Uplevel 4-day Workweek Playbook

Experiment results and implementation secrets

Introduction

Starting January 2022, we joined a very small wave of companies daring to challenge the norm of a five-day workweek. Our Seattle-based and remote team members began a three-month trial of a compressed four-day workweek – Monday to Thursday with no change to salaries.

FDR effectively formalized the 40-hour workweek into law with The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The world has changed drastically since then. Logic would suggest that the workweek should, too.

Alternate workweek experiments in Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States have proven successful. And shortly after starting our own experiment, California introduced a bill to change the definition of a workweek to 32 hours for companies with more than 500 employees. This "experiment" no longer seems fringe.

> " **The normal working week doesn't work in many ways. It's just hidden by the fact that we're forced to do it.** "
>
> –Will Stronge, co-author of
>   *Overtime: Why We Need a Shorter Working Week*
>   Coverage from NPR

The science behind a shorter workweek is telling. Parkinson's Law finds that we will expand our work to occupy the mandated time, whether a 40-hour workweek or a 60-minute meeting. Given a shorter time frame, we will condense to match. Plus, we all balance work obligations and life duties every day. When work takes up more hours, we're more likely to multitask (often ineffectively) to get things done. Like most things, success hinges on effective communication.

As an engineering insights startup centered around data, we're invested in the measurable side of this debate. We did this to learn, not to make waves.

Was it a success? The short answer – yes. Did we learn new ways to work? Yes. And some learnings surprised us. The results were not all positive, which we expected going in.

But in reviewing the data, the decision to continue was an easy one.

Here's what the data showed us:

Notable insights

Here are some interesting findings on the compressed workweek:

- Surprisingly, most metrics increased but stayed relatively stable pre- and post-implementation. Translation: The 4-day workweek wasn't as disruptive to work rhythms as one might think.
- Product delivery volume actually increased. We looked at the overall number of tickets completed and the estimated effort/complexity for each one, and both went up during the experiment. In other words, our people got more done while working on more high-impact projects.
- We onboarded more customers than any other quarter to date.
- About 40% of employees HAD to work on Fridays at some point, but typically only a few hours.
- Globally, employees feel better able to balance work and life, they feel less used up at the end of the day and are less fatigued in the morning prior to starting the work day.

Team health benefits

From a teamwork perspective, there has been a general improvement in:

- Meeting relevance
- Productivity
- Satisfaction with work
- Ability to plan
- Ability to make work more robust
- Time spent on professional development
- Ability to complete personal responsibilities

Mental health benefits

For mental health, Uplevel saw a marked increase in employee ability to:

- Exercise
- Recuperate enough to feel refreshed on Mondays
- Take time off when sick
- Do something fun
- Rest

Uplevel insights

Looking at metrics from our own product:

- Our meeting hours + average length decreased or stayed the same
- Despite losing one day, our available Deep Work time increased for almost all teams.
- Always On, our proxy for burnout, did not change in a statistically significant way. This suggests that people are getting the same amount of work done in four days – with more recovery time (not counting Friday as a recovery day).

Overall, 100% of employees wanted to continue the four-day workweek. It was not an easy adjustment. In our first month especially, we all felt the crunch to hit our goals in fewer days. Everyone expressed a new sense of "urgency" throughout the week that wasn't necessarily positive. However, our teams did report faster, more efficient decision-making as a result of the increased urgency. Many people shared that they were motivated to work harder and to optimize for shorter, more effective bursts of work.

Another surprising outcome of the experiment is that many people actually worked on Fridays. Some because they were assigned to be on call – whether for engineering or for customer support. But many worked because they wanted to – usually less than two hours. It was a chance to set aside some Deep Work time on a schedule that worked for them. Those who didn't work on Fridays still found themselves thinking about work, happy to let their brains wander to solve a hard problem on a hike or while doing a house chore.

While we continue to call this a four-day workweek, it's important for us as a company to allow employees choice over how and when they want to work. The only people that are required to work on Friday are the few assigned on the rotating on-call sheet. But we would never tell someone they weren't allowed to work on Friday if they wanted to.

It's important for us to extend our four-day workweek as an extended "experiment." We don't want to adopt this new way of working without constantly pushing ourselves to think about how we can work more effectively. We're a small, fast-growing company, so we need to be nimble enough to make shifts when things aren't working. If at any point this new way of working is not supporting our business goals, we will pivot.

Team testimonials

"It seems counterintuitive, but reducing the number of days in our workweek has increased the speed of our team's decision making. A large part has to do with staying focused. We question the purpose of every meeting and happily end the meetings we keep early once we've addressed all agenda items. We don't have extra time to over-deliberate on product decisions and are very effective during our work times in asynchronous communications. Condensing our process time has helped us to get more done without feeling burned out.

As a mother of two, having the time to decompress and reset on Fridays has been invaluable. It helps me to be more present with my family on the weekends and more effective at my job during the workweek. I'm able to prioritize both family and work needs more successfully. "

NICOLE | Director of Design

"As someone who works in a customer-facing role, the four-day workweek started off as more of a challenge than I expected, but ultimately has proven to be very beneficial. I initially expected the transition to a shorter week to be easy right off the bat, but that wasn't the case. Our CS team did a great job of thinking through how we need to adjust team processes prior to the four-day workweek, but the first few weeks surfaced even more areas that required additional changes and led to me working on Fridays despite my best attempts not to.

That said, the four-day workweek was a great forcing-function that led to our team implementing processes to better manage open support issues, track customer tasks, add automation where we could, be more strategic with meeting length and efficiency, share knowledge across the team to better support each other, and ultimately better prioritize our team's work-life balance. Now, after a full quarter of four-day workweeks, I can say that, yes, I do sometimes have to work on Fridays. But having the freedom to be offline and fit in appointments and personal development has been a tremendous benefit. I look forward to more four-day workweeks to come! "

CORBAN | Customer Success Manager

66 Personally, the four-day workweek is a huge benefit. Having the extra day off provides a lot of flexibility, and prevents me from having to lose work time for meetings and appointments. At work, switching to the four-day workweek did require some changes to be successful. As a team we had to have some early discussions about how we were focusing and planning, and it was somewhat chaotic for the first couple of weeks.

Overall, productivity has more or less been the same as when we were at five days, but the planning aspect is where I notice the time crunch. The team is committed to continuing to work on our effectiveness. Despite these ongoing challenges on planning, I like that the four-day workweek requires us to be more intentional. As a team, we have done a better job of monitoring and responding to our team health. We've also cut a lot of recurring meetings that were not providing us with consistent benefits. 99

STEWART | Senior Dev

66 I'm all for the four-day workweek. My team and I have more ownership of our time, which gives us more flexibility in how we take on work, without having to stretch out the workday. As a dev manager, I was more concerned with my team meeting their goals – not how they spend their time. It was a great way to live our Uplevel values and foster trust with our devs. And we did it while still meeting, and in many ways exceeding, our product delivery goals.

There were some challenges. It was difficult at times to schedule meetings, with fewer time blocks available on our calendars. And with the same amount of work to complete, the expectations and goals for our team didn't change. We had to learn to focus our efforts on the right things. It incentivized us to make the most of our time. We streamlined communications and rethought our meetings to get the same amount of work done in fewer days. 99

BRIAN | Dev Manager

How people used their Fridays

Here are a few ways our employees used their Fridays:

Sports and hobbies

Our employees went mountaineering, hiking, and rock climbing. They re-learned hockey and they took to the slopes. They also used it for hobbies such as woodworking, reading, painting, and to learn new languages.

> 66 I always wanted to learn a new language, and having Friday off gives me the flexibility to finally take this on without feeling like I'm sacrificing rest during the weekend. I'm on week four learning Japanese! 99

Chores and errands

Some got rid of errands for a more free and open weekend. Veterinary visits, house/apartment hunting, taxes, grocery shopping, and more – free Fridays allowed several members of our team to conquer weekend tasks and those they can't complete outside of the normal Monday-Friday 9-5.

> 66 Another big perk is going to the grocery store when it's not crazy busy! Costco is just so much better when it's empty. So grateful for this. 99

Relaxation

Several people used their Fridays to relax and mentally recharge after a long week – or before a long weekend.
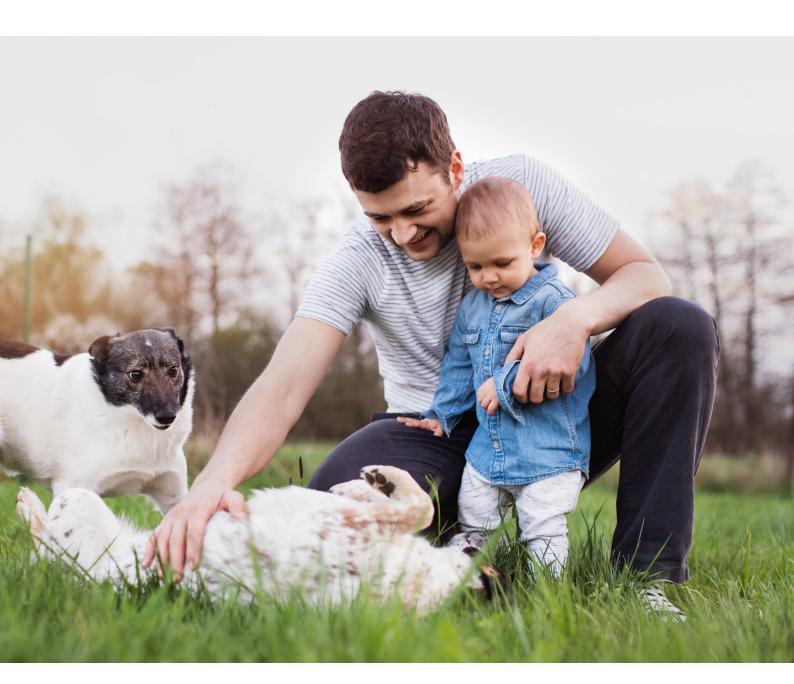
Side passions

One person got back into D&I work by doing some consulting on the side and helping create an inclusive parenting course. Another helped his wife with her small business and set aside time for big thinking/strategy days.

Family time

Several people took advantage of free Fridays by spending more time with their families – taking their kids to school, going on walks to the dog park, or just spending quality time together.

Background: How we launched this experiment

Success of this experiment centered on communication. We shared this idea with our team two months early so everyone had time to raise questions and work out solutions.

Some key concerns: Will we end up working 10-hour days? (No.) Will it be seen as noble to continue working on Fridays? (No.)

Our full rollout plan included:

- Initial launch meeting with messaging on why we were doing this, our expectations, and an emphasis on how we were treating this as an experiment (no one wants something to be taken away from them, and we wanted to make it clear that we would end the experiment if it wasn't successful).
- We also held a half-day, internal hackathon for people to work across teams to brainstorm how we would need to change our way of working to make it successful.
- We developed comprehensive monthly surveys and shorter bi-weekly pulse surveys to check in with the team and measure success throughout the experiment.
- Each team developed their own metrics for success as well as protocols specific to their team.
- We brought in an advisor and expert on meetings - Steven Rogelberg - for tips on how to make our meetings more effective and inclusive.

Our definition of success

In our hackathon, we worked together as a company to develop our definition of success. This criteria was used by our organizational research scientist to develop our survey questions:

- Do we still achieve our overall company goals – sales, customer engagement, sprint goals?
- Are co-workers still connected, is engagement up (better work/life balance)?
- Do we have better meeting hygiene?
- Are we less burned out?
- Is it easier to get work done?
- Have we reduced the Sunday scaries? As well as worry over the weekend about what was/wasn't accomplished?
- Do we have lower employee attrition? Do we attract candidates?
- Do we adopt new rituals and change how we work?
- Do we still have enough time to do less critical/urgent things? Can't be a culture of "no."

These findings would make us stop this experiment:

- Has morale decreased?
- Did cramming five days into four increase stress?
- Did customer-facing teams still have to keep the same schedule?
- Do we find that we are missing out on socializing/connecting with co-workers due to pressure to be hyper efficient?

Other things we thought about:

- Can we learn more about effectiveness, enough to even coach our customers and inform our product?
- Do we heavily use our product (and maybe improve it)?

How we operationalized

To make this an effective switch to a four-day workweek, we thought about new policies and protocols that would be required. This included how we would communicate with customers, how we would handle Friday support requests, and how we would work across teams to complete our work. For customers, we shared formal communications on what we were doing, why, and how they could reach us on Fridays.

Here are a few examples of things that we operationalized:

Customer success

One person on call every Friday for customer success

Customer/prospect meeting requests on Fridays:

- If it's a 1:1 meeting, the Uplevel employee can make the call.
- For group meetings, move to another day. If extremely urgent, start Slack with the group to make the call. Could proceed with a smaller group.

Data outages:

- Use the holiday schedule - one person check at 11 a.m. (rotating schedule)

IT communication:

- Friday requests – check once at 11 a.m. (same time as data outages)

Sales/Marketing

Incoming leads on Fridays:

- One person is on call every week.

Meeting requests for Fridays:

- Explain that we work four days and that we can't do Friday meetings.
- If that's the only time available for quite some time, we'll consider taking a meeting.

Demos on Fridays:

- Notify other teams to make sure there is product support.

Data Science/Development

Cross-team dependencies:

- Triage the process for incoming ad-hoc investigations/requests.
- Schedule after-hours messages to send the next morning.
- Triage process for Friday/weekend customer requests.

Team meetings

- Monday meetings are expected to be a roughly five-minute detailed discussion of what folks are working on. Questions/feedback are welcome but optional. Interjections or questions from others are absolutely welcome.
- Explicit check/statement of "this is close to shipping/this is ready to ship/if we see X or figure out Y it'll be ready."
- Cancel Thursday meetings.
- Check on Monday if we want to schedule an ad-hoc deep dive for any topic.

Operations/KTLO

- Set up an on-call calendar.
- Better document the common errors.

How we can be more effective

We agreed on the following to make sure that how we worked was as effective as possible during our shorter week.

Meetings

MEETING HEALTH

✓ **All meetings should be 30 min., unless there is a specific reason to extend it.**
  - Internal feedback/engagement meetings – need time to go through everything
  - All company business updates
  - If there is active brainstorming/action plan needed

✓ **No more than two people from each team per meeting (unless specific reason) – and then report back.**

✓ **Share agendas before meetings with role of each person/why they should be there.**

✓ **All meetings have notes and action items shared.**

✓ **Meeting culture – when you can schedule customer meetings:**
  - You can always schedule over internal 1:1s without asking.
  - Early morning/late evenings are okay to schedule – but ask first.
  - Regular meeting hours are 9-5 p.m.
  - Deep Work can be scheduled over if needed - not preferable.

✓ **The title of the meeting MUST include the intent. For example:**
  - Reach a decision on XXX.
  - Inform the XX team of the latest customer feedback (but not to solve it).

DEEP WORK TIME

☑ **Block "available" time for 30 min. daily – where you know you can get an answer quickly.**

- Try 11:30 a.m.

☑ **Team Deep Work blocks of two hours, two times a week**

- Monday 9-11 a.m.
- Wednesday 3-5 p.m.

☑ **Reserve 12-1 as non-responsive time.**

Slack

USE SLACK STATUSES

☑ **When you are stepping away from computer**

SLACK VS. GOOGLE DRIVE

☑ **Anything important should also be posted to a shared drive to find it.**

- All customer meeting notes under CS > meeting notes > specific customer folder

> For now, the four-day workweek is working for our team, but that doesn't mean it will work for everyone. You have to have a culture of trust – of outcomes, not hours. When you trust your people to bring their full selves to their work, they will. And they'll do it in four days.

Uplevel