

Beyond Technology: Assessing the Feasibility of the Four-Day Workweek in the Ministry of Health, Southern Province, Zambia-A Sectoral Reality Check.

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ABSTRACT

The four-day workweek (4DWW) has gained attention as a transformative approach to work life balance, productivity, and organizational sustainability. While widely embraced in the technology sector, its viability in essential service sectors remains underexplored. This study synthesizes peer reviewed evidence, sector specific case studies, and theoretical frameworks to assess the feasibility of implementing the 4DWW beyond technology, with a focus on Zambia's public healthcare system. Drawing on both global literature and a local survey of HR professionals and healthcare staff, the paper examines the model's relevance to healthcare, education, logistics, and manufacturing. Findings highlight the promise of the 4DWW in improving work-life balance and morale, but also reveal critical constraints related to staffing, continuity of service, and regulatory readiness. The study integrates the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model to guide analysis and proposes context specific strategies for adaptation. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for public sector HR professionals and policy makers pursuing flexible work reforms in developing country settings.

Keywords: Four-Day Workweek, Work Life Balance, Flexible Work, HR Strategy, Sectoral Implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The Four-Day Workweek (4DWW) is a flexible work arrangement in which employees work for four days instead of the traditional five-day schedule, typically without a reduction in pay. It may involve compressed working hours or a reduced total number of hours for example 32 hours per week, while often maintaining full salary and expected productivity. The model aims to enhance work life balance, improve employee well-being, reduce stress and fatigue, and support organizational efficiency and environmental sustainability (Jahal et al., 2023; Jain et al., 2025; Yildizhan et al., 2023).

Why does technology love it, but what about everyone else? The technology sector's early adoption of the four-day work week has catalyzed global interest in reduced hour models. Startups and digital firms, equipped with asynchronous workflows, cloud-based infrastructure, and agile cultures, have successfully used the 4DWW to boost morale, retain talent, and increase productivity (Srnicsek, 2018). These firms operate in environments where outputs are measurable, tasks are modular, and physical presence is often unnecessary. Yet outside technology, enthusiasm is tempered by operational and regulatory complexities. Unlike technology, traditional sectors face frontline duties, fixed scheduling, and legacy systems that complicate the feasibility of compressed or reduced work arrangements. Despite this, the push for a more humane, flexible work structure is growing driven by the pandemic's legacy, rising mental health awareness, and generational shifts in work expectations (Jain et al., 2025).

While the technology sector has successfully adopted the 4DWW due to modular tasks, digital infrastructure,

and agile culture, its application in essential public service sectors, such as healthcare and education, remains limited. These sectors face unique operational constraints including continuous service requirements, staff shortages, and regulatory frameworks that may impede flexible scheduling. Additionally, equity implications must be considered: low-income workers, women, and contract staff may face heightened risks of income loss, increased unpaid overtime, or exclusion FROM flexible arrangements. In Zambia, public healthcare is highly gendered, with women representing a significant proportion of frontline staff. Addressing these disparities is critical to ensure inclusive adoption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The four-day workweek (4DWW) has reemerged as a prominent topic in workforce discourse, prompted by post pandemic reevaluations of work life balance, rising employee burnout, and the expanding desire for flexible work arrangements. While early experiments with the 4DWW were mostly confined to the technology sector and limited in geographic scope, contemporary research indicates its growing relevance across diverse sectors and cultural contexts.

Jahal et al. (2023) provides a comprehensive scoping review of over 1,700 records spanning five decades, identifying key themes such as productivity, employee acceptance, gender equity, and time allocation. The study underscores that the success of 4DWW trials often hinges on sector specific design, stakeholder consultation, and clarity around whether the reduction applies to hours, days, or workload. Particularly notable is the rising interest from sectors traditionally resistant to nonstandard work arrangements, such as healthcare, education, and manufacturing.

In the education sector, Arsha et al. (2024) demonstrate the potential of a 4DWW to improve work life balance and reduce burnout among educators. However, they also highlight sector specific concerns such as maintaining instructional quality and aligning stakeholder expectations. Their mixed methods study in Sweden reflects nuanced acceptance, shaped by managerial and cultural attitudes.

Yildizhan et al. (2023) explore the organizational and environmental outcomes of the 4DWW, revealing that beyond individual benefits like improved mental health and motivation, a shorter workweek can significantly reduce carbon emissions due to less commuting. This environmental dimension adds a compelling layer to the broader sustainability narrative.

Globally, nations such as Iceland, Belgium, and New Zealand have piloted national level or largescale organizational 4DWW trials. Neiryneck (2023) finds that while reduced hours improve wellbeing, gender equity, and sustainability, widespread adoption faces challenges including labor shortages, sectoral competitiveness, and regulatory inertia. Belgium's experiments, for instance, underscore the importance of strong policy frameworks and financial support mechanisms to ease transition costs.

Jain et al. (2025) center employee voices in the UK and find strong support for 4DWW based on its potential to improve job satisfaction and mental health. Yet, workers also raise concerns about increased daily workload and uneven applicability in sectors requiring continuous coverage. These findings echo earlier warnings by Srnicek (2018), who viewed the fight for free time not merely as a labor reform but a political and existential imperative in an age of automation.

From a theoretical standpoint, conservation of resources theory (Jahal et al., 2023) and the job demands resources model (Fan et al., 2024) offer explanatory frameworks for understanding how time reductions influence wellbeing and organizational dynamics. Both models argue that reduced hours can mitigate job strain and enhance resource recovery, fostering productivity and morale.

Across the literature, there is consensus that the 4DWW can be viable beyond technology but only with sector sensitive adaptation, supportive policies, and sustained evaluation. As Tessema et al. (2023) argue, successful

implementation demands innovative strategies tailored to organizational structure, industry norms, and employee demographics. While the promise is evident, the pathway is far from uniform.

Sector by Sector Analysis

Healthcare

In the healthcare sector, the primary challenge in implementing a 4DWW is maintaining continuity of care. Jain et al. (2025) noted that reduced hour schedules can exacerbate staffing gaps unless paired with increased hiring or automation. From a JDR model perspective, the sector's high demands must be counter balanced by organizational resources such as more efficient scheduling and administrative support to realize the wellbeing benefits highlighted in COR theory.

Education

Arsha et al. (2024) explored how Swedish educators responded to the 4DWW and revealed fears about academic performance degradation. Although teachers valued better work life balance, COR theory suggests that stress from compressed instructional time may undermine these gains unless mitigated by curriculum redesign and student support tools. The JDR model also frames classroom autonomy and professional development as vital resources to support a shorter workweek.

Logistics

The logistics sector, marked by throughput expectations and time sensitive tasks, shows mixed viability for 4DWW adoption. Historical examples from unionized postal services (Srnicek, 2018) demonstrate successful hour reductions via automation. However, increased demands during global supply chain crises have exposed the fragility of rigid staffing models. Effective implementation requires strategic deployment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT), and rotating shifts to align job demands with resource flexibility.

Manufacturing

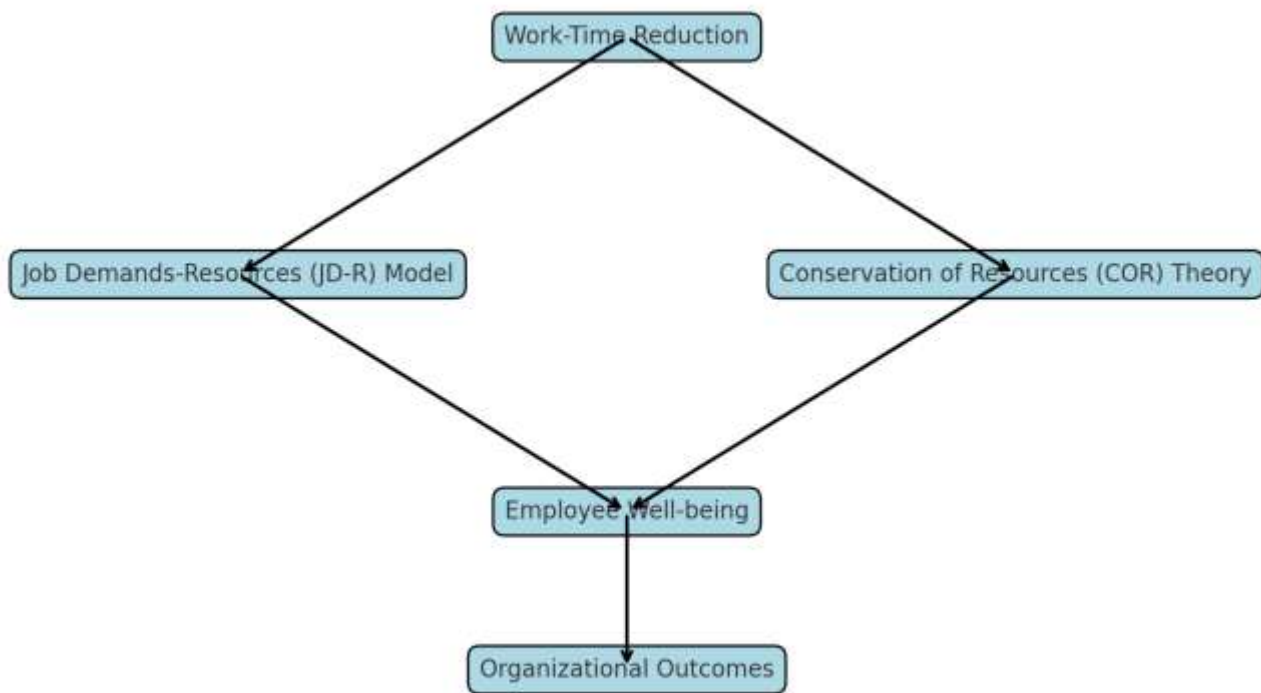
Jahal et al. (2024) found that manufacturing environments with lean production systems and strong union presence are best suited for experimenting with reduced hours. Neiryneck (2023) emphasized that productivity remained stable or improved in Belgium's 30 hour workweek trials. Here, the JDR framework suggests that physical labor intensity (high demands) must be buffered by ergonomic planning, multiskilling, and smart subsidies to protect workers' health and maintain throughput.

Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and the Job Demands Resources (JDR) Model. COR theory posits that stress arises when individuals perceive a threat of resource loss or lose valued resources. Worktime reduction, therefore, becomes a resource conserving intervention enhancing employee wellbeing. The JDR model expands this by emphasizing that job demands for example workload, shift rigidity and job resources like schedule autonomy and support structures jointly influence employee outcomes such as burnout, engagement, and performance.

These models guide our analysis of the 4DWW across sectors, helping identify how different job structures mediate the benefits or risks of implementation. For example, in sectors with low schedule autonomy but high physical demands like healthcare the resource restorative value of a 4DWW depends on parallel investments in staffing and workflow redesign.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking worktime reduction to organizational outcomes



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed qualitative synthesis approach, integrating primary data from a sector specific survey with existing scholarly literature, policy reports, and case studies on the implementation of the four-day workweek (4DWW). The primary data was gathered from a targeted survey of healthcare professionals in Zambia's Southern Province, comprising HR officers, frontline staff, and managerial personnel. Respondents were asked to share their perspectives on the feasibility, barriers, and potential benefits of the 4DWW within the healthcare sector.

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding to uncover trends in organizational readiness, perceived feasibility, and preferred flexible work models. To complement the survey insights, a qualitative meta-synthesis was conducted drawing on literature published between 2018 and 2025. Sources were selected based on their relevance to non technology sectors, inclusion of empirical findings, and discussion of organizational or worker level outcomes. Data from both sources were integrated and thematically structured using the conservation of resources (COR) and job demand resources (JDR) theoretical frameworks to interpret factors influencing successful implementation.

Sector specific patterns particularly in healthcare were critically examined to reveal context dependent enablers and inhibitors. While the inclusion of primary data enhances contextual relevance, limitations include a geographically localized sample and a cross-sectional snapshot that precludes longitudinal insights.

Nonetheless, the methodology provides a comprehensive and empirically grounded view of 4DWW implementation challenges and opportunities in essential service sectors, contributing to evidence-based policy and organizational decision making.

RESULTS

The targeted survey conducted among Ministry of Health personnel in Southern Province, Zambia, revealed several insights into the feasibility and perceptions of a four-day workweek (4DWW). Most respondents

comprising HR professionals and frontline staff reported that the 4DWW is not currently practiced within their respective organizations. However, there was strong support for its potential adoption, with many suggesting pilot implementations or tailored approaches based on departmental needs.

Perceptions of feasibility varied, while one respondent rated it as highly feasible (5/5), the majority rated it between 1 and 2, primarily due to operational constraints and regulatory barriers. The most commonly cited challenges included service continuity and workload compression. Despite these concerns, respondents acknowledged potential benefits such as improved work-life balance, reduced burnout, and enhanced staff morale.

In terms of preferred models, compressed schedules (four longer days) were most favored, followed by rotational day-off arrangements. Notably, the level of openness among employees to adopt flexible scheduling options was moderately high, indicating a general willingness to explore alternative work structures. However, there was skepticism regarding the likelihood of widespread implementation within the next five years, with respondents emphasizing the need for enabling policy, structural adjustments, and resource availability.

DISCUSSION

The survey findings align closely with global evidence on the 4DWW, which has demonstrated tangible benefits across sectors including improved physical and mental wellbeing, enhanced job satisfaction, and in some cases, stable or increased productivity (Fan et al., 2025). These outcomes are particularly evident in organizations where job reorganization preceded hour reduction. Environmental benefits, notably reductions in commuting related emissions, further strengthen the sustainability argument for adopting a 4DWW (Yildizhan et al., 2023).

Despite these advantages, challenges persist. Main among them is workload compression without adequate institutional support an issue especially pronounced in sectors like healthcare and education, where service delivery is continuous and time sensitive. Conversely, sectors such as logistics and manufacturing have shown greater readiness, particularly when paired with automation, workflow redesign, and supportive labor policies.

The Zambian healthcare context mirrors this global landscape. While there is optimism about the 4DWW's potential to reduce burnout and improve morale, concerns about continuity of care and staffing limitations remain significant. Uniform implementation across all departments could worsen disparities unless accompanied by systemic reforms, adequate staffing levels, and budgetary support.

Ultimately, the findings underscore a critical insight: the viability of the 4DWW depends on context-specific, sector sensitive strategies. For Zambia's public healthcare system, success will require a combination of leadership commitment, institutional readiness, policy support, and continuous monitoring. Embedding flexibility within broader HR and operational reforms rather than treating it as a standalone innovation is key to ensuring sustainable and equitable adoption.

Sustainability of the 4DWW in Zambia requires phased trials, job redesign, and integration with broader HR reforms. Continuous evaluation mechanisms, including monitoring workloads, service continuity, and staff wellbeing, are essential to assess long-term impacts. Comparative insights from other African or developing country contexts suggest that structured feedback loops and stakeholder engagement strengthen adoption while minimizing unintended consequences.

CONCLUSION

The four-day workweek, while pioneered in technology, is not limited to it. Evidence from multiple sectors indicates that the model can be successfully adapted provided implementation is sector sensitive and guided by sound organizational design. The integration of COR and JDR theories affirms that reduced hours alone are insufficient. Work redesign, leadership commitment, and robust support systems are equally vital.

Integration of 4DWW into Zambia's public sector requires robust monitoring, clear regulatory frameworks, and alignment with national labor policies. Policymakers, HR managers, and unions should collaborate to ensure

equitable, sustainable, and data-informed adoption, embedding flexibility within broader operational and HR reforms rather than treating it as a standalone innovation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To implement a four-day workweek (4DWW) effectively in Zambia's public service sectors, it is recommended to begin with phased pilot programs in healthcare and education, incorporating rotational schedules and compressed hours to maintain service coverage. Job redesign should accompany these pilots, including the redistribution of tasks, optimization of workflows, and integration of administrative or digital support to ensure operational continuity. A thorough cost-benefit analysis is essential to evaluate the financial, staffing, and operational implications before scaling the pilot. Equity considerations must be central, ensuring that flexible arrangements are accessible to all staff, with safeguards specifically for women, low-income workers, and contract employees. ADDITIONALLY, labor regulations should be reformed to accommodate flexible schedules, supported by robust monitoring systems to track implementation. Finally, continuous evaluation should be conducted to assess long-term outcomes on employee wellbeing, productivity, equity, and overall organizational performance, providing evidence for sustainable adoption of the 4DWW.

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