

COALITION CAMPAIGNS FOR FOUR-DAY WEEK SCHEME

Under a new pilot programme, employers are set to introduce a four-day week for their employees over a six-month period starting in January 2022. The pilot is being organised by the Four Day Week Ireland campaign, which claims the initiative can deliver positive results for business and provide a work/life balance for employees. Report by Deirdre O'Flynn.

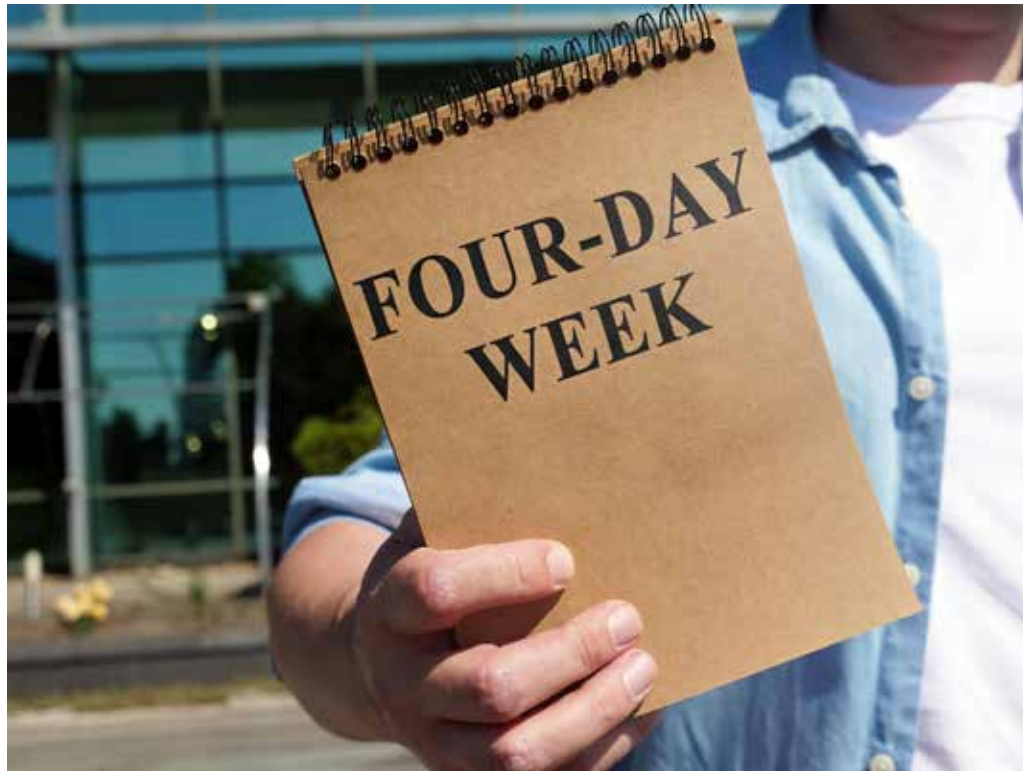
The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown the world of work into a spin, with the introduction of new models of working across all sectors of the economy. However, it may also now be an ideal time for employers and employees to consider a four-day working week in the future.

A four-day week can deliver positive results for business and provide the work/life balance employees want post-Covid, according to Four Day Week Ireland, who launched the pilot programme on 22 June for employers to trial the effectiveness of the scheme.

Four Day Week Ireland is the Irish leg of an international campaign to establish a four-day week, without any reductions in pay or productivity, and Irish trade union Fórsa is part of the coalition behind the initiative.

Last year, Fórsa published Ireland's first ever public opinion poll on the four-day week. Three-quarters of respondents said they supported a Government exploration of its introduction, while almost half the number of Irish employers said it would be feasible to trial it in their own workplace.

Fórsa's campaign director and chairperson of Four Day Week Ireland, Joe O'Connor, told *'Health & Safety Times'* that as the nature of work has changed, "technology and globalisation



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have introduced new ways of working, yet people are still working the same hours".

In fact, a fourth industrial revolution is upon us, O'Connor said, pointing to a 2017 report by PWC, which noted that artificial intelligence would boost Ireland's GDP in 2030 by 11.6% or €48 billion.

NATIONAL PILOT PROGRAMME

"Within this context, the four-day week campaign is part of the debate about sharing the benefits of productivity increases with workers. It draws on experiences internationally, including New Zealand, where companies are using the '100/80/100' model – 100 per cent productivity on 80 per cent of the time with 100 per cent pay. It's about linking productivity to results rather than time at a desk."

O'Connor said that the campaign wants "a gradual, steady, managed



Joe O'Connor, Fórsa's campaign director, said they want "a gradual and managed transition to a shorter working week for all workers in the private and public sectors".

transition to a shorter working week for all workers”, adding that the union hopes to involve public and private sector employers in a national four-day week pilot programme, which is currently in the late stages of development.

He added that this will lead to innovation by organisations and employees, with reduced working time being better for business, better for workers, better for women, and better for the environment, according to the coalition.

The next step is the roll-out of a pilot project with the US and New Zealand. “Companies in the three countries are set to introduce the four-day week at the same time, allowing comparability and shared experiences.

“This will be backed up by research with UCD and Boston College, with the ultimate aim of measuring the effects of the approach.”

INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY

The four-day week has been successfully introduced in a number of companies worldwide, including here in Ireland.

Two companies – both located in the West of Ireland – have expressed

increased productivity as a result of introducing a four-day working week.

ICE Group is a leading recruitment, training, and outsourced services company, with offices in Galway, Limerick, and Sligo.

“We depend on our people and felt that if we gave something back, it would make a huge difference to the sustainability of our organisation,” Margaret Cox, Director of ICE Group, told *‘Health & Safety Times’*.

The organisation introduced the four-day week for its 50 staff members in July 2019. “After a year-and-a-half, productivity increased 27 per cent, sales increased and unplanned attrition declined. And the number of single-day absences fell to three days in one year across the whole company. And we also estimate a 20 per cent saving on transport emissions.”

ICE Group operates a three-day weekend – employees work either from Monday to Thursday, with a Friday-Saturday-Sunday weekend, or alternatively they work from Tuesday to Friday, with a Saturday-Sunday-Monday weekend. “We still provide our services over 5.5 days, including Saturday, but we moved into part-time to cover the weekends.”

A CULTURE CHANGE

“The teams made the decision. It was a culture change – for it to work, everyone needed to be focused on its success and, for us, it was so important that we do whatever we have to make it work.

“It has been absolutely brilliant. We call the day off our ‘Genius Day’ – having an extra day at the weekend gives people space and they are energetic, enthusiastic, and focused when they

THREE ROUTES TO ACHIEVE THE FOUR-DAY WEEK

The Four-Day Week Ireland Steering Committee includes representatives from ICTU, Fórsa, Friends of the Earth Ireland, the National Women’s Council of Ireland, Maynooth University, ICE Group, and the UK and international four-day week campaigns.

The coalition says there are three routes to achieving the four-day week:

1. Good business leadership, combined with market and labour market factors, which will increase the attraction of the four-day week to companies.
2. Reduced working time, without loss of pay or productivity, through negotiations between management and unions in organisations where collective bargaining takes place.
3. Government as a large employer leading by example, supporting private companies that introduce reduced working time, and legislating where appropriate.

For further information on the campaign in Ireland visit www.fourdayweek.ie



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The ‘Four-Day Week’ concept was launched in September 2019 by Four Day Week Ireland – this coalition of businesses, unions, academics, environmentalists and NGOs is campaigning for a shorter working time across sectors of the economy.



Paul McNulty, CEO of 3D Issue, a digital content experience software company based in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, says that the four-day week has allowed him to reward and retain staff. (www.3Dissue.com)

come into work," Cox noted.

Customer service has remained high, with clients fully briefed. "We developed a strong handover protocol", so that one employee hands over to another on Thursday night if Friday work is required with a particular client.

"There's been huge goodwill and clients recognise that we have the energy to deliver our service to them."

STAFF REWARDED AND RETAINED

Paul McNulty, CEO of 3D Issue, a digital content experience software company based in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, said that the four-day week has allowed him to reward and retain staff.

"We've been working on a new product in the last few years, which took a lot of work, and I was looking for a way to reward the staff," he explained to

'Health & Safety Times'. "The four-day week allows me to compete with bigger corporations in terms of retaining my staff. It has worked well; there has been no loss of employees since we started the four-day week in 2019. Nor has there been any loss in productivity, in fact productivity has increased over what we did in the five-day week."

McNulty also runs the Monday-

LOCAL AUTHORITIES URGED TO PILOT THE FOUR-DAY WEEK PROGRAMME

Fórsa has written to the chief executives of all local authorities in Ireland, asking them to engage with the four-day week pilot programme.

The union's local government conference on 12 May heard from Andrew Barnes, Chief Executive of New Zealand firm Perpetual Guardian, who said his company had doubled per capita productivity and halved sick leave rates since it adopted a four-day week in 2018. He said the policy had helped Perpetual Guardian maintain productivity and profitability during the Covid lockdown.

Barnes established the '4-Day Week Global' foundation to support businesses and campaigners, following the successful introduction of the four-day week in his company,

"This is the model for employment in the 21st century; thousands of companies worldwide, including household names like Microsoft and Unilever, have followed our lead and experimented with the four-day week."

He said that it is an issue facing workers all the way across the world, regardless of country and culture, "because there's a mismatch between the amount of time we spend working and the amount of time we spend with our families and communities".

Barnes said the Covid experience of a rapid shift to remote working had boosted the case for the four-day week by removing "a barrier of trust" regarding time management and productivity.





“As a relatively new concept, the emerging evidence is mixed, and for some organisations the complexity and cost of managing a four-day workforce over a five-day working week has been prohibitive,” according to Maeve McElwee, Ibec’s Director of Employer Relations.

Thursday and Tuesday-Friday model, arranging it so that each role is always covered.

“Job applications have increased five-fold now because we offer the four-day week,” he said, adding that 3D Issue is unique in that area due to this.

“As long as people are getting the market rate, the satisfaction with that lessens after a while.

The extra day off is more valuable – that value may be in reduced childcare costs, peace and quiet for parents while children are in school, or an extra day off to get over the weekend.”

THE RIGHT WORK-LIFE BALANCE

According to Ibec’s Director of Employer Relations, Maeve McElwee, the accelerating pace of change in Irish workplaces has driven the adoption of new technologies and facilitated many new ways of working.

“The experience of flexible and remote working has grown significantly as a result of the Covid pandemic, and many organisations are now considering how they might incorporate the benefits of new work structures for the longer term,” she said.

“The Four-Day Week model is one practice that may

GOVERNMENT TO FUND RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP TO ASSESS IMPACTS

As part of the pilot programme, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications will fund a research partnership to assess the economic, social and environmental impacts of a four-day working week.

The researchers will examine the impact of a shorter working week on private sector companies and public sector employers as they pilot a four-day week over six months. The research will explore the impact of a shorter working week on productivity, wellbeing, job satisfaction, environmental footprint, and household division of labour.

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise and Employment Leo Varadkar said: “The Covid-19 pandemic has caused us to rethink and re-evaluate how we work. It’s been shown that huge numbers of people can be just as productive while working at home rather than having to come into the office every day, and it has accelerated the shift towards more flexible and family-friendly working hours.”

This new research call will provide an opportunity to address these impacts in the specific context of the Irish economy. “The idea is ambitious, to achieve the same outcomes and productivity, for the same pay with 20% fewer hours worked.” He noted that while it may work for some sectors, he said it was hard to see how it would work particularly in health, education and manufacturing for example.

“However, we need to keep an open mind when it comes to innovations in the world of work. This research being commissioned by the Government will give us a much greater understanding of the potential of this idea and that’s why the Department has agreed to co-sponsor it.”

Minister for Environment Climate and Communications Eamon Ryan said: “We want to find out more about how we can keep some of the gains made in terms of less commuting and more family time. A four-day week could help us cut carbon emissions and air pollution, improve people’s work-life balance and support gender equality. We need to look at the potential and assess the impacts of such a change, and this research will help us figure that out.”

Up to €150,000 will be made available to support this research. The two government departments will formally open the call on 1 July, at which time the full evaluation criteria, terms and conditions will be provided. It is anticipated that the call will remain open to proposals until 15 July 2021.

provide the right work/life balance for some organisations. The idea behind this practice is that whilst working hours reduce, productivity increases or remains the same, at a minimum.”

However, McElwee noted that as a relatively new concept, the emerging evidence is mixed, adding that for some organisations the complexity and cost of managing a four-day workforce over a five-day working week has been prohibitive.

“In other organisations, flexibility is considered more broadly with policies tailored to reflect the many different types of flexible working requests that employees may need, rather than a one-size-fits-all model,” she claimed.