

Balancing Efficiency and Service

Managing a 4-Day Work Week Model in a Small Theological Library

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In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the adaptation of flexible work arrangements to account for societal, economic, and industry changes. Telework, flexible hours, and alternative workloads have all been introduced across multiple industries (Vidat 2023). One of these new alternative work arrangements that has become increasingly popular in recent years is the concept of a 4-day work week. The 4-day work week model has been presented as a potential solution to improve work-life balance, enhance productivity, and promote overall well-being among employees. This work model challenges the traditional 5-day work week, proposing that reducing the number of days spent at work can significantly benefit workers and employers.

There are two different models for the 4-day work week; the first reduces the work week from five to four days but with the same number of hours in a week. The second model reduces both the number

of days and the number of hours in the work week. An example of the difference between the two would be a 4-day, 40-hour work week during which an employee works 10-hour days, versus a 4-day, 32-hour work week, during which an employee maintains the traditional 8-hour workday. Both models retain the same level of pay/salary for employees as if they worked a typical 5-day work week. Studies suggest that the 4-day work week model presents many benefits, such as a healthier work-life balance and flexibility, higher employee retention rates, increases in efficiency and productivity, and an increase in overall well-being (Bersin 2023; Moen and Chu 2023; Wadsworth and Facer 2016).

The 4-day compressed work week has been introduced by various employers, such as Microsoft Japan and Utah state-affiliated employers. Both Microsoft and Utah state initially implemented pilot projects and found that this alternative work model increased productivity and lowered absenteeism, while the employees reported better work-life balance and improved employee satisfaction (Vidat 2023; Wadsworth and Facer 2016). While remote and hybrid work models have become increasingly popular since the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still many jobs where remote or hybrid work models do not work but could successfully implement a 4-day work week model for all employees (Moen and Chu 2023).

However, there are many challenges and implications to consider when implementing an alternative work schedule, especially when it comes to management. Managers may have to redesign jobs, tasks, or departments to account for new timesaving or productivity strategies. Workloads may need to be altered or shifted, and the maintenance of service or turnaround times will need to be considered along with alternative scheduling for employees and/or services. In light of these changes, managers will need to be intentional in maintaining relationships with employees despite the decreased facetime (Moen and Chu 2023; Wadsworth and Facer 2016).

In the last few years, there has been a significant increase in alternative or flexible work schedules, including remote or hybrid work at colleges and universities across the world. However, post-secondary institutions have yet to attempt a compressed or diminished work week. It begs the question of whether a 4-day work week could be successfully implemented across various departments or entire institutions. In 2022 Saint Paul University, a pontifical catholic university in Ottawa, Canada, introduced a 4-day work week pilot project for all administrative staff in the hopes of creating more work-life

balance, increasing employee satisfaction, increasing productivity, increasing retention rates, and remaining competitive in a city with multiple post-secondary institutions with higher budgets and salaries. Managers and supervisors across the university were informed of this change and asked to address each service's potential impacts, challenges, and opportunities. In 2023, the university concluded the pilot, and the 4-day work week was officially adopted and ratified in the support staff collective agreement.

This chapter will discuss how a small catholic university implemented the 4-day work week model for its administrative and support staff, and how this model has affected the library, its services, and the management of the library. This chapter will explore how the library employees adapted to this new model despite its small team, and the challenges library management faced when trying to find appropriate and adaptable strategies to maintain its high-quality services to the university community.

Managing the 4-day Work Week

Many theological libraries are small; most of these libraries are run by a staff of fewer than 10 people, and in some cases, by a single person. The Jean-Léon Allie Library at Saint Paul University employs seven full-time staff: three librarians and four library technicians. The pilot project included all library technicians as well as the Chief Librarian. The other two librarians fall under the full-time (FT) professor's union and were thus excluded from the project. As such, five of the seven FT library staff were switched from the regular 5-day, 35 hours/week schedule to a 4-day, 28 hours/week schedule. The first pilot project was introduced in June 2022 and concluded in October 2022, followed by a second pilot project from October 2022 to May 2023. Managers were informed of the project by human resources and upper administration and were given details as to how the 4-day work week would work. They also provided managers with various project management techniques to help them determine what changes would need to be made in their departments to maintain productivity, efficiency, and service. Managers were asked to examine their departments and determine what practices to keep, which ones needed improvement or changes, and what new practices needed to be added. Before the beginning of the pilot, the Chief Librarian met

with the head of user services to discuss the potential challenges, opportunities, and changes that would need to be made to accommodate this new model.

Challenge 1: Workload

Managers across the university were asked to examine each employee's workload to make sure that the same level of work and service were maintained within the 4-day work week. This proved very challenging as we now had five employees working not only one day less, but seven fewer hours, going from 35 hours a week to 28 hours. This meant that our staff needed to do the same amount of work in the week but with thirty-five fewer hours to do it. Each manager met with their employees to discuss their workload and examine all processes to see if any tasks could be improved, changed, or eliminated. During the first few months of the pilot, there were no significant changes in the workload for our FT employees, and they were able to complete all of their tasks and provide quality services to our patrons during the 4-day work week. However, full-time classes and our full student population returned in September. We began to notice a few problems; we were not able to shelve our books at the same rate as before, and the turnaround time for scan requests was getting longer. The service desk team met to discuss these problems and try to come up with solutions. We looked at our process for shelving and scanning, such as how many hours we all dedicate to these tasks and at what time of day would be the best times to try to complete them. We determined that gathering all of the scans needed in the morning and leaving them for our PT staff to complete in the evenings when the desk traffic was typically slower would help us maintain our turnaround time for scans, and free up more time for FT staff to shelve instead of scan. We also acknowledged that hiring work-study students to assist with shelving could be a possible solution. Subsequently, whenever we noticed that certain tasks became increasingly difficult to complete, all managers and library staff met to discuss what we could collaboratively do to maintain or improve our workloads and services.

Challenge 2: Days Off

The biggest challenge we faced when implementing the 4-day work week was making sure that the library's service/circulation desk would remain staffed for the same number of hours as usual. From September to April, the library's service desk is open 7 days a week. FT employees staff the desk from Monday to Friday during regular business hours, and three part-time (PT) employees staff the desk in the evenings and on weekends. Currently, three FT library staff work at the service desk, all of whom switched from a 5-day to a 4-day work week. This initially caused major scheduling conflicts. With the 4-day work week, employees were allowed to decide which day of the week they take off, also known as their "free" day, with many employees at the university opting for either Mondays or Fridays. There was a potential problem with employees all wanting the same day of the week off, and how we would determine who got what days. With three employees working four days, we needed to figure out which days they would like off while acknowledging that they could not take the same day off. We settled on a consistent schedule with one employee taking Mondays off and two employees taking Fridays off, with employees having the option to change their day if needed by submitting a change request in advance. The issue arose that if two employees took the Friday off, there would only be one employee left to work the desk for the whole day, meaning that the desk would need to close for breaks, lunch, and would, in turn, decrease the number of hours of service we provided to the university community. We needed to acknowledge that only having one person work the service desk on Fridays was not viable, so extra hours would need to be given to PT staff to cover any gaps in service. The head of user services also offered to cover and work the service desk on Fridays to help ease the burden of the only employee scheduled that day.

Challenge 3: Budget

We needed to increase the number of hours our PT staff worked to maintain the same level and hours at the service desk. Before the pilot, there were 30 hours/week of PT work, which needed to be increased to 45 hours, for a total increase of 15 hours/week. This had significant budget considerations. In the entire university, we were

the only department that needed to hire/increase PT work to account for the new work model. Upper administration granted our budget increase so that we could maintain our service hours. However, we acknowledge that this could be difficult for institutions that have very conservative or strict budgets.

Extra shifts were added on both Mondays and Fridays to accommodate the lower number of staff working that day and to account for any potential missed days due to vacation or illness. However, this, too posed challenges when hiring PT staff. The library tried to hire graduate students in master's library programs from another university to work the service desk during the year, and it became increasingly difficult to find students who could work during the day due to their class schedules. We expanded our pool of candidates to include students in the local college's library and information technician (LIT) program and increased the number of PT hires from three to four. We also hired two more PT Saint Paul students for work-study jobs in the library at 10 hours/week during the fall and winter semesters to keep up with our shelving and scanning demands. Overall, a small increase in PT staff as well as our budget was needed to maintain the same level of service and efficiency as before.

Moving Forward

Since the beginning of the pilot, our staff has reported that they feel a greater and more positive work-life balance and overall job satisfaction since the implementation of the 4-day work week. Our team comes to work with a more positive outlook and is ready to assist any of their team members as needed. We have noticed an overall increase in collaboration and willingness to adjust to emerging situations. We have also noticed an overall higher retention rate across all staff in the university. Being a smaller university in a city with two other major universities that are twenty to forty times larger than us, it can be difficult to attract employees as our salaries tend to be lower than those at bigger institutions. The implementation of the 4-day work week has proven to be an attractive work model and has allowed us to remain competitive. We have now had two years to adjust to the 4-day work week and have been able to implement it successfully in the library while maintaining the same quality of service to our patrons.

Managers have had to come up with creative solutions to adjust employee's workloads, scheduling, and budget to make this model a success. Managers remain in continuous open communication with their employees to adjust to any changes in service or schedule. The 4-day work week has required increased collaboration within the library and the entire university. Sometimes we may try to contact employees in other departments who are gone due to their free day, and it is important to have open communication across departments to ensure that we can all collaborate successfully, maintain service, and meet deadlines.

In conclusion, the 4-day work week model represents a paradigm shift in how we perceive work, productivity, and well-being in the modern age. By prioritizing efficiency, employee satisfaction, and work-life balance, organizations have the potential to foster a more engaged and motivated workforce. However, many challenges exist with this model, resulting in library management needing to be proactive in maintaining library services. As societal attitudes toward work continue to evolve, the 4-day work week is a progressive alternative to traditional work structures. While widespread adoption may not be feasible or suitable for every industry or organization, this model encourages employers and managers to rethink how they approach work hours and employee well-being. As more data becomes available and success stories such as ours emerge, the case for a shorter work week will likely continue to grow stronger. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st-century workplace, embracing innovative approaches like the 4-day work week could pave the way for a more sustainable and fulfilling future of library work.

References

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