



## WORK

# Will the four-day work week become the norm?

**The initiative, which would give employees more free time, has started to make waves among publicly listed companies. The results of the experiments are encouraging, but the complexity and initial costs that come with the change remain barriers to entry for most companies.** BY BLANDINE GUIGNIER

**L**

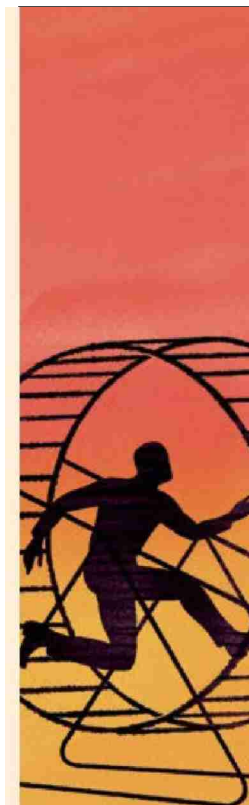
aurent de la Clergerie never expected to announce a four-day work week to his company like he did. "The news was very quickly leaked to the media and we had only just started discussing it internally. Investment firms called me up to ask what I was thinking. 'We didn't know you were a left-leaning CEO,' they said. But we didn't see any negative effects on our share

price in the days that followed. Overall, the reactions were more surprised than scared." The four-day initiative was still relatively unknown in Europe in 2020, when the French online retail group LDLC decided to take the leap. Since then, pilot projects have popped up in many countries, including dozens of companies in the United Kingdom, Portugal, and even right now, in Germany. We've also seen new laws that allow employee requests for a shorter week, such as in Belgium in October 2022.

This concept has spread around the world, thanks to the efforts from the "4 Day Week Global" foundation, created in New Zealand in 2019. The

group encourages thousands of companies around the world to launch a six-month pilot project, which reduces working time to 80% while maintaining the same salaries and productivity goals. The multinational Unilever piloted this programme in Oceania. After an 18-month pilot from December 2020 to June 2022 in its New Zealand branch with 80 employees, Unilever extended the pilot to include 500 additional employees in Australia. "Our pilot project in New Zealand led to promising results, exceeding the key performance indicators, including revenue growth," said a company spokesperson. "Absenteeism was reduced by 34%, work stress was down





33% and conflicts between work and home life were cut by a whopping 67%. Meetings were reduced to 3.5 hours per week and we maintained stakeholder satisfaction throughout the entire pilot."

### Appealing employers

In the United Kingdom, the results of the 4 Day Week Global

pilot program, compiled by the University of Cambridge and Boston College, were also very positive. Among the 61 participating companies (representing approx. 2,900 employees in total), 92% decided to continue the programme beyond six months. The number of employees who quit during the pilot dropped by

57%. Immediately afterwards, retail shops publicly traded on the LSE, such as Dunelm, Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencer and Superdry, began offering shorter work weeks. This benefit is appealing in a context of employee shortages and high turnover, which is common in

retail. These "in-person" jobs, much like industry and health-care, can't take advantage of remote working – another type of flexible work that employees increasingly request.

Employee loyalty is the primary advantage of these types of programmes for the company, according to Professor Rafael Lalive from the University of Lausanne. "In recent history, the COVID pandemic highlighted the need to have better work-life balance. When competing to attract talent in fields such as tech, for example, companies realised that they had to offer not only → a competitive salary, but also more free time. The four-day work week is a competitive advantage, a way to stand out from other companies. It increases employee loyalty and retention, saving money that would otherwise be spent on engagement and training new employees." For the economist, who specialises in the labour market, global forces are at play here. "According to a recent study conducted by SECO, between 1950 and 2022, the actual annual hours worked per working person in Switzerland dropped from 2,400 to 1,500 hours. The hypothesis is that thanks to automation and

digital technologies, we are now much more productive. And the corresponding productivity gains result in more free time for employees."

EPFZ professor of work and organisational psychology Gudela Grote hopes that companies, and more widely, national laws will continue to work towards reducing the work week because of productivity gains, "as that will help manage the major transformations that we will see in the labour market." But the professor does admit: "Corporate interest in the four-day work week is also a result of a lack of qualified personnel in many sectors and industries. That could change if the situation flips and the supply of workers exceeds demand."

In France, almost all companies that are interested in a reduced work week are having difficulty recruiting," said de la Clergerie. In his book *Osez la semaine de 4 jours!* [Try the 4-day week!], the LDLC CEO focused on the positive effect the pilot had on human resources. Going from

35 hours in 5 days to 32 hours in 4 days, LDLC saw the rate of absenteeism drop between 2019 and 2021, even after accounting for sick leave during the pandemic. The initiative has gained even more traction after pilots showed that supplemental hiring needs were lower than initially expected. But the entrepreneur does offer some



english edition

Swissquote Magazine  
1196 Gland  
044/ 825 88 88  
<https://de.swissquote.com/magazine>

Genre de média: Médias imprimés  
Type de média: Magazines populaires  
Tirage: 86'795  
Parution: 6x/année

Page: 60  
Surface: 273'205 mm²

Ordre: 1072864  
N° de thème: 377.006

Référence: 92058294  
Coupure Page: 3/7



advice. "You need to make this opportunity available to all employees, not just the ones who cannot work remotely, for example, or for the roles that are particularly hard to fill. It's a matter of equity and above all, I am convinced that the more employees that participate in the programme, the more profitable it will be for the company." According to the CEO, even if the reason that companies begin a pilot is to combat an employee shortage, they often continue the programme after seeing other advantages.

### Rethinking corporate structure

At LDLC, the most surprising outcome was increased efficiency in the workplace and steady revenue. "I calculated that if the company moved from 35 to 32 hours, we risked losing approximately 5% of the workforce, which could result in a 2% to 3% loss of EBITDA. And despite the concerns that it would negatively affect our share price, I decided to go for it after everything I read about it in other countries, particularly for Microsoft Japan. In the end, revenue went from approximately 500 million in 2019 to 700 million in 2021. The workforce increased by less than 4%, going from 1,020 to 1,060 employees, with working hours reduced by 8.6%. In 2022, revenue dipped slightly, because it was very high following the explosion of online shopping during the pandemic, but the shareholders and analysts never blamed it on the move to the four-day work week."

Both the French group's CEO and the EPFZ professor believe that the effort involved in reorganising processes and schedules to figure out how to complete the work in a reduced time frame can improve a company's overall structure. "Working longer doesn't necessarily mean working more efficiently," said Grote. "If companies use these initiatives to examine and improve their processes in order to reduce working time, the positive effects can be compounded."

For some multinationals such as Panasonic Japan, the move to the four day work week was part of a larger review of work-life balance that was →

included in their ESG report. For the Japanese group, which has 233,000 employees around the world, it was the CEO himself, Yuki Kusumi, who announced the initiative during a presentation to investors on sustainable development. "We didn't do a specific calculation at our company, but it is indeed an interesting metric for corporate social responsibility (CSR)," said de la Clergerie. "With this type of commitment in favour of more social progress and employee wellbeing, companies will be valued higher on the stock markets and among certain specific investment funds." Companies can also highlight improved carbon emissions, thanks to no longer having

employees commute, for example.

### Caution and limits

For the Swiss universities that we interviewed, the four-day work week is difficult to apply across the board for all companies in a uniform way. "Companies piloting this approach have often said that not all types of work can be reduced to four days," said Grote. "For example, shift work and 24/7 service are particularly complicated." Companies that already have a solid financial basis seem to be much more willing to reorganise the structure to accommodate a four-day work week, according to Rafael Lalive. "The company needs to be able to absorb increased costs for the first few months."

The number of Swiss public companies with a four-day week remains very limited, though there are a few pilots, such as at Romande Energie (see inset on p. 62). For the HEC Lausanne professor, this is due to the fact that Swiss people strongly identify with their work. "Reducing the work week by one day could cause confusion for many Swiss people, who in the past, for example, refused an initiative to increase the number of vacation days." The EPFZ expert Gudela Grote also considers a cultural reason: the Swiss economy is less inclined to try new concepts like this. "Companies in Switzerland are doing well overall, and the concept of the 'great resignation' in the United States didn't really



have much of an effect here, and perhaps the idea of experimentation isn't as strong here as elsewhere."

Furthermore, Switzerland doesn't seem like the easiest place to implement a four-day work week. The maximum number of hours worked per week is relatively high: 42 hours, compared to 35 in France and 38 in the Netherlands, for example. The geographical differences could make implementing a uniform solution quite complicated, for example when taking into account the cantonal specifics in terms of the right to work or longer school days for children. "Workers do not need to do 10-hour days," said Lalive. Even if it was legal, productivity could be very low by the end of the day. Furthermore, it would no longer seem to be an advantage for employees and the idea could lose its appeal." The economist also foresees another potential negative. "Much like other modes of flexible working, companies need to ensure that social relationships are maintained. Informal discussions between colleagues create trust, and nurture creativity and possible collaborations. To counteract this, management needs to encourage social events, which will no longer necessarily happen during working hours." Relaxation spaces and game rooms seen in big companies such as Google Zurich could soon become obsolete. ▴







english edition

Swissquote Magazine  
1196 Gland  
044/ 825 88 88  
<https://de.swissquote.com/magazine>

Genre de média: Médias imprimés  
Type de média: Magazines populaires  
Tirage: 86'795  
Parution: 6x/année



Page: 60  
Surface: 273'205 mm²

Ordre: 1072864  
N° de thème: 377.006  
Référence: 92058294  
Coupure Page: 5/7



← Laurent de la Clergerie, CEO of the French group LDLC, has introduced the 4-day week at his company. In his book *Osez la semaine de 4 jours!* [Try the 4-day week!], he explains the benefits for his group.





english edition

Swissquote Magazine  
1196 Gland  
044/ 825 88 88  
<https://de.swissquote.com/magazine>

Genre de média: Médias imprimés  
Type de média: Magazines populaires  
Tirage: 86'795  
Parution: 6x/année



Page: 60  
Surface: 273'205 mm²

Ordre: 1072864  
N° de thème: 377.006

Référence: 92058294  
Coupure Page: 6/7

## “Employee loyalty is the primary advantage of these types of programmes for the company”

Rafael Lalive, professor at the University of Lausanne

## “Companies can also highlight improved carbon emissions, thanks to no longer having employees commute”

Laurent de la Clergerie, CEO of the LDLC group

## Switzerland doesn't seem like the easiest place to implement a four-day work week

### Romande Energie: a Swiss pilot

Romande Energie, which is partially public to investors, has several pilots in progress for a four-day work week. The goal is to refine the concept in order to eventually expand the pilot to the entire company.

For Philippe Chollet, the idea to test a four-day work week came from an assessment. “The energy transition in Switzerland could be affected by a significant labour shortage of around

300,000 people,” explained the head of strategy for Romande Energie Services. “We need to offer disruptive working conditions to attract new talent and keep employees from going to the competition.” The Romande Energie group sells technical offerings in construction and building renovation. Technicians in the field make up the majority of the company's

employees, alongside engineers and other office workers.

From March to June 2023, the first pilot was conducted in a team of

seven people. “They went from 5 days to 4, with 10-hour days instead of 8. It was legal under the cantonal labour law, with a required 30-minute lunch break. Several employees came from neighbouring France and the idea of having one fewer day to commute was quite appealing.” Of the risks identified by the company at the start of the pilot project, only a few actually materialised. “Contrary to our concerns, it was easy to organise the work. Coordinating with other groups at construction sites – which were all working 4.5 or 5 days – was not complicated. We also didn't have any negative repercussions about our reputation with clients. We didn't see any reduction in revenue, and the number of hours billed stayed



the same." But there were other hardships. "Employees ended up increasing their commuting time home because they got stuck in rush hour traffic. Returning home later in the day impacted their family life. Physical fatigue also increased."

For the next round of pilot projects, which will begin 1 April, Romande Energie Services made some changes. "We are conducting pilots in Neuchâtel and Bulle, where commuting times are generally lower. We're reducing the number of hours while maintaining the same salary." At the Neuchâtel-based company, the entire subsidiary (approximately 25 people) will move to 37 hours from Monday to Thursday. "Only the after-sales service department will remain open Monday to Friday with a rotating system." The Bulle subsidiary has 40 employees, and the local team suggested a pilot with one team working a 4-day week (34 hours) and another team working 5 days (42.5 hours) that switch weekly. "At the end of the pilot, we will analyse productivity, feedback from clients and other stakeholders, revenue changes, managers' feedback on the organisation, and absenteeism." All employees have been informed of the changes. "The goal is really to test the advantages and disadvantages of the approach, rather than forcing people to do something."

Chollet is, of course, supported by the group's management team. "They thought it was a good idea and gave us the freedom to test it. They just set a few conditions such as no losses in productivity and revenue goals." It seems premature to report on the experience at a global level, for example in the management report. "But I'm convinced that by improving work-life balance and employee motivation, the compa-

ny as a whole will benefit. And it's important that we're seen as agile, because in 15 years, the four-day week will become the norm."

