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The social, economic and environmental impacts of a 4-day workweek in an organization.

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ABSTRACT

This research project examines the socio, environmental, and economic impact of a 4 Day work week on Interviews were conducted with both the managers and employees of the organization to gather primary data. The recommendations are proposed to solve the issues observed with implementing the new 4- day workweek system. We found that the social impact was positive, but the economic impact of the change was negative. The lack of consensus in employees' views showed that productivity is a subjective topic in the This research applies the three pillars of sustainability to ascertain the impact of move to shorter workweek by an organization based in the Emirate of Sharjah, UAE. To our knowledge this is the first study in the region that has examined this issue to ascertain the effectiveness of this approach.

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Introduction

Research Context

The study is conducted in a government organization based in the Emirate of Sharjah, UAE. According to the report of Emiri Decree, which is categorized as the governmental member of Sharjah, the strategy of 4 day working week has been implemented in the business organisations working in the Emirate (Walker & Fontinha, 2022). The organization has 40 permanent employees.

Aim of the consultancy project

The aim of this study was to examine the socio, environmental, and economic impact of a 4 Day work week on the organizational outcomes at the organizational and personal level.

Study significance

This study will be the steppingstone of future amendments to the shorter workweek system. Nevertheless, The Government of Sharjah didn't provide any study that critically examines the new shorter workweek system. The following sections will provide the organization with the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the shorter workweek system on the organizational level and the employee level.

Literature Review

Social Impact

Gilmore (2019) states that a four-day work has the possibility to enhance general well-being and personal health. It is noted that a decrease in working hours may lead to positive health impacts, for instance, less breathing or heart problems, better sleep quality, and less mental exhaustion. For example, Galea et al. (2020) state that free time is essential and working for long office hours is not one of their standards of working life expectancy. Suter (2019) suggests that option of a four-day workweek should also be given for all professions to prevent social inequities. Moreover, a four-day workweek could result in an equal distribution of household care between men and women.

The outbreak of COVID-19 significantly altered the relationship dynamics between productivity, stress, and working hours. Businesses have always had the right to require a distinction between work and personal life. But 2020 led to fluidity of boundaries between the two in what was possibly the biggest remote work experiment ever (Veal, 2022). Increased flexibility became increasingly crucial when the job took a back seat as people were responsible for balancing conflicting priorities in terms of health concerns, personal life, professional life and so on. The situation was not easy for working families, but there were some advantages. Many employees have embraced a new work schedule devoid of commutes and set hours because of this new work environment (Fitzgerald, 2022). Some of these positive lessons should be incorporated in the post-pandemic work culture.

Bohnenberger (2022) noted that Employees who work four days a week could feel satisfied and eager to work more as those who work five days a week for the same salary. The enhanced motivation of these employees resulted in a noticeable improvement in their performance. Guerin (2021) states that since it is much simpler for them to start a workweek when there are fewer workdays, working four days a week instead of five has also been demonstrated to increase employees' psychological well-being while not compromising in terms of the total work achieved.

Economic Impact

Discussing the effects of the pandemic on the quality of life and the global economy, El Keshky et al. (2021) note that a decrease in working hours could initially appear to be detrimental to the economy because fewer hours are being worked all together. Frankiewicz et al. (2020) suggest that reskilling and upskilling of the workforce human and technology can address this issue.

The report of The International Labour organization ILO (2022) shows that companies were encouraged to cut working time rather than altering the jobs thanks to work-sharing policies and initiatives.

Balderson et al. (2022) stated that when the four-day work week was introduced, companies saved by conservation of resources, due to decreased utility bills. Similarly, Castrillion (2021) have emphasized on the question whether companies should adapt to the four-day work week. The first point indicates that the organization will benefit from reduced overheads and costs as electricity is a variable cost and the variable costs will reduce keeping the fixed costs the same. The article mentioned that Microsoft Japan reduced the working hours and that boosted the productivity by 40%.

Patel (2021) have stated that the corona virus has had a shift in the British work habit norms as it pushed for hybrid setting and reduced workdays. The author claims that reduced work week led to productivity on the organizational and personal level. However, some disadvantages will appear in terms of unutilized labour as they will only work for 4 days a week. Moreover, some industries cannot adapt to such working systems.

Ellerbeck (2022) noted that it will cost the healthcare industry more, as the healthcare professionals working for longer hours will be required to be paid more overtime increasing the costs in total.

Russel et al. (2022) argued that reducing work hours doesn't necessarily reduce work. It is up to everyone differently of how they stay connected to work. It is based on how eager the employee is willing to work.

Environmental Impact

Grosse (2018) indicates that a four-day workweek could result in a change in social priorities away from seeking growth in the economy for its own sake and toward a more sustainable method of improving the standard of living. Such a change to less energy-intensive consumer habits may complement a reduction in working hours. If working hours were to be reduced, one could picture people preparing their own meals, employing more active transportation, and indulging in less carbon-intensive kinds of leisure.

Wang et al. (2022) found that a four-day workweek would reduce the yearly carbon dioxide emissions by about 6,000 metric tonnes. It is interesting to note that "economic development" has been specifically mentioned by the European Commission as one of the main advantages of creating a low-carbon society.

People who work fewer hours often have less impact on the environment as they have less money available for consumption, which results in much-reduced greenhouse gas emissions. Because of their lesser wealth, they drive and fly less, which is mostly to blame. Therefore, when combined with a decreased salary, a reduction in working hours would have good benefits. However, society is not likely to approve of such a solution under our existing capitalist system (Schor & Tienhaara, 2022).

On the other hand, Balderson et al., (2022) claimed that a four-day work week may potentially have some detrimental effects on the environment depending on how people choose to spend the extra day off.

A report describing the environmental impacts of a shorter work week was presented in May 2021 by the Platform UK group for social justice and the environment. From the start of the epidemic, fewer people commuted to work which means less utilities are consumed at work.

In summary, recently, the economic and political discussion have focused on a shorter workday. For example, in the context of UK, Skidelsky (2019) states that the political parties view the reduction in the working week duration as a major policy that may improve worker well-being, raise productivity, and address the problems posed by automation. The rise of significant global movements that bring awareness to other crisis that society is presently experiencing, including the exhaustion of resources, the decomposition of the natural environments, and most notably, the earth's natural quick warming, aligns with the increased interest in working time cutbacks. Modern understanding of the connections between productivity, tension, and working hours has experienced many important changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Companies intend to create a work-life balance Hogarty (2021). The Covid-19 pandemic initiated what was likely the biggest remote work experiment in history. Increased flexibility became increasingly essential when the job became less significant because people had to balance competing interests.

Keeping in view the importance of the subject in the recent times and the mixed findings about the possible consequences of shorter work week, this study focuses on the case of an organization in the Emirate of Sharjah which implemented the four-day work week to understand the consequences and implications of this move to a shorter work week.

Methodology

The purpose of the research to understand the impact of four-day work week on the employees and organizational outcomes in terms of the three pillars of sustainability. Semi structured interviews (15-30 minutes duration) were conducted to collect data for the managers and the employees of the organization.

The perspective of the employees shed light on the employees' outcomes whereas the managers' perspective helped in understanding the impact on organizational outcomes. A thematic analysis was conducted based on the three themes of sustainability i.e., Social, economic, and environmental impacts.

The Sample size includes 15 interviewees (7 managers and 8 employees) from three different departments as shown in Appendix A.

The interview questions were adapted from Harper (2022) and Feldman (2022) The interview questions are provided in Appendix B.

Findings

Theme 1: Social

Code: Family values

Employees in DSCD believe in core conservative values including raising their own children and supporting their families. “I am a mother of two kids, I use this extra time to teach my kids at home and help them do their homework. I believe that I am a protective mother” assured (E_3). (E_3) pointed out that spending time with her kids is possible due to a shorter workweek.

Spending more time than expected with family members did cause a slight inconvenience to (M_5) as her nuclear family is now demanding more chores to be completed. “Sometimes family demands become too much because your nuclear family sees that you are more present at home and more readily available. I fell into the trap of doing either too much or too little, and there was no proper balance” gasped (M_5). I believe that this issue is mostly due to (M_5)’s mismanagement of the longer weekend. (M_5) did shed the light on the fact that his/her family members are demanding more due to his/her availability. This quote also points out that family does play a role in DSCD employee’s lives and the 4-day work week is re-enforcing family values.

Visiting extended families as well as nuclear families plays a crucial role in the social relationships of employees. “I have time to visit my in laws as well” cheered (E_1). In laws are not a part of the nuclear family and are considered as extended. The researcher realised the mandate of ties with kindship and regular visits are considered as cultural norms.

Code: Volunteering and non-work-related communities

With employees gaining an extra day per week they want to give back to society by participating in volunteering programs without pay. “I usually volunteer in the animal shelter in the weekends, I care about the well-being of the captured stray cats. Now I spend two of my three days of weekend there” Chortled (E_4). The researcher configured that (E_4) is satisfied with the new workweek system that she can pay her gratitude back by participating in non-paid jobs through his/her long weekend.

“I am a part of the padel tennis community here in Sharjah, I need to interact more with professionals so I can improve and reach to my maximum potential one day” admitted (E_5). The researcher perceived that the 4-day work week is benefiting employees socially. Furthermore, enhanced motivation was observed “I believe that the new system enhances the well-being of employees, increased motivation, greater productivity, improved efficiency, and a balanced work-life to personal life” noted (E6). (E6) complemented (E_5)’s point by mentioning a balanced work-life system.

Theme 2: Economic

Code: 4-days’ workweek can’t be maintained throughout the year

Due to external pressures on the organization, the managers are finding it difficult to maintain the 4-day workweek system. “When it comes to the completion of projects with high funding. I am sorry to say 4 days will not be enough. I have extended the workdays to 6 days a week for a month then changing it back to 4 days a week. I acknowledge that the employees are exhausted and may not be satisfied in the current term, but it is only temporary.” admitted (M_1). The results showed how the managers are not convinced with the new system and due to the temporary change; they did seem to panic.

A contradicting response from another manager, “With proper time management 4 days’ workweek is more than enough to complete the tasks. However, occasionally we work around half a day online at our own pace at home” stated (M_2). This statement indicates work out of the 4-days week system is still an improvement to the temporary shift, but the work can’t be completed in 4 days.

Code: Scheduling and communication barriers.

Due to the 4-day workweek the employees have raised their concerns regarding loss of communication leading to loss of productivity. Friday is the last day of the week in the private sector and the private sector follows a different workweek schedule. “Having an additional day off (Friday) compared to the rest of the Emirates as well as the rest of the world caused us to have scheduling difficulties. Rather than finishing the job in the same week, we are required to postpone it to the following week” noted (E6). The researcher perceived that the new working system caused a communication barrier with the private sector. Furthermore, “We are conducting economic research as a primary activity of the department, we find it difficult to communicate with the private sector as they are working two more days as compared to DSCD, if you ask me, I believe that we are lacking productivity here” complained (M_1). Hence an ineffective communication process was noted due to mismatch of one workday.

Code: Productivity

Productivity was found to be objective rather than subjective. The managers and employees had a different perspective regarding productivity. “My productivity didn’t change with the shift from 5-day to 4-day workweek” claimed (E_2). (E_2) and all the other employees claimed that productivity remained the same. Referring to the previous subthemes, it is perceived that the

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managers don't have faith in the new system. The researcher believes that the managers are not transparent enough in this topic. The researcher believes that the managers could strengthen their claim by providing documentation. "4-day workweek has nothing to do with productivity. In fact, I believe that the organizational culture plays a role in productivity. How do other managers behave when delegating work to his/her subordinates", stated (M4).

Code: Flexibility

Tasks that are not technical in nature could be performed remotely. "Pre-Covid the human resources rules and regulations regarding the employee's punctuality were extremely strict but throughout the pandemic the C-suites realised that productivity is not measured by punctuality, and they started valuing the output differently. Claimed (M2). The researcher comprehended the nature of the tasks performed by the statisticians and researchers. The pandemic created the opportunity for flexibility in workplaces. The management still emphasised on productivity. Lifting the harsh human resources rules for more productivity shows that the C-suite are changing their perspective. Furthermore, "we are an organization that researches and overseas other projects, we are not engineers or technicians" stated (M3).

Code: Longer work hours

Due to changing to a 4-day workweek, the organization assumed that adding an hour a day will cover for the time off. "4 days' workweek resulted in prolonging the working hours by an hour a day, it is the first time for the public sector to work for 8 hours a day approximately, it was 5 days a week and 7 hours per day" complained (M6). However, (M6) and other employees found it strange that they are working an hour more a day.

Theme 3: Environmental

This section discusses the quotes recorded and provides interpretations.

Code: Dioxin omissions and combustion

It was assumed that there might be less commute to work as the employees were travelling to work 4 days a week instead of 5. However, due to working an extra hour employees tend to be hungry and order food from delivery applications. "Longer working hours per day, therefore employees tend to order out food that results in producing higher emissions. Cooking at home reduces emissions from both the food and the transportation involved in going to a restaurant or getting meals delivered" reported (E6). Multiple drivers commute to the organization throughout the day increasing combustion.

Code: Reduced Electricity consumption

A reduction in the energy and water bills was expected. "Well in the organizational level, we do operate for 4 days now instead of 5 days. It will cause a reduction in our electricity and water bills. But on the personal level I might not be able to answer. Is there any way of measuring the impacts environmentally" enquired (M7).

Code: Employees can't measure the environmental impacts

Mixes views were presented in terms of the vagueness of environmental impact. "We need specific equipment to measure the impacts, I guess. I do have twenty years' experience in research, and I think that none of the interviewees will find it easy to answer such question with full honesty. They want to support the cause by claiming that is environmentally friendly" stated (M4).

The findings are summarized in the Table 1 below.

Code	Theme	Possible Impact
Reinforcement of family values	Social	Positive
volunteering and unpaid labour activities	Social	Positive
sports communities	Social	Positive
Managers couldn't maintain the 4-day work week system	Economic	Negative
Time management is described as the key to enforcing the 4-day workweek system	Economic	Positive
Scheduling issues with the private	Economic	Negative

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sector		
physical existence in not necessary (Flexibility)	Economic	Positive
prolonging the working hours	Economic	Negative
Employees claim that their productivity didn't change. However, there managers don't agree with their claims. (Productivity)	Economic	Negative
Higher emissions of dioxins	Environmental	Negative
The employees are driving less	Environmental	Positive
Reduction in electricity bills	Environmental	Positive

Table :1 Study Findings

Discussion and Recommendations

The temporary shift from 4-day workweek to 6-day workweek.

The 4-day work week did work for other smaller projects but couldn't be implemented in bigger projects. The change process from a 5-day workweek to a 4-day workweek's transition wasn't successful.

Though change models are not exclusive to solve a certain issue but having a generic model is still better than having no model Warrilow (2019) has challenged Kotter's claim that change could happen only if the organizational leaders agreed. However, due to our case organization being small, application of Kotter's 8 step model introduced in 1996 (Kotter, 1996) can help in a smooth transition. The process is as follows:

Establish a sense of urgency: The 4-day workweek system should remain in action and shifting it should not be an option.

Create a guiding coalition: The head of departments and the supervisors assigned must plan and agree that the new system must be intact, and the strategic planning must be based on that principle.

Develop a clear shared vision: The managers must support the idea instead of altering the current system. The shared vision must include the "betterment of the employees".

Communicate the vision: The vision can be communicated using Microsoft teams' application or inviting the employees to a seminar re-introducing the ideas to the employees.

Empower people to act on the vision: All the mentioned managers that took part in the study could re-familiarize the employees with the new 4-day work week system.

Create short term wins: Employee satisfaction surveys will provide polls to measure the exhaustion level. A simple Likert scale could be used.

Consolidation and build on the gains: The national (2022) stated that Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed mentioned how Sharjah cares about the humanitarian role too as well as building a core family value in the emirate.

Institutionalize the change: The change is already implemented early 2022. However, it was altered by the management. The Kotter's strategy will re-familiarize the organization with the system and ensures the continuity of the program.

Introducing a new productivity culture

It is already predicted some employees might be at a disadvantage because of a sudden change. Refer to the economic theme and find the productivity code. While applying the stages suggested above, managers should remain constant of the required change in the productivity culture.

Productivity is measured subjectively.

Referring to the productivity code, it was observed that the managers did not believe that the employees are productive and on the contrary, employees felt that productivity is not changed as tasks can be divided into 4 days. An electronic system that records the tasks being sent from the manager to the employee and the completion rate can resolve this issue.

Interorganizational communication barriers

Referring to the code Scheduling issues from the economic theme, respondents have reported that due to

having Friday as a day off in Sharjah, they have faced rescheduling and communication issues with the private sector. Friday is the closing week for most companies thus some meetings are held on Fridays. Training on formal communication channels can help her. An alternative approach could be that extra day on Friday and should be permitted to take a day off any day throughout the following week.

Sustainability starts in the classroom.

Referring to the codes Dioxin omissions and combustion, Reduced Electricity consumption and Employees can't measure the environmental impacts from the environmental theme, it was found that employees need awareness on environment issues. Researchers agree that the ideology of sustainability could be taught (Folk, 2021; Strobierski, 2021). To promote a sustainable future, the organization can hold seminars informing about sustainability and its importance.

Resistance management

Referring to the economic theme codes: 4-days' workweek can't be maintained throughout the year and longer work hours. The following recommendations are made (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

Education & Communication: 1 on 1, the manager can calmly provide awareness to the employee and direct feedback from the employee is recommended.

Participation & Involvement: Providing a hands-on experience to the employees, the manager could lead by example.

Facilitation & support: The managers must facilitate the employees to be productive in 4 days. i.e., reducing meeting hours so the employees can focus on their jobs.

Negotiation & Agreement: the employee must agree to replace Friday with midweek. It should mutually agree.

Manipulation & co-optation: This approach should be decided and implemented if the managers feel it is appropriate.

Explicit & implicit coercion: I agree with using this approach if all the other 5 approaches didn't stop the resistance to change.

Limitations and areas of future research

The research follows a single case study design. Future studies can collect data from multiple organizations to check for the generalizability of the results. Moreover, the literature review indicates that all the research are done on the international scale and insufficient literature is found that includes the Emirati local context so the results may vary. More studies are encouraged in this area in the Middle Eastern context.

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