
3 reasons benefits managers should consider a four-day workweek

By Miriam Lacey

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Last summer, Microsoft Japan [made headlines](#) after offering workers an enviable job benefit: work four days, take a three-day weekend, receive a five-day paycheck. Predictably, morale jumped, absenteeism dropped, and the rank-and-file worker rejoiced at the prospect of more free time. In a counterintuitive twist, Microsoft also enjoyed a 40% increase in productivity.

Already, other organizations outside the United States are following Microsoft's lead by experimenting with a shorter workweek, including the New Zealand-based financial advisers [Perpetual Guardian](#) and the British call center [Simply Business](#).

A [recent study](#) in the peer-reviewed journal Pepperdine Graziadio Business Review noted that the concept of a compressed workweek is not new. According to the report, as far back as 1950 experts suggested the U.S. would reach a 30-hour workweek by 1980. So far, the 70-year-old prediction has not been achieved. However, that frozen-in-time tradition may be melting.

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Most senior managers are unaware of the untapped potential of preserving high quality work by shortening the workweek but maintaining 40-hour-per-week pay. The idea that a shorter workweek will improve productivity to match the a five-day workweek is a game changer. Managers, including benefits professionals, should view this remarkable phenomenon as an opportunity to reimagine work and benefits.

Read more: [Thank God it's Thursday? Making the case for a four-day workweek](#)

Here are three reasons the compressed week could redefine work and benefits:

First, the obvious boost to employee morale. Employees benefit from fewer days in the office, less time commuting, scheduling flexibility, and more focused hours at work. Reactions from employees at companies like Microsoft are clear evidence that workers react favorably to a shorter workweek.

Second, there is more, not less, ability to manage worker shortages. According to the [Pepperdine Private Capital Access](#) survey conducted quarterly over five years, a quarter to a third of business owners surveyed said the ability to find qualified candidates was the top reason they were not hiring. Until the four-day workweek becomes the standard, employers who offer three-day weekends will maintain a significant advantage recruiting and retaining workers.

Third, benefits unrelated to labor costs. In instituting the four-day workweek policy, Microsoft Japan [became more efficient](#) in other areas. It shaved the standard meeting time from 60 minutes to 30 minutes. Electricity costs fell 23%. In addition, because they were not in the office on Fridays, workers printed 60% fewer pages.

For managers, the challenge lies in taking the first steps. For those who are serious about experimenting with a four-day workweek in 2020, here are some considerations:

- Companies considering a compressed workweek need to work with management to determine if the four-day workweek will be optional or a requirement. One downside is that some employees report being tired at work at the end of a 10-hour day. [A 2013 study of healthcare workers](#) showed long work hours increase the risk for reduced performance on the job as well as obesity, injuries, and a wide range of chronic diseases. Changing the standard workweek to four days

could result in fallout, with employees leaving if they don't like it. Making it optional can balance out the negative reactions of some staff members.

- Replace four days in the office with some telecommuting options rather than physically requiring staff to be in the office. Four-day workweeks work particularly well when people can work from home a portion of the week. Managers commonly worry about people becoming slackers. [Research](#) shows that telecommuters tend to be more productive than others, since they take fewer breaks. Being able to get up and stretch (or feed the cat) allows for more physical activity throughout the day so bodies have fewer stiff muscles. Nevertheless, I have extreme caution about full-time telecommunicating because it could weaken your company culture. My rule is: People must see each other to build trusting relations with people they believe they can rely on. This is the glue that keeps your company together. I recommend at least one day a week in the office.
- Consider offering a truly flexible workweek. My recommendation is for companies to decide on the combination that makes sense for their office staff and company culture. For example, either of these are worth consideration: two days of telecommuting at ten hours and two eight-hour days at the office; or two days telecommuting at ten hours, and two eight-hour days in the office along with one four-hour day. This results in a four-and-a-half-day workweek.

Overall, my recommendation is to try several options and seek out a combination that works for the organization's culture. Three-day, four-day or five-day workweek? Much depends on the leadership approach, employee preferences, and company culture needs. All signs and research are increasingly pointing to the inevitable: compressed workweeks will become the norm in beliefs and benefits.

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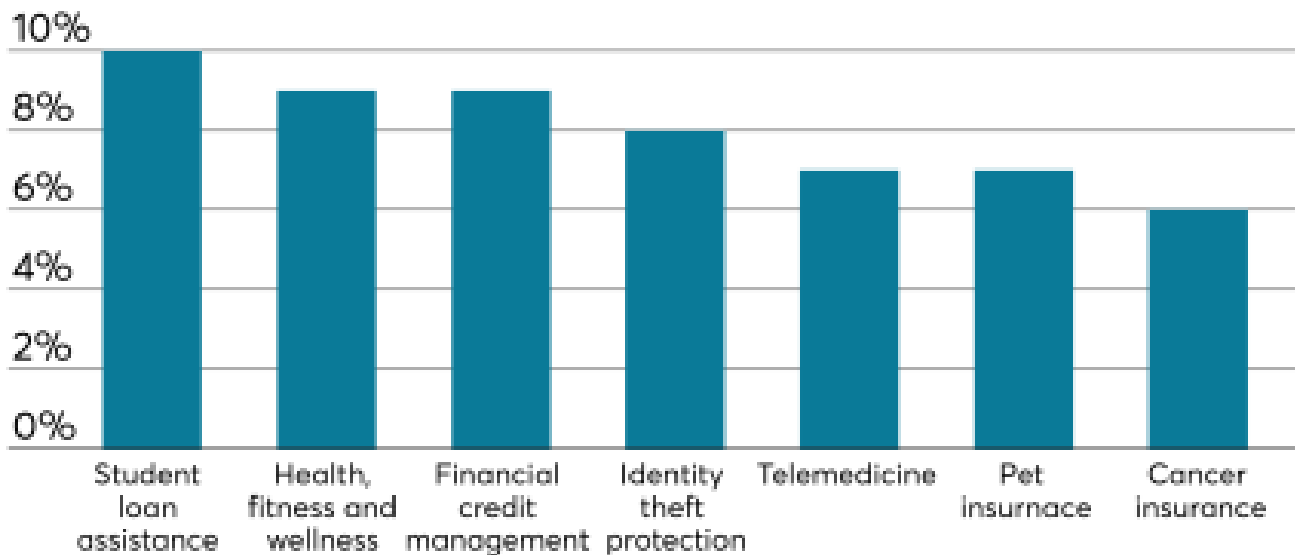
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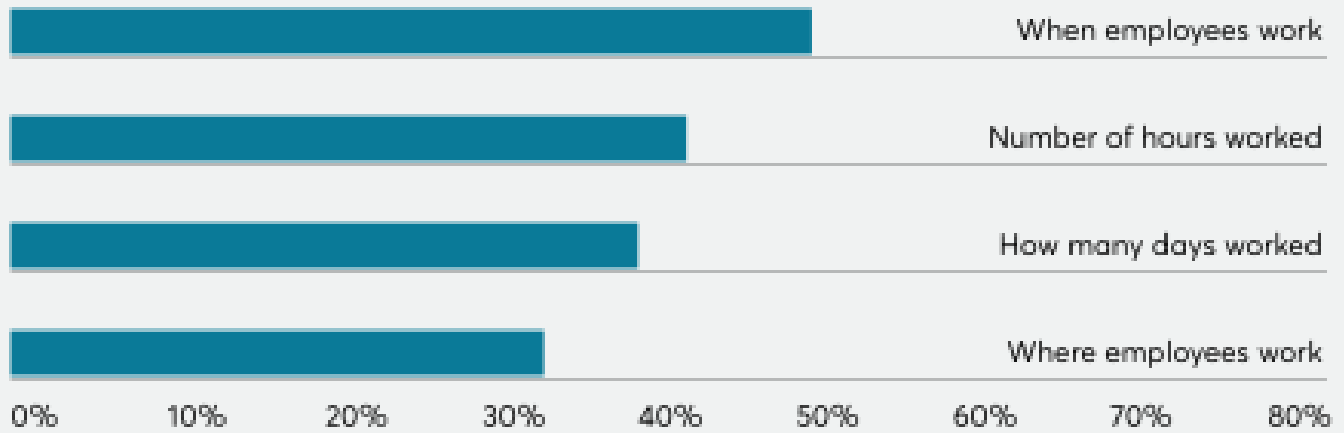


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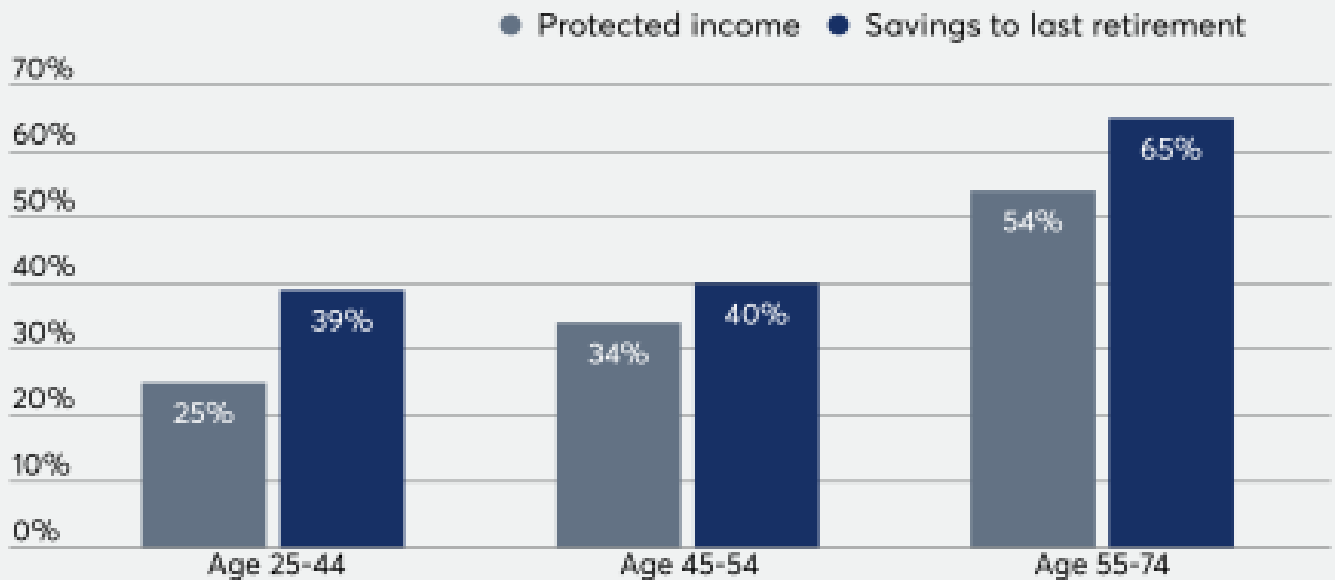
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