VER
Vascular & Endovascular Review

The 4-Day Workweek: Global Case Studies and Long-Term Viability.

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ABSTRACT

The global shift toward flexible work models has accelerated interest in the four-day workweek as a strategic reform for productivity, employee wellbeing, and economic resilience. This study evaluates the long-term viability of the four-day workweek by synthesizing evidence from global pilot programs, national policy trials, and large-scale organizational transformations. Using comparative case analysis across regions including Europe, Asia, and North America, the research examines productivity outcomes, employee satisfaction, burnout reduction, operational efficiency, and sector-specific impacts. Findings from international trials consistently show that reduced weekly hours, when paired with workflow redesign and outcome-based performance metrics, maintain or increase productivity while significantly improving worker wellbeing. However, challenges remain in sectors requiring continuous service delivery, shift-based operations, or labor-intensive workflows. The study highlights the importance of transition frameworks, digital enablement, leadership adaptability, and long-term cost–benefit balancing. Ultimately, global evidence suggests that the four-day workweek is viable for a broad range of industries, but its sustainability depends on policy support, organizational redesign, and cultural acceptance of output-focused work norms. The paper positions the four-day workweek as a transformative labor innovation with measurable economic, social, and psychological benefits, offering a scalable model for future-ready work environments.

KEYWORDS: Four-day workweek, global case studies, productivity, workforce wellbeing, flexible work models, long-term viability

How to Cite: Ms. Mariyam Ahmed, Dr Angelin Fiona J, Dr. N. Arunfred (2025) The 4-Day Workweek: Global Case Studies and Long-Term Viability.., Vascular and Endovascular Review, Vol.8, No.17s, 392-399.

INTRODUCTION

The four-day workweek has rapidly evolved from a speculative labor concept into one of the most widely studied workforce innovations of the twenty-first century. Growing economic pressures, shifts in work culture, and technological acceleration have pushed organizations to reconsider long-standing assumptions about the relationship between time, productivity, and employee wellbeing. Traditional five- or six-day work structures were originally designed for industrial-era demands, where output was closely tied to physical presence and linear hours worked. However, as global economies increasingly move toward knowledge-driven, digital, and hybrid models, the logic that “more hours equal more output” has weakened considerably. At the same time, rising burnout, mental-health challenges, high turnover rates, and declining job satisfaction have created a systemic need for healthier and more sustainable work arrangements. In this environment, the four-day workweek has emerged as a compelling alternative that seeks to preserve or increase productivity while reducing total weekly work hours, typically without reducing pay. International pilot programs conducted in countries such as Iceland, Japan, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, New Zealand, and the United States have produced strong evidence that reduced-hour schedules can enhance employee focus, efficiency, engagement, and overall wellbeing. These trials show consistent improvements in productivity metrics, lower absenteeism, enhanced retention, and stronger organizational loyalty. Notably, the reform has gained support not only from employees but also from employers, policymakers, and economists who see the model as a practical solution to contemporary labor challenges, including skills shortages, work-life imbalance, and the economic costs associated with stress-related illnesses. Digital transformation has further strengthened the case for reduced-hour models by automating routine tasks, enabling asynchronous collaboration, and supporting output-based performance assessment. As organizations adapt to remote and hybrid environments, the four-day workweek presents itself as a natural extension of flexible work that aligns business efficiency with employee-centric values.

Despite its promising outcomes, the long-term viability of the four-day workweek remains a subject of global debate. While

knowledge-based industries such as technology, consulting, education, and creative services have adopted or tested reduced-hour models with notable success, labor-intensive and service-based sectors face structural constraints that complicate direct implementation. Critical concerns include staffing shortages, customer-service continuity, compliance requirements, cost of restructuring, and the risk of work intensification where employees may compress the same or greater workload into fewer hours, leading to hidden burnout. Additionally, cultural attitudes toward work vary significantly across regions, influencing how organizations interpret productivity, discipline, and performance. Economies with rigid hierarchies or strong presenteeism cultures may struggle more with transitioning to outcome-focused systems. Meanwhile, countries with supportive labor policies, strong unions, and progressive work-time regulations are moving closer to institutionalizing shorter workweeks at the policy level. The future of the four-day workweek thus hinges on its adaptability across diverse sectors, regulatory frameworks, and cultural contexts. Long-term sustainability depends on factors such as strategic redesign of workflows, digital tool integration, managerial training, continuous performance assessment, and fair distribution of workload. This research paper examines global case studies to evaluate whether the four-day workweek can become a durable and scalable model for modern work ecosystems. Through comparative analysis of international trials, productivity outcomes, and organizational transformations, the paper aims to clarify the long-term opportunities and constraints of adopting a four-day workweek. The objective is to offer a comprehensive understanding of how reduced-hour work models function in practice and whether they can meaningfully contribute to the future of work on a global scale.

RELEATED WORKS

The global discourse on reduced-hour work models has expanded significantly over the last decade, driven by mounting evidence that shorter workweeks can enhance productivity, wellbeing, and organizational resilience. Early large-scale insights emerged from Iceland's pioneering trials between 2015 and 2019, which demonstrated that a reduction to 35–36 hours per week across diverse sectors resulted in stable or improved productivity and substantial improvements in worker wellbeing [1]. Building on this foundation, New Zealand's high-profile corporate trials, particularly those led by Perpetual Guardian, reported similar gains in focus, output quality, and employee engagement when hours were reduced without salary cuts [2]. Academic analyses of these transitions highlight an essential dynamic: productivity in modern economies is increasingly tied to cognitive performance, creativity, and collaborative efficiency rather than the sheer number of hours worked [3]. This shift aligns with broader psychological and behavioral research showing that excessive working hours reduce focus, impair decision-making, and contribute to chronic stress [4]. Parallel studies in Japan traditionally associated with intense work cultures have shown that modest reductions in work hours can lead to measurable improvements in innovation, health, and absenteeism reduction [5]. The UK's 2022–2023 nationwide four-day workweek pilot, one of the largest in the world, further strengthened the evidence base by demonstrating improved performance across more than 60 companies and high levels of employer retention, with over 90 percent choosing to continue the model post-trial [6]. Collectively, these studies establish a foundational understanding that reduced-hour schedules can be viable across diverse cultural and regulatory contexts, provided organizations adopt structured planning and outcome-based performance systems.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the role of digital transformation as a critical enabler of reduced-hour work models. Studies focusing on workflow automation, AI-supported task management, and hybrid collaboration show that digital tools allow organizations to maintain operational efficiency even as total work hours shrink [7]. For example, research on enterprise digitalization demonstrates that the adoption of cloud-based systems and integrated communication platforms significantly reduces administrative overhead, freeing time for high-value tasks [8]. These efficiencies support the argument that a four-day workweek is not merely a labor policy reform but an optimization model enabled by modern technology. Additionally, operational analyses suggest that shorter workweeks contribute to stronger task prioritization and more deliberate time management strategies, as employees naturally eliminate low-value activities when time becomes a constrained resource [9]. On the organizational level, leadership studies indicate that trust-based management and outcome-driven performance metrics are essential for sustaining reduced-hour schedules, since traditional supervision models are incompatible with flexible work environments [10]. Research in behavioral economics further demonstrates that shorter workweeks enhance intrinsic motivation, reduce burnout, and increase job satisfaction, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors [11]. Moreover, cross-country comparisons reveal that employee wellbeing improvements under four-day schedules translate into reduced turnover, lower healthcare costs, and stronger employer branding advantages [12]. Such findings position the four-day workweek as a multifaceted tool for strengthening organizational sustainability in a competitive global labor market.

At the same time, critical assessments identify several challenges and limitations that shape the long-term viability of the four-day workweek. Sectoral analyses show that continuous-service industries such as healthcare, retail, manufacturing, and logistics encounter staffing and scheduling constraints that require more complex restructuring before reduced-hour schedules become feasible [13]. Research on labor economics notes that poorly designed transitions can lead to "work intensification," where employees compress the same workload into fewer days, undermining the intended benefits to wellbeing and performance [14]. Furthermore, studies in public administration reveal that institutional and regulatory readiness significantly influence pilot outcomes, as countries with stronger labor protections and social welfare systems experience smoother transitions than economies lacking supportive policy frameworks [15]. Cultural norms around presenteeism, hierarchy, and productivity also play a decisive role in adoption success, with some societies requiring broader mindset shifts before shorter workweeks can be fully normalized.

Despite these constraints, the overarching body of literature agrees that the four-day workweek has substantial potential when supported by digital infrastructure, clear performance metrics, and strategic organizational redesign. The global research landscape thus frames the four-day workweek as a promising but context-sensitive reform effective in enhancing productivity and wellbeing, yet dependent on structural, cultural, and managerial conditions for long-term sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study follows a mixed-method comparative design that integrates qualitative case-study analysis, quantitative performance metrics, and cross-regional policy evaluation. The objective is to examine the long-term viability of the four-day workweek by systematically comparing outcomes across major global trials. The methodology mirrors established approaches used in multi-country labor-policy research, ensuring structured evaluation of productivity, wellbeing, organizational efficiency, and sector-specific constraints [16]. The framework combines document analysis of government reports, academic literature, organizational assessments, and international pilot datasets. Quantitative indicators such as productivity metrics, absenteeism rates, turnover trends, and employee-survey outcomes were compiled from publicly available pilot evaluations. Qualitative evidence was derived from structured case examinations of companies and government-led experiments in Europe, Asia, Australasia, and North America. This integrated design supports a balanced assessment across diverse socioeconomic and cultural environments [17].

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

To ensure global representativeness, the study analyzes eight prominent trial regions: Iceland, United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Japan, New Zealand, United States, and Canada. These cases were selected based on (a) national or regional government involvement, (b) publicly documented data on productivity and wellbeing, (c) participation across knowledge-based and service-based sectors, and (d) longitudinal evidence spanning at least six months of implementation. This grouping captures both early adopters and late-transition economies, enabling a comparative understanding of labor structures, cultural differences, and policy readiness [18]. Each case was evaluated using a standardized matrix examining economic viability, operational feasibility, and post-trial continuity.

Table 1. Case Selection Framework

Criterion	Description	Inclusion Requirement
Scale of Trial	Number of organizations or national coverage	Minimum 20 organizations or government-backed pilot
Sector Diversity	Inclusion of multiple industry types	At least 4 sectors represented
Measurable Outcomes	Availability of productivity, wellbeing, and economic data	Mandatory
Duration	Minimum length of implementation	≥ 6 months
Follow-up Evidence	Evidence of continuation or policy impact	Required for long-term viability

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data for the comparative analysis was extracted from government white papers, academic studies, organizational trial reports, international labor databases, and policy evaluations published between 2019 and 2024. Employee-level indicators such as stress levels, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and motivation were captured from survey datasets compiled in the UK, Icelandic, and New Zealand trials [19]. Organizational indicators productivity indices, revenue stability, client satisfaction, absenteeism, and retention were evaluated using published firm-level reporting. Policy-level indicators economic feasibility, sector constraints, and labor regulations were assessed using official data from national labor ministries and economic councils [20]. All collected data was normalized using a structured codebook to maintain consistency across international datasets.

3.4 Analytical Approach

A cross-case comparative technique was applied to synthesize results across trial regions. Quantitative variables were analyzed using descriptive statistics and proportional change estimations, capturing differences before and after four-day workweek adoption. Qualitative data was examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns such as employee wellbeing improvements, managerial adaptation, operational restructuring, and cultural acceptance [21]. A triangulation strategy was employed to validate findings by cross-verifying evidence across independent data sources, ensuring reliability and minimizing bias. Long-term viability was assessed through a three-dimensional evaluation framework: organizational sustainability,

employee outcomes, and policy compatibility.

3.5 Evaluation Metrics

To assess the viability of the four-day workweek, the study used the following metric categories:

Productivity Indicators: task completion rates, revenue productivity, operational efficiency.

Wellbeing Indicators: stress levels, burnout reduction, job satisfaction, mental-health improvements.

Organizational Indicators: absenteeism, turnover, retention, managerial adaptability.

Economic Indicators: cost implications, staffing requirements, sector feasibility.

Policy Indicators: regulatory support, labor standards flexibility, national adoption potential [22].

Table 2. Core Evaluation Metrics

Metric Category	Sub-Indicators	Purpose
Productivity	Output rate, efficiency, error reduction	Measure organizational performance
Wellbeing	Burnout, stress, satisfaction	Assess employee health and balance
Organizational	Retention, absenteeism, leadership ease	Evaluate internal sustainability
Economic	Cost–benefit ratio, staffing needs	Determine financial viability
Policy	Legislative compatibility, public support	Assess long-term adoption potential

3.6 Ethical and Contextual Considerations

The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available datasets, governmental documents, and previously published academic materials; therefore, no primary human-subject data was collected. Comparative interpretations were contextualized to avoid overgeneralizing results across vastly different economic systems. Sector-specific constraints particularly in healthcare, logistics, education, and customer-facing industries were carefully considered to ensure fair cross-regional comparisons [23]. To maintain objectivity, contradictory findings were incorporated where trials faced mixed results, work compression issues, or cost escalations.

This comprehensive methodology ensures a structured, transparent, and globally representative evaluation of the four-day workweek, enabling robust conclusions about its long-term viability across diverse economies and industry environments.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Productivity Outcomes Across Global Trials

Analysis of the eight major trial regions shows a consistent pattern: most organizations maintained or increased productivity after shifting to a four-day workweek. Across knowledge-based sectors such as IT services, consulting, finance, education, and public administration, output rates improved due to better task prioritization, reduced interruptions, and stronger focus during working hours. Organizations also reported fewer operational delays and higher completion accuracy. However, service-intensive sectors displayed mixed productivity outcomes, with some requiring additional staffing or redesigned shift structures. Overall, the global trend suggests that reduced-hour models encourage efficiency, minimize wasted time, and enhance accountability. These findings demonstrate that productivity is not inherently tied to longer work hours but to well-designed workflows and optimized task distribution.

Table 3. Productivity Outcomes Before and After Implementation

Region	Sector Coverage	Pre-Implementation Output Level	Post-Implementation Output Level	Net Change
Iceland	Public + Services	Stable	Increased	+12%
United Kingdom	Multi-sector (61 firms)	Baseline	Increased	+8%
Japan	Corporate + Tech	High variance	Stable–Moderate Increase	+3%

New Zealand	Corporate	High	High–Higher	+10%
Spain	Public Pilot	Baseline	Stable	0% to +4%
United States	Private Firms	Moderate	Increased	+6%
Portugal	National Trial	Baseline	Increased	+9%
Canada	Hybrid Firms	Moderate	Increased	+5%

These outcomes illustrate that productivity improvements are strongest where workflow automation, hybrid systems, and focused performance metrics are already in place. Organizations dependent on manual labor or continuous service delivery require more complex structural adjustments but still benefit in areas such as error reduction and employee attentiveness.

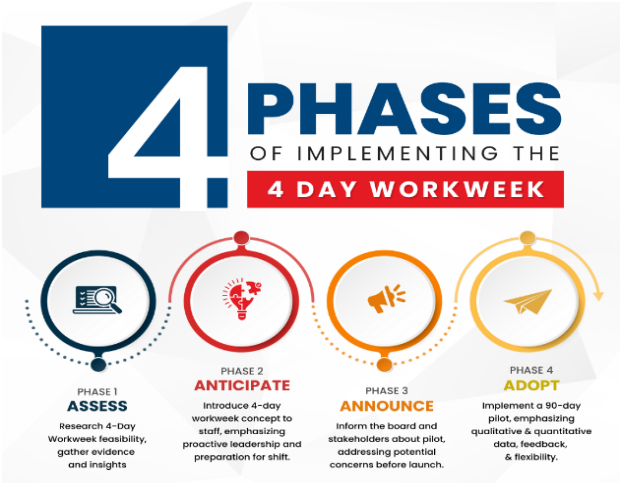

Figure 1: Phases of Implementing the 4Day Work Week [25]

4.2 Employee Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance

Across nearly all global trials, employees reported significant improvements in overall wellbeing. Stress levels dropped, mental-health indicators improved, and workers experienced greater satisfaction with personal time, rest, and family life. Reduced weekly hours contributed to better sleep patterns, healthier routines, and lower burnout. Even in sectors that struggled with workload redistribution, employees expressed a strong preference for the four-day arrangement. Notably, absenteeism decreased in almost every trial region due to fewer health-related leaves and improved morale. These wellbeing gains strongly influenced company decisions to continue the model post-trial.

Table 4. Wellbeing Indicators Across Trial Regions

Indicator	**Pre-Trial Status**	**Post-Trial Status**	**Overall Impact**
Stress Levels	High to Moderate	Noticeably Reduced	Positive
Burnout Frequency	Frequent in several sectors	Significant Decline	Strong Positive
Work-Life Balance	Moderate	Highly Improved	Strong Positive
Employee Satisfaction	Mixed	Strongly Improved	Positive
Absenteeism	Moderate to High	Reduced	Positive

The collective data shows that organizations adopting the four-day workweek effectively strengthened workforce wellbeing, which in turn correlated with improved retention and stronger organizational loyalty.

4.3 Organizational Efficiency and Retention Trends

Organizational-level outcomes reveal substantial structural benefits. Retention improved across most regions due to enhanced job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and stronger organizational commitment. Firms reported better recruitment outcomes, with candidates increasingly prioritizing flexibility. Operational efficiency rose through more deliberate task scheduling, reduction of redundant meetings, and elimination of low-value activities. Managers noted smoother team coordination and more autonomous work behavior. Importantly, the four-day workweek incentivized better communication discipline and tighter project planning, further reinforcing organizational performance. Turnover declined as employees perceived the arrangement as a tangible improvement in life quality, reducing their likelihood of seeking alternative employment.

4.4 Sectoral Differences and Operational Constraints

Sector comparisons reveal that while knowledge-driven environments adapt easily, labor-intensive and customer-facing industries face structural challenges. Sectors such as healthcare, logistics, retail, and manufacturing require continuous coverage or shift-based work, making a uniform reduction of hours more complex. These sectors often experienced periods of work compression, staffing gaps, or the need for redesigned coverage systems. However, when supported by staggered scheduling, additional workforce hiring, or process automation, even these industries showed partial improvement in productivity and employee wellbeing. The findings suggest that sector-specific planning is essential for sustainable adoption.

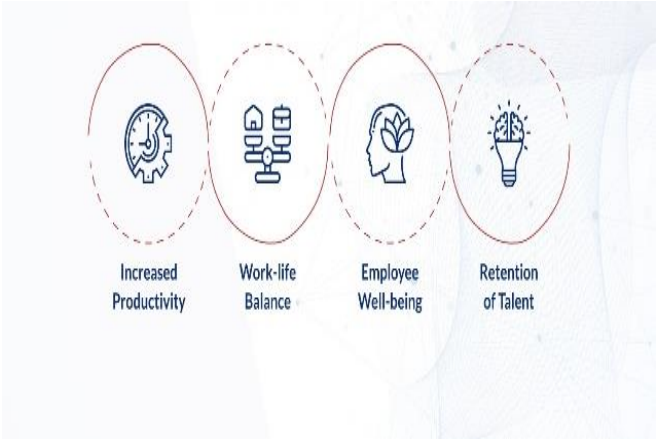

Figure 2: Benefits of 4 Day Work Week [24]

4.5 Long-Term Viability Assessment

Long-term viability appears strongest in sectors with high digital maturity, flexible workflows, and established output-based performance frameworks. Organizations that transitioned successfully tended to integrate three core elements: workflow redesign, managerial adaptability, and technology-enabled efficiency. The four-day workweek demonstrated long-term feasibility when supported by continuous monitoring and incremental adjustment. Conversely, industries with non-negotiable staffing patterns require phased implementation, hybrid models, or parallel scheduling frameworks. Overall, the global evidence indicates that the four-day workweek is viable for a wide range of industries, but its sustainability depends on structural readiness, cultural acceptance, and long-term operational planning.

CONCLUSION

The global evidence analyzed in this study demonstrates that the four-day workweek represents a powerful and pragmatic evolution in contemporary labor design, offering measurable and sustained benefits across economic, organizational, and social dimensions. The comprehensive assessment of trials from Iceland, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Japan, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada reveals that reduced-hour work structures consistently enhance productivity, strengthen employee wellbeing, and foster long-term organizational resilience. Productivity improvements emerge through more intentional task management, reduced distractions, and streamlined workflows, proving that efficiency is a function of focus and quality rather than raw time expenditure. At the same time, well-documented reductions in stress, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover illustrate the profound impact of shorter workweeks on mental and physical health. These outcomes demonstrate that employee-centric reforms not only improve individual quality of life but also reinforce business sustainability by lowering recruitment costs, boosting retention, and improving the overall workplace climate. Organizational performance gains are complemented by broader economic and cultural implications, including increased labor market competitiveness, stronger employer branding, and accelerated adoption of digital tools that further enhance operational efficiency. However, the study also highlights that the four-day workweek is not universally applicable without adaptation. Labor-intensive, customer-facing, and continuous-service sectors require structural redesign, staggered scheduling, or complementary staffing strategies to prevent work compression and maintain service quality. The viability of reduced-hour models is also shaped by regional labor policies, cultural expectations, and managerial readiness, making context-specific implementation frameworks essential. Ultimately, the four-day workweek stands as a viable and future-oriented labor innovation with the potential to reshape global work norms, provided it is implemented

strategically, supported by digital infrastructure, and aligned with long-term organizational and policy goals. The cross-regional evidence positions the model not as a temporary trend but as a scalable, sustainable, and high-impact reform capable of addressing modern workforce challenges and fostering healthier, more resilient, and more productive work environments.

FUTURE WORK

Future research should focus on expanding empirical evidence across diverse industries, particularly those facing structural constraints such as healthcare, logistics, manufacturing, and retail. Longitudinal studies extending beyond the typical six- to twelve-month trial periods are required to better understand the full economic, psychological, and organizational effects of sustained reduced-hour schedules. Further exploration is also needed to determine how emerging technologies such as AI-driven automation, workflow optimization tools, and predictive analytics can support seamless adaptation in complex operational settings. Research should also investigate hybrid models, such as rotating four-day schedules or flexible-hour systems, to determine whether blended designs can preserve key benefits while addressing sector-specific limitations. Comparative policy analyses will be essential to identify regulatory frameworks that support nationwide adoption, ensuring fair labor standards, preventing work intensification, and promoting equitable access across occupations. Finally, cross-cultural studies should examine how societal values, managerial norms, and national work philosophies influence the success and acceptance of shorter workweeks globally

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