

Once You Try a Four-Day Workweek, It's Hard to Go Back

A six-month trial in Germany showed many promising signs. But there were disappointments, too.



Employees during a meeting at the office of event planner Solidsense in Stuttgart. *Photographer: Ben Kilb/Bloomberg*

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Germany's brief experiment with a four-day workweek is over, but for many of the businesses that participated, there's no going back. "I don't want to work on Fridays anymore. I just don't," says Sören Fricke, co-founder of event planner [Solidsense](#). "Friday has actually become the third day of the weekend. You only work if there is no other option."

Solidsense is one of [45 companies](#) that participated in the six-month trial, during which employees worked fewer hours but still received their full paycheck. In the end, 73% of the participants said they're prepared to make

the change permanent or extend the experiment, according to a report released by the trial's organizers on Oct. 18.

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The pilot in Germany is the second-largest one staged by 4 Day Week Global, a New Zealand-based advocacy group that has run trials in countries including Portugal, South Africa and the UK. For the German experiment, the organization teamed up with the University of Münster and Berlin-based consulting firm Intraprenör.

The results confirmed what the participants had hoped. The shorter workweek improved employees' physical health and mental well-being. Employers saw benefits, too: 70% reported that recruiting workers was easier once they went to a four-day schedule—a boon in a country where many industries complain that intense competition for talent drives up costs. A dozen participants reported details of their financial performance, showing revenue and profit were stable overall.

The German researchers involved in the study set out to construct a more rigorous trial than those that 4 Day Week Global had staged in other countries. They used hair samples to measure levels of cortisol, a hormone released in response to stress, and analyzed data collected by smartwatches, which showed employees slept an average of 38 minutes more per week and increased their physical activity. Researchers also carried out more than 600 interviews and compared results with control groups within companies where not all employees took part.

Not every business made it through the trial. Two dropped out midway through, citing economic difficulties (not necessarily related to the reduction in work hours) or low support among employees. Of the remaining companies, 20% decided to return to a five-day standard—a larger proportion than in other pilots organized by 4 Day Week Global. “I still don’t think we should be saying that Germany needs a four-day week for all companies,” says Julia Backmann, the researcher at the University of Münster who led the study. “But I do see it for organizations that might want to do something for their employees or for their own attractiveness as an employer.”

The findings come at an awkward time for German business. According to analysts polled by Bloomberg, Europe’s largest economy is experiencing a mild recession because of a combination of factors that include the cutoff of low-cost Russian gas, disappointing export demand from China and a dearth of skilled workers. Volkswagen AG, the country’s biggest carmaker and an industrial bellwether, has warned it may need to close factories in its home country for the first time.

Prominent figures in business and government have cautioned against instituting a four-day week more widely. Christian Linder, the finance minister, said that working less threatens prosperity, while Deutsche Bank AG Chief Executive Officer Christian Sewing has said the country needs to prepare to “work more and harder.” He advocates for lengthening the workweek.



Fricke, co-founder of event planner Solidsense. *Photographer: Ben Kilb/Bloomberg*

Employees at Solidsense disagree—and so do their bosses. Since March, the office in Stuttgart has been largely empty on Fridays. The shorter week has allowed the company’s 18 employees to hit the gym, spend more time with their families or pursue hobbies. Even Fricke, to his own surprise, has managed to dedicate most Fridays to his hobby of repairing vintage cars. And still the business expects to record a 40% increase in revenue this year. “The four-day week has even been economically profitable for us,” he says, citing a “dramatic” increase in productivity. “When we discussed the extension with the entire team a few months ago, it was clear: Of course we’re continuing.”

To make such gains possible, a whole set of adjustments is needed. At Solidsense, unnecessary meetings were cut and artificial intelligence is being used to perform menial tasks, such as editing Excel lists. The exhibition planner also took the precaution of informing customers about the change. Its new email signature reads: “Please be aware that our working hours may not align with yours.”





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The switch didn't go as well for Eurolam, a window manufacturer based in Wiegendorf. Henning Röper, the managing director, says he was initially excited to see an increase in job applicants, in terms of both quality and quantity. Suddenly, he had the “luxury to reject people,” something he couldn't afford to do in previous years, he says. Eurolam, like many German employers, has faced a shortage of skilled workers, caused in large part by a shrinking population. Coupled with high inflation, this has empowered workers across a swath of industries to demand large pay increases and better working conditions.

Nevertheless, as the trial progressed, Röper began to see downsides. The truncated workweek made it more difficult to juggle regular orders along with unanticipated jobs, such as repairing defective items customers returned. The business even registered an increase in employee absenteeism in its production unit, as more employees called in sick.



The announcement that the business was going back to a five-day schedule was met with “shocked silence,” Röper says. Eurolam’s white-collar employees generally were more disappointed than factory workers, he says, though he noted that his longest-serving employee in production had described the four-day trial as the best thing that happened in his career.

The pilot’s organizers said other participants expressed concerns about how the loss of a workday reduced their flexibility to cope with unpredictable events, such as equipment breakdowns or delayed supplier deliveries. Despite the improvements in health and mental well-being, there was no significant change in registered sick days overall, which stands in stark contrast to the 65% drop in absenteeism registered during the UK pilot.

That finding alone might dissuade other employers from experimenting with a four-day week. The number of sick days taken by employees in Germany in the first eight months of the current year equaled the peak in 2023, according to a report by insurer AOK, and is sure to rise further as winter sets in. The country’s workers were absent an average of 21.3 days in 2022, which translated into a staggering €207 billion (\$220 billion) loss in value added, according to data from the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Despite the generally favorable results, managers at Solidsense noticed that automating simple but time-consuming chores, or outsourcing them, left employees with more challenging tasks on their to-do lists. This made time at the office more mentally exhausting. Fricke opted to extend Solidsense’s four-day experiment to February, so he can determine whether it can stand up to what are traditionally its busiest months, September to December.

At Eurolam, workers are back on the job five days a week, though they have the option of leaving early on Fridays if they’ve put in the requisite number of hours. Röper says he’s still on the lookout for a new working model. “Just because this hasn’t worked now, doesn’t mean one should close their mind to new paths,” he says. “Not allowing change means standing still, and that in turn means falling behind.”

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