research methodology, this research draws on the experience of participants in this trial and sheds light on areas under-represented in the publicly available pilot

reports. A deeper understanding of the profiles of organisations and the people who lead them, as well as the challenges faced during the implementation phase, was obtained.

Based on research findings, this article offers guidance to management teams in understanding the implications and necessary conditions for the successful adoption of reduced working hour policies. Insight from this study can inform planning, communication and execution strategies during policy changes to ultimately increase efficiency and productivity.

It must be observed that the pilot programmes in South Africa and elsewhere mostly appealed to smaller organisations performing specialised services through knowledge work performed by a relatively educated workforce. These characteristics, together with high technology adoption, leadership's people-centric mentality and willingness to experiment are aspects that might have contributed to the successful adoption of reduced working hours during the trials. The implemented pilot programmes were experimental for the research project, although many participating companies continued working fewer hours after trial completion. More research is needed for larger organisations, organisations in non-technical services industries that typically employ shift workers or operate during hours outside the traditional workweek such as hospitality and nursing and non-service industries. Although qualitative data gathered for this research have been limited in scope, the global trend focusing on increased work–life balance and well-being shows the need for flexibility and a redesign of work as we know it. Awareness of changing employee needs allows organisations to act. This research can guide organisations to successfully implement flexible policies that require fewer work hours to realise benefits such as an engaged workforce, increased productivity and better staff attraction and retention, leading to a sustained competitive advantage and a higher chance of business success.

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Authors' contributions

J.S. was involved in the conceptualisation of the study, the methodological design and investigation, project administration and data curation and the drafting of the original manuscript.

R.S. was involved in the conceptualisation of the study, the methodological design, validation of the data, supervision of the project and the review of the draft.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of consent not being obtained from participants for further use beyond this research study and the publication thereof.

Disclaimer

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