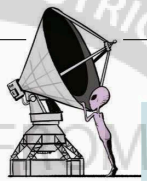
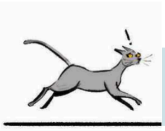
- Work-life balance



ALPHA ABSENCE
Male dominance is rarer than you'd think in the primate world **p20**



WHO'S LISTENING IN?
Alien astronomers could detect us from 200 light-years away **p21**



OFF TO A BAD START
Study suggests the origin of domestic cats is dark **p23**

NEWS FROM THE FRONTIERS OF SCIENCE

DISCOVERIES

HEALTH

Four-day weeks make employees healthier, study finds

A shorter work week could drastically improve employee wellbeing, without sacrificing productivity



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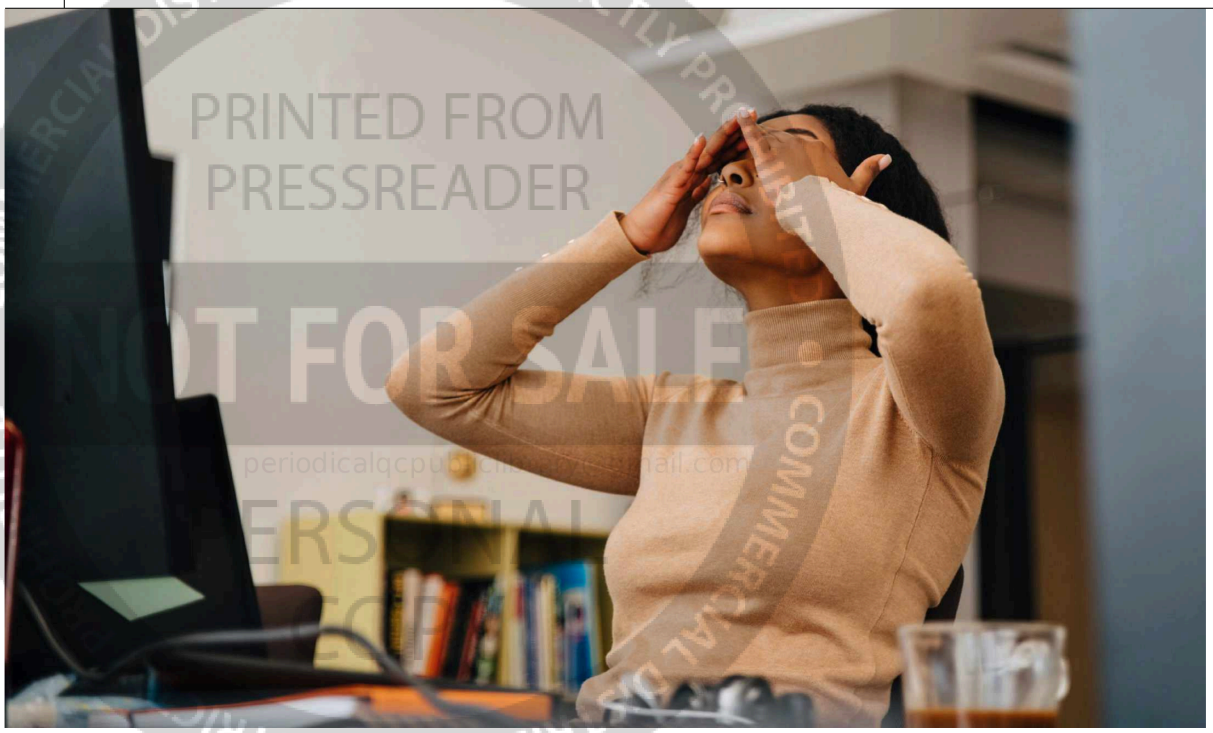
If you're reading this at your desk, feeling a little tired and wondering where the weekend went, the idea of a four-day work week probably sounds pretty appealing. Just imagine what you could do with an extra day off – finally tackle those odd jobs, get outside or simply catch up on sleep.

The idea has been floating around for years, but now the evidence is speaking for itself. Cutting your work week by just one day could lower your stress levels, improve your sleep, boost physical activity and even enhance your productivity. That's the promise of the growing global movement testing the shorter work week across Europe, North America and beyond.

REIMAGINE THE WEEK

In one new study, researchers from Boston College and University College Dublin tracked nearly

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3,000 employees across 141 different organisations in six English-speaking countries. Over a six-month period, these participants worked up to eight hours less per week without any reduction in pay.

The results, published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, were impressive. Employees reported better mental and physical health, fewer sleeping problems and lower levels of fatigue – all while maintaining their output.

90 per cent of the companies involved in the study were so pleased with the results that they continued using reduced working hours after the trial ended.

"We see global trends (not just in high-income countries, but in many low- and middle-income countries) where workers are struggling with burnout, long hours and little time for themselves and their families," study author Prof Wen Fan, associate professor of sociology at Boston College, told *BBC Science Focus*.

"Our four-day work week is a potential way to reimagine how we can reconstruct the work arrangement in order for workers to benefit, and society to benefit as well."

"The reduced-hours group experienced significantly less stress, as measured by heart-rate variability"

HARD DATA

While many work week trials rely on surveys to gather feedback, a recent study in Germany led by Dr Julia Backmann (who oversees the Chair for Transformation of Work and co-directs the Center for Business Transformation at the University of Münster) was based on something else: hard data.

Her team tracked stress, activity levels and sleep using smartwatches worn by those taking part in the four-day work week trial and a control group working full time.

They found that participants in the reduced-hours group experienced significantly less stress, as measured by heart-rate rate variability. "The four-day work week group had significantly fewer stress minutes on most days," Backmann told *BBC Science Focus*.

"What I find really interesting is that even during the weekend, they never reached the same stress levels as the control group."

The differences held across Saturday, which was surprisingly the most stressful day of the week – likely due to errands and family responsibilities – and Sunday, the least stressful. Participants also walked more, exercised more and slept around 38 minutes longer per week.

ABOVE Stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 16.4 million working days lost in the UK between 2023 and 2024, according to the Labour Force Survey

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"They're more active, they're doing more sports, they're less stressed and they also sleep a bit more during the week," Backmann said.

While the sleep quality data (measuring how well participants slept) are still being processed, early signs all point in one direction, says Backmann: "This basically supports the idea that the four-day week is, overall, good for wellbeing and health."

Crucially, these physiological results back up what participants have already reported in surveys – an important finding, given longstanding concerns about bias in self-reported data in other four-day work week studies. "That's normally the main criticism," Backmann said. "But now we actually see that [these results are] pretty in sync with the objective data."

As part of the same study, researchers also collected hair samples to measure cortisol, a hormone linked to chronic stress. The results are still being processed – Backmann expects them later this year. If consistent with the other findings, they could offer another independent line of evidence for the four-day week's health benefits.

In total, the trial involved 41 organisations across Germany, ranging from IT firms to healthcare providers. Not every employee switched to a four-day week within each company. Some departments in larger firms stayed on full-time hours. Of those that did switch, most reduced their hours without compressing them into longer days. Monthly overtime fell, too.

Fortunately for the CEOs reading this article, no significant changes in revenue were observed under a four-day week, and both employee productivity and work intensity ticked up.

Crucially, the model was widely popular. According to the report, 73 per cent of organisations planned to continue the four-day week in some form, and 82 per cent of workers wanted to stick with it.



ABOVE The stress and activity levels of people taking part in the four-day work week trial was tracked using smart watches

TOP Workers' General Union secretary general, Pepe Álvarez, speaking at the 4-Day Week International Summit

THE FUTURE OF WORK

So, is the Monday-to-Friday slog on its way out? Not so fast, says Prof Cal Newport, a computer scientist at Georgetown University, in the US, and author of *Deep Work*.

While he agrees that a shorter week can bring some relief, he believes it doesn't go far enough. "One of the primary sources of burnout in knowledge workers is overload," he told *BBC Science Focus*. "They're tackling too many projects, tasks and obligations at once." In other words, the problem isn't just how long we work, but how much we're expected to do.

"Moving to a four-day work week only indirectly addresses this issue," he said. "There's some anecdotal evidence that reducing the work week does reduce workloads somewhat, as these new constraints make it easier for people to justify saying 'no'."

"But the most effective solution would be to address workloads directly and have systems or rules in place to ensure no one ever has more than a reasonable amount of work on their plate."

Backmann's team is now planning to investigate how compressed four-day weeks – where employees squeeze 40 hours into four longer days – compare to genuine reductions in total working time.

In all, the results for a four-day work week are encouraging. Trials across the globe all point to the same conclusion: done well, shorter work weeks can improve wellbeing without hurting performance.

But as Newport points out, the time we work may matter less than the expectations we work under. If the four-day week is to stick, we might need to rethink our capacity as well as our calendars.

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