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# The Shortened Working Week and Its Impact on Workplace Sustainability

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## Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of the Shortened Working Week (SWW) as a mechanism for advancing Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM). It begins by reviewing various SWW models implemented in pilot studies across the UK, Sweden, Japan, and the US. Next, the paper employs the Triple Bottom Line theoretical framework to assess the impact of SWW on SHRM. Furthermore, it presents empirical data from a survey of 1,000 white-collar employees in Polish organisations, examining their attitudes towards SWW. The findings suggest that a reduction in work hours can positively influence the social, economic, and environmental pillars of SHRM. Considering the varied preferences for SWW based on factors such as gender, family status, and company size, the paper recommends that managers consider flexible scheduling alternatives to the conventional Free Fridays model.

**Keywords:** sustainable HR, shortened working week, 4-day week, flexible work, work-life balance

**JEL Classification Codes:** J22, J24, Q01, L21

## Introduction

In the context of persistent ecological, social, and economic challenges, as outlined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), organisations are increasingly called upon to modify their narrow focus on financial gains and growth (UN, 2023; Stern, 2006). Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) embodies a significant paradigm shift in organisational workforce management strategies, emphasising a tripartite balance between economic efficiency, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. In today's labour market, the workforce – particularly the younger generation – seeks not only fair compensation but also meaningful and decent work. This encompasses a supportive and safe work environment, alongside a harmonious balance between professional and personal life. The recent global pandemic has further highlighted the need for workplaces that prioritise well-being and mental health, underlining the importance of reducing psychological risks.

Sustainable organisations face the challenge of managing their workforce in a manner that preserves the future potential of upcoming generations. Concurrently, evolving labour market trends, such as the advent of hybrid and remote work modalities and greater expectation of work-life-balance, are reshaping Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and policies. The regulation of working hours has been a key issue in political discourse and plays a vital role in structuring daily life and work (Fagan et al., 2012). In contemporary work environments, there is an intensified desire among employees for improved work-life balance (Marzec et al, 2023) and increased autonomy and flexibility in their work arrangements (Lott, 2018). These social and technological changes raise pertinent questions about the sustainability of current work arrangements, including working time regimes, in the face of potential burnout, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), and discussions on universal basic income policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the need to modernise working models, introducing novel organisational structures for work that are decoupled from traditional time and place constraints, thus endorsing remote and hybrid work models (Kotłowska, 2021, 2020). The conventional Monday-to-Friday, 8:00–16:00 employment structure, dedicated to a single employer for 40 hours weekly, is increasingly giving way to alternative work forms. These are often driven by technological innovations and include platform work, freelancing, remote employment, and crowdsourcing (Eurofound, 2022, 2020). The seismic shifts in work patterns and modalities – spurred by technological evolution and evolving employee expectations – have ushered in dialogues about the feasibility of a shorter workweek (Delaney and Casey, 2022).

In recent years, two Polish political parties – the Razem party in 2019 and the Lewica party in 2022 – have presented proposals for a reduced workweek to the Polish legislative assembly, the Sejm. Since 2024, the Polish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy has been conducting analyses of working time, length of holidays, working days with a view to possibly shortening the working week. The Ministry of Labour is also analysing pilot projects to shorten the working week, which are being introduced by Polish companies (Infor, 2024). These initiatives have ignited discussions among politicians and employers about the potential introduction of SWW in Poland. Despite the research on the SWW in various countries, Poland has yet to produce extensive literature on the subject, and this paper contributes to better understanding of the emerging trend of SWW in the Polish context.

Currently, theoretical models of sustainable HR and the concept of the Shortened Working Week (SWW) are often treated by researchers as two distinct areas. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the integration of these two fields. Specifically, there is a lack of studies that apply Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) theories directly to the SWW context in Poland.

This paper also stands out by exploring the SWW model within the Eastern European framework, a region where studies and pilot projects related to the SWW are scarce. The Hays Report (Hays, 2021) suggests that only 9 percent of Polish workers experienced a SWW model, either working 4 days × 8h (37%) or in a compressed week 4 days × 10h (30%). The recent case study on this topic in Poland covers the practices of only four companies (Augustyńska-Śmiało, 2023). Previous employees' surveys (Personnel Service, 2021) typically present a binary choice – supporting or opposing the 4-day week. Previous research from the Polish market does not provide data on different employees characteristics. This paper enhances the limited understanding of the 4-day working week on the Polish market by providing insights into various time reduction strategies and by considering a wide array of variables and worker's perspectives, including gender, family status, and company size.

## Working time regimes

The Shortened Working Week (SWW) concept is a burgeoning topic in both business practice and academic research. It stems from technological progress, higher productivity, and a growing demand among employees for autonomy and well-being (Barnes and Jones, 2020; Delaney and Casey, 2022; Gomes, 2022; Smith and McBride, 2021; Spencer, 2022; Pang, 2020).

In the early 20th century, workers typically faced an exhausting 10–12 hour workday within a six-day workweek framework. However, evolving worker demands,

technological improvements, and policy changes gradually shifted the paradigm of the standard workweek towards a five-day routine. In a pioneering move in 1926, the Ford Motor Company in the United States introduced a 5-day, 40-hour workweek for its factory workforce. Notably, despite maintaining wage levels, Ford witnessed an uptick in factory productivity (Hunnicatt, 1984).

Over the past 100 years, the advocacy for shorter and more humane working hours has seen significant contributions from labour movements, and academic theorists in America and Western Europe. The early 20th century witnessed the 8-hour workday campaign by factory workers and labour movements, particularly in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, what was crucial for establishing the 40-hour work week as a new norm (US Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938). In the post-war era in Western Europe, the focus on humane working hours continued, driven by economic prosperity, the growing influence of labour unions, and development of welfare state policies. John Maynard Keynes, British economist, argued in his essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren” (1930), that technological advancements and higher productivity would lead to shorter workweeks, as less labour would be needed. Bertrand Russell, in his 1932 essay “In Praise of Idleness”, argued for a reduction of working hours as a way to address unemployment and improve the quality of life. More contemporary thinkers have addressed working time policies in the context of automation, unemployment, universal basic income, environmental issues, and the well-being of people (Schor, 1991; Susskind, 2020). In the Western Europe, there has been a dramatic reduction of annual working hours in developed countries over the past century – from average 3,000 hours at the outset of the 20th century to a mere 1,500 hours as the new millennium dawned (Anttila et al., 2015).

In contrast, in Poland and other Eastern and Central European Countries, the concept of a Shorter Working Week (SWW) is relatively new. The communist era prioritised full-time employment and provided universal social benefits like housing and childcare (Wallace and Pichler, 2007). There were no unemployment benefits, and long working hours were a norm, with mandatory work on Saturdays in Poland until 1973. In the post-communist era, since 90., the region witnessed a challenging transition to a free market economy, characterised by job insecurity, high unemployment, reduced social welfare, and low wages. Despite Poland’s EU accession in 2004, which mandated adherence to the European Employment Strategy, significant disparities in working time regimes between Western and Eastern Europe persist (European Commission, 2021).

In 2023 the longest working weeks were recorded in Greece (41.0 hours), Poland (40.4), Romania and Bulgaria (40.2 both). While in the Netherlands (33.2 hours),

Germany (35.3) and Denmark (35.4) people work shorter on average, even without a radical interventionist approach (Eurostat, 2023).

Considering the varied working-time regimes across Europe and the extensive research on shorter working weeks in Western countries, it is crucial to explore the feasibility of reducing working hours in Eastern nations as well, in the context of sustainability. Therefore, this study makes a valid contribution by providing new data from Poland.

## Pilot projects testing Shortened Working Week (SWW)

Many countries, including Japan, Sweden, Iceland, Belgium, Great Britain, Australia, and the United States, have initiated pilot projects to assess the benefits and challenges of reducing the standard working week from 40 to 32–35 hours, often referred to as the *Shortened Working Week* (SWW). These endeavours are driven both by individual organisations and through participation in public pilot programmes (Four Day Week Global, 2023).

In 2019, Microsoft Japan tested a 4-day working week and observed positive outcomes (Paul, 2022). In Iceland, public sector employees trialled a model that reduced their workweek from 40 to 35 hours (BBC, 2021). Meanwhile, in the UK, the online bank Atom trimmed working hours to 34 without reducing pay (Atom Bank, 2021).

Between 1998 and 2001, the French government enacted pioneering legislation that cut the standard working week from 39 hours to 35 hours, making France distinctive as the only country to apply a national legislative framework to curtail working hours across its entire workforce.

In 2008, Utah's government embarked on an experiment where 18,000 of the state's 25,000 employees shifted to a four-day workweek, facilitating a three-day weekend. Although the total weekly hours remained unchanged, the revised schedule compressed work hours between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. Additionally, approximately 900 public buildings shut down on Fridays, counterbalanced by extended operating hours from Monday to Thursday. This SWW aimed for multiple benefits: decreasing energy consumption, improving customer service, bolstering employee recruitment and retention, and mitigating the environmental footprint of government activities (Working 4 Utah, 2009).

A recent UK pilot study conducted in 2022 included 2,900 employees across 61 companies trialled a shorter working week for a duration of six months. This experiment was overseen by researchers from the University of Cambridge and Boston College. Findings indicated that within these companies, productivity either

remained the same (46%) or showed a slight increase (34%). There was a reported reduction in stress levels, increased job satisfaction, and an improved work-life balance. Remarkably, after the pilot concluded, 92 percent of the participating companies expressed a desire to make this change permanent (Autonomy Research, 2023).

Some governments and distinct companies are considering adoption the concept of a shorter workweek. This endeavour has received notable backing from the international consortium 4 Day Week Global, comprised of various organisations and scholars (Four Day Week Global, 2023).

A survey carried out by Henley Business School in November 2021, which encompassed 2,000 employees and 500 business leaders, unveiled that businesses, which adopted some form of a shortened workweek saved approximately £104 billion, equating to around 2.2 percent of their overall turnover. Further, companies documented increased employee satisfaction and fewer incidents of employee sickness. Initial apprehensions of potential work quality degradation due to fewer working hours proved unfounded, since 64 percent of employers reported that the quality of work remained consistent within the four-day work framework. Employees also championed the new arrangement, with 68 percent stating their job satisfaction would heighten in a four-day work setup. The shorter workweek presented other advantages: diminished commuting time (74%), reduced stress among employees (78%), enhanced employee attraction and retention (69%), and employees dedicating more time to skill development (64%) (Henley Business School, 2021).

## Different models of Shortened Working Week

The *4-day Working Week* model, often referred to as '*Free Fridays*,' wherein businesses, factories, and retail outlets close for an additional day each week, represents a radical approach to reducing working hours. This shift alters the conventional five-day work week and two-day weekend to a four-day work week with a three-day weekend. To date, no country has implemented such a reform. However, numerous pilot studies from various countries have demonstrated that a reduction in weekly working hours from 40 to 32–35 hours is achievable through a range of methodologies.

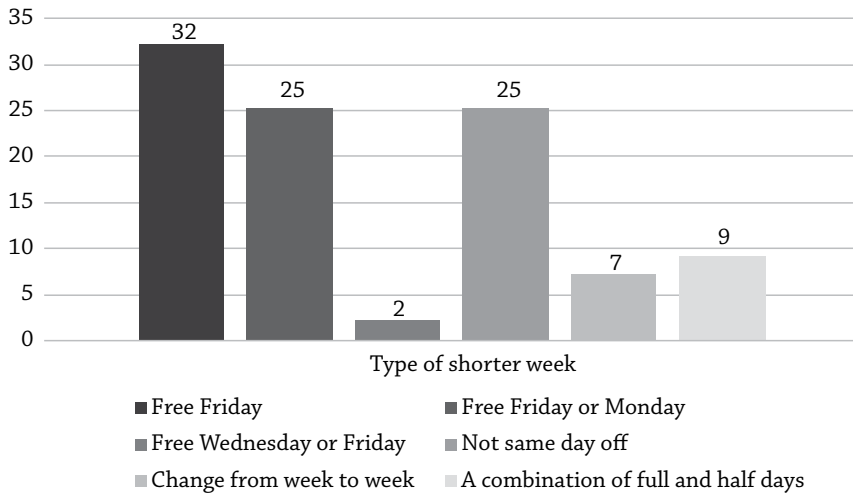
For instance, in Sweden during 2014, nurses trialled shorter working days over an 18-month period. Instead of adopting *Free Fridays*, their daily work duration was cut from 8 hours to 6 hours, spread across five days. The pilot evidenced enhanced work-life balance for the nurses, increased productivity, and a decline in sick leaves. For the healthcare sector, it was deemed more suitable to reduce daily working hours rather than to incorporate *Free Fridays* (BBC, 2017).

Another telling example hails from Toyota. Their case demonstrates that the 4-day Working Week model doesn't universally apply across all industries. In 2002, Toyota service centres in Gothenburg transitioned to a six-hour workday model, retaining a five-day week. In just 30 hours, the mechanics achieved 114 percent of what they previously accomplished in a 40-hour week. This more condensed work schedule resulted in fewer errors, and profits surged by 25 percent (Stronge and Harper, 2019). Furthermore, in June 2023, Toyota Motor Corp in Japan rolled out a company-wide policy permitting employees with children to opt for shorter working hours (Toyota, 2023).

A4BEE, a Polish biotech and manufacturing innovation company, implemented a pilot of 4-day working week which resulted in work-life balance increase by 35 percent, opportunities for self-development outside of work hours increase by 71 percent, and the number of meetings decreased by 10 percent during trial (A4BE, 2022). Their method was to allow employees to choose one day off during the week, with keeping the same number of tasks and maintaining the same pay and benefits.

In the 2022 UK pilot study involving 2,900 employees across 61 companies, only 32 percent of participating entities adopted a Free Fridays policy. Figure 4 delineates the diverse working models chosen by the companies in this UK pilot study.

**Figure 4. Models of Shortened Working Week chosen by participating companies (%)**



Source: Autonomy Research (2023, p.22).

One method allowed half of the workforce to operate from Monday to Thursday, with the remaining half working from Tuesday to Friday. Although this altered the employees' working days, the business operations continued uninterrupted



from Monday to Friday. Other UK firms empowered specific departments with the discretion to define their own work schedules. Consequently, there were noticeable differences in the working hours between administrative roles and sales-related departments (Autonomy Research, 2023).

An extensive review of relevant literature has illuminated various models for the *Shortened Working Week* (SWW), which are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2. Models of Shortened Working Week**

Models	Description	Weekly hours
Free Fridays	Reduced working week: 4 days per week × 8h Free Friday for all employees and a 3-day weekend	32
Free Fridays compressed week	Compressed working week: 4 days per week × 10h Free Friday for all employees and 3-day weekend.	40
Free Mondays or Fridays	4 days per week × 8h – Free Mondays for one group/department and 4 days per week × 8h – Free Fridays for the other group/department	32
Free Mondays or Fridays-compressed week	4 days per week × 10h – Free Mondays for one group/department and 4 days per week × 10h – Free Fridays for the other group/department	40
Shorter Workdays	5 days per week × 7h 5 days per week × 6h	35 30
Shift Work	5 days per week × 6h 7.00–13.00 – one shift of workers 12.00–18.00 – the other shift of workers	30
Differentiated Model	Each unit/department chooses the SWW model independently, according to its needs, depending on customer service, supplies and operations.	40 or less
Monthly Billing model	The number of working hours per month does not have to change, but employees can schedule the work in flexible way. For example: intensive work in the first and third week and less work in second and fourth week; or intensive work for two weeks and then no work for two weeks.	40 or less
Annual Billing Model	Individual work plans tailored to seasonal needs. Longer working hours in high season for specific sectors (e.g. Christmas sales, summer harvest etc.) and shorter working hours in other periods. Flexible adjustment to business activity.	40 or less

Source: own study based on (Autonomy Research, 2023; Barnes and Jones, 2020; Collewet et al., 2017; Delaney and Casey, 2022; Gomes, 2022; Harper, 2019; Kameråde et al, 2019; Smith and McBride, 2021; Spencer, 2022; Pang, 2020; Zheng et al.,2023; 4-day Week Global, 2023)

Research conducted by the Henley Business School revealed that when UK employees were presented with various models for reduced working hours, a significant



preference emerged for a four-day working week. Specifically, 69 percent favoured the flexibility to select which fifth day to take off, while 61 percent preferred having either Monday or Friday as the designated day off. Other popular options included working full-time hours with flexibility in choosing work times (65%) and the liberty to work from home as needed (66%). Interestingly, the study highlighted gender disparities: while 79 percent of female respondents found a four-day workweek personally appealing, only 61 percent of male participants shared this sentiment (Henley Business School, 2021).

The British experiment, alongside other global pilot studies, shows the importance of adopting a customised approach when transitioning to a shortened workweek. Each company's unique context and specific requirements should inform the decision. It's pivotal to understand that a shortened workweek doesn't strictly imply a 4-day workweek. Consequently, reorganising work time should be meticulously tailored to cater to the distinct needs of different employers and industries.

## Theoretical perspective – SHRM models

Over the last years researchers have examined the relationship between HR and sustainability (Clarke, 2011; Ehnert, 2009; Pfeffer, 2010; Kramar, 2014, Elkington, 1997). Some differences in definitions of SHRM are apparent, however there is some consensus that the concept concerns long-term resource balancing, efficiency and development of human resources (Ehnert, 2014). Zaugg, Blum, and Thom (2001) define the SHRM through methodological and instrumental approaches aimed at achieving long-term-oriented, socially responsible, and economically efficient outcomes in the recruitment, training, retention, and disemployment of staff members. They highlight the significance of increasing employability, ensuring a harmonious work-life balance, and enhancing individual responsibility within the SHRM framework. These elements underscore the multifaceted objectives of SHRM in fostering an organisational culture that supports sustainable growth and development while addressing the well-being of employees and societal expectations.

Mariappanadar (2003, 2020) expands on this by conceptualising Sustainable HR strategy as the management of human resources to fulfil the immediate needs of the company and its community without jeopardising future generations' abilities to meet their own needs. This definition echoes the principles of sustainability, emphasising the necessity of balancing present requirements with future prospects, thereby ensuring a legacy of resource availability and well-being for future employees and communities.

Ehnert (2009, p. 74) argues that “sustainable HRM is the pattern of planned or emerging human resource strategies and practices intended to enable an organisational goal achievement while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long-lasting calendar time and controlling for self-induced side and feedback effects on the HR systems on the HR base and thus on the company itself”. Finally, Kramar (2014) elucidates SHRM as encompassing planned or emerging HR strategies and practices that pursue financial, social, and ecological objectives. Kramar’s definition is pivotal in integrating the environmental dimension of sustainability, advocating for minimised negative impacts on the natural environment and communities. This approach recognises the essential roles of CEOs, managers, HR professionals, and employees in delivering consistent and unified sustainability messages, thereby fostering a culture of shared responsibility towards achieving sustainable outcomes.

Another approach to SHRM, has been presented by De Prins, Van Beirendonck, De Vos, and J. Segers (2011) who explain four perspectives of SHRM: sociological, psychological, strategic, and green. The balance between professional and private lives of the workforce is identified as important aspect of the psychological perspective (Rompa, 2011). Other authors suggest that implementing work-life-balance programmes is one of the socially responsible HRM activities (Mazur 2017; Piwowar-Sulej and Bąk-Grabowska, 2020; Barrena-Martinez et al. 2017).

I. Aust, B. Matthews, M. Muller-Camen (2019) compared the theoretical SHRM models trying to capture the differences in approaches to sustainability concept in relation to HRM based on the previous research (Ehnert, 2014; Dyllick, Muff, 2016; Stankeviciute, Savaneviciene, 2018). They propose four Sustainable HRM types such as: Socially Responsible HRM, Green HRM, Triple Bottom Line HRM, Common Good HRM (table 4).

Triple Bottom Line HRM (TBL-HRM) represents a comprehensive approach to Sustainable HRM, integrating economic, environmental, and social goals within human resource management practices. According to Bush (2019), TBL-HRM is by now is one of the most common conceptualisation of Sustainable HRM.

This model, primarily derived from Elkington’s (1997) triple bottom line concept and popularised within HRM by Jackson, Renwick, Jabbour, Muller-Camen (2011), seeks to balance and maximise organisational objectives across these three dimensions (Bush, 2019). TBL-HRM is distinguished by its emphasis on not only enhancing employee well-being and engagement but also addressing the broader impacts of HRM practices on societal and ecological systems (Ehnert, 2009; Andersson et al., 2013).

**Table 4. A classification of Sustainable HRM Types**

Sustainable HRM types	Organisational perspective (purpose)	Sustainable HRM inputs (what key concerns?)	Sustainable HRM processes (how?)	Sustainable HRM outputs (what values, resources are created?)
Socially Responsible HRM	Inside-out, i.e. economic and social purpose (the latter as long as it serves the economic purpose)	Creating an awareness of the impact of business on people beyond organisational boundaries and present time frames	Socially responsible HR behaviour, practices, strategies, and culture, e.g. health and well-being initiatives	Economic and social values, e.g., enhanced organisational social reputation, employer attractiveness
Green HRM	Inside-out, i.e. economic and environmental purpose (the latter as long as it serves the economic purpose)	Using HRM to embed Green values across an organisation; implementing Green workplace practices	Green HR behaviour, practices, strategies, and culture, e.g. Green recruitment, Green awareness training, Green rewards	Economic and ecological values, e.g., growing employee engagement with reduced carbon footprint
Triple Bottom Line HRM	Inside-out, i.e. economic, environmental and social purpose (the latter two as long as they serve the economic purpose)	Uses HRM competencies, skills, knowledge, attitudes, to create win-win-win situations	Behaviour, practices, strategies, cultures etc., enabling contributions to CS and to perform HRM sustainably	Cross-generational (green) management secures the transfer of knowledge and skills to future generation (economic sustainability) and enhances older workers self-esteem and well-being (social sustainability)
Common Good HRM	Outside-in	Uses HRM competencies, skills, knowledge, and attitudes to contribute to the common good and to help in solving “grand challenges”	HR practices and behaviour enhancing common good values, e.g., trustful employment relationships	Social and Ecological Sustainable Development Impact, e.g., Decent working conditions in supply chains, employment creation, economic democracy

Source: Aust, Matthews, Muller-Camen (2019).

Bush (2019) notes that this approach has become the predominant conceptualisation of Sustainable HRM, suggesting a shift towards a holistic understanding of HRM's role in promoting sustainability. It extends the traditional focus on economic performance to include environmental stewardship and social equity, thereby redefining organisational success in terms of “people, profits, and planet” (Porter, Kramer, 2011). However, embracing such a multi-dimensional perspective can introduce complexities, including potential tensions between economic, social, and environmental objectives (Ehnert, 2009, 2014; Bush, 2019). These tensions may manifest as challenges in balancing investment in environmental initiatives with the need to maintain economic performance or in navigating the implications of flexible working practices for employee roles and responsibilities.

The **economic dimension** in the TBL presents a new perspective on the capitalist system, where the primary measure of a company's success is its financial outcome. Traditional management assumes that strategic plans and critical business decisions are typically crafted with a sharp focus on enhancing profits, minimising expenses, and alleviating risks. However, the TBL concept suggests that the enterprises can drive positive global change without compromising their financial results.

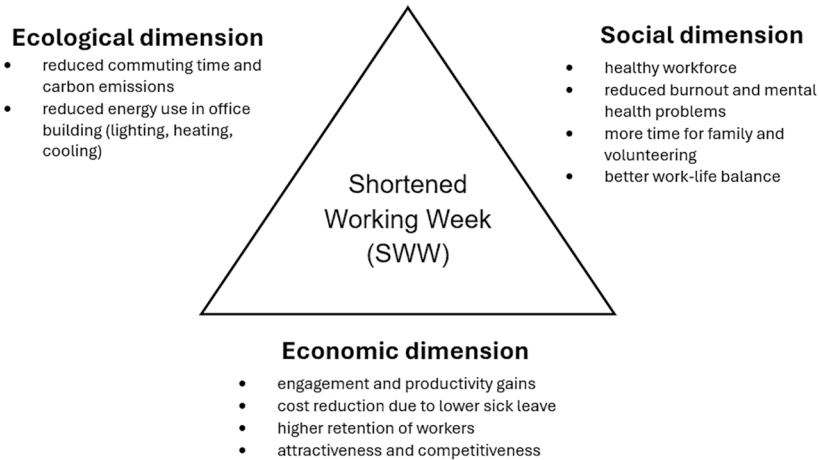
Considering the economic dimension in the Triple Bottom Line Model, in the context of the Shortened Work Week (SWW), it is argued that it can create economic value for organisations without compromising the profitability, for several reasons. First, working time reduction, which promotes Work-Life Balance (WLB), may increase an employer's attractiveness, thus appealing to better candidates during the recruitment process. Second, SWW is associated with a lower sickness rate and reduced absenteeism, thereby contributing to cost savings. Third, numerous pilot projects, as described earlier in this paper, show that SWW can boost engagement and loyalty (Strenitzerová and Achimský, 2019). This represents another economic gain, as lack of engagement is often linked with productivity loss. The cost of recruiting new staff can be reduced as a result of improved loyalty to the organisation. Overall, SWW could enhance a company's competitiveness in the labour market and generate economic benefits.

The model can be useful for evaluating potential impact of SWW on sustainable HRM. As Figure 5 illustrates there are potential benefits from the ecological, social and economic perspective.

The **social dimension** of the TBL-HRM refers to the company's actions towards its workforce and the community. Historically, companies have prioritised shareholder value as the main measure of success, concentrating on increasing profits for their shareholders. However, as the concept of sustainability gains traction in the business world, many firms are broadening their focus. They now aim to generate value not only for shareholders but also for all stakeholders affected by their operations,

such as customers, employees, and the wider community. Workers are important stakeholders of every business (Freeman et al., 2007) and the internal HR practices and policies can significantly impact the workers' families.

**Figure 5. Triple Bottom Line HRM in the context of SWW**



Source: own study.

Companies adopting SWW can greatly improve the everyday lives of working parents, single mothers, or other workers who struggle with balancing work and non-work-related responsibilities. Research reveals that workers offered more free time use it for family, friends, self-development, and wellbeing (Henley Business School, 2021). Thus, by providing workers with SWW, companies would create a more sustainable environment not only for the employees but also for the society. A healthy workplace and better work-life balance achieved through SWW create opportunities for reducing burnout, chronic stress, and other mental disorders, which negatively affect the entire society. Working time reduction also frees up time for volunteering, generating positive outcomes for the society.

The impact of SWW on the **ecological dimension** of SHRM is also notable. Businesses have been major drivers of climate change, but today more often business leaders acknowledge their societal duty to enact positive environmental changes. Actions such as adopting ethically sourced materials, reducing energy use, and optimising logistics are positive steps towards achieving sustainable practices.

Reducing working hours and promoting remote and flexible work arrangements can lead to decreased energy consumption within office buildings, which are significant consumers of electricity for lighting, heating, and cooling. Studies suggest that a shorter workweek could lead to lower carbon footprints for organisations,

as the energy demands of maintaining office spaces are reduced (Schor, 2005). Additionally, a reduction in working hours can contribute to less commuter traffic, further decreasing carbon emissions associated with transportation (Strachan, 2016). Furthermore, remote work can lead to a reduction in business travel, replacing it with virtual meetings and thus saving on emissions related to air travel.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that the adoption of reduced working hours presents a promising path towards achieving environmental, social and economic sustainability. By decreasing the need for commuting and promoting work-life balance the companies can use the SWW as a measure of competitive distinctiveness on the labour market, gaining tangible economic benefits for lower absenteeism and higher engagement.

The theoretical evaluation of the potential function of SWW as an instrument of promoting SHRM opens a valid question regarding the preferences of workers.

## Empirical perspective

The aim of the empirical study is to identify the preferences of Polish white-collar employees regarding different models of shortened working week. To address the research question, a quantitative research methodology was employed, ensuring an objective and comprehensive overview (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Between April and May 2023, an online survey was conducted by an external agency using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique.

The empirical aspect of the study focuses on assessing the preferences for a Shorter Working Week (SWW) among a sample of white-collar workers (N=1000). This sample selection process was based on the recognition of the unique positions and varying work conditions prevalent among white-collar and blue-collar workers. White-collar workers are identified as professionals and semi-professionals engaged in office-based jobs, frequently utilising ICT technology (Hu et al., 2010). Conversely, blue-collar workers are primarily involved in physical labour (Gibson Papa, 2000). Literature describes variances between these groups in aspects such as job satisfaction, compensation models (hourly wages versus annual salaries), and their overall perception of work. These differences underscore the necessity of conducting separate analyses for each group.

The survey was executed by external agency, using the nationwide online panel 'Opinion Survey,' which amalgamates a broad network of over 100,000 respondents with diverse demographic characteristics – encompassing various Polish regions, ages, genders, and social groups. Participation in both the survey and the panel is voluntary, with participants independently deciding whether to partake in studies

on specific topics. The characteristics of the sample used in this research are detailed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Population characteristics**

Parameter		Total (N=1000)	%
Company Size	Micro	138	14
	Small	215	21
	Medium	272	27
	Large	342	34
Gender	Female	499	50
	Male	495	49
	Other	6	1
Family status	Living with children	549	55
	Living without children	451	45

Source: own study.

The study employed random sampling method with equal representation of women and men. The respondents taking part in the survey had to meet following criteria such as:

- a natural person with full legal capacity,
- at least 18 years old on the day of the survey,
- permanent resident of Poland who is proficient in Polish,
- employed as a white-collar worker at the time of the survey.

To address the main research question the participants were asked: *“Would you like to work in a shortened working week model while receiving 100 percent of your salary?”* Respondents were provided with four options, from which they could select only one:

- No,
- Yes, 4 days per week for 10 hours,
- Yes, 4 days per week for 8 hours,
- Yes, 5 days per week for 6 hours.

These options were informed by prior research and pilot projects exploring various models of working time summarised in Table 2.

The additional aims is to identify whether there are distinct preferences among different groups of workers concerning their favoured method of working time reduction. To address this question the time reduction preferences were compared across different groups considering the variables such as: company size, family status and gender.

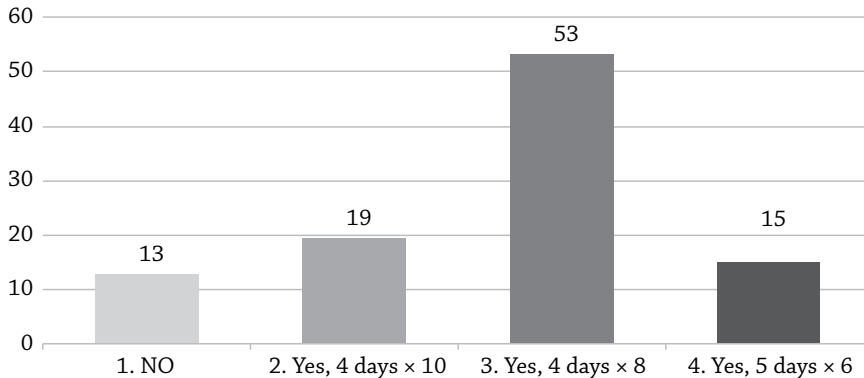


The statistical analysis focused on the comparisons of responses between groups, therefore a chi-square test was utilised (with Yates correction for 2x2 tables). Where low expected counts emerged in the tables, an accurate Fisher test was employed. Cramér's V test has been adopted to measure the effect size of the association between categorical variables. This analysis was executed using R, version 4.3.1. (R Core Team, 2023).

## Results of the empirical study

The survey results indicate that a majority (53%) of white-collar workers are in favour of the *4-day Working Week* (4WW) model, entailing 8-hour workdays across four days. Approximately 19 percent express a preference for a compressed workweek, involving 10-hour workdays over four days. Notably, 13 percent of respondents prefer not to reduce their working hours, while 15 percent would opt for a five-day week with 6-hour workdays (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Would you like to work in a shortened working week model for 100% of your salary?**



Source: own study.

This study reveals that 13% of respondents are not inclined to reduce their working hours, and 19% prefer a 40-hour workweek (4 days x 10 hours), even with the option of working fewer hours for the same pay. These employees' choices, which may initially appear irrational or indicative of potential bias, require examination through relevant theoretical frameworks.

The divergent working hour preferences can be explained using the economic model of *homo economicus* (Becker, 1976) or the sociological concept of *homo sociologicus*

(Dahrendorf, 2023; Abell, 1991). The *homo economicus* theory, which posits that individuals act rationally to maximise their utility or profit, suggests that choosing to work longer hours for the same pay might seem irrational. However, this perspective fails to account for the multidimensional nature of work and personal satisfaction.

In contrast, the *homo sociologicus* theory underscores the impact of societal norms and values on individual behaviour (Heap, 1992). This perspective aligns with the *status quo bias* (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988), where individuals prefer familiar arrangements, such as the traditional five-day workweek.

Further, *work identity* theories (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) suggest that employees may find their primary source of satisfaction and esteem within their professional roles. This notion is supported by *work-centric* concept discussed by Carr, Boyar, and Gregory (2008), who emphasise the influence of work on family life. The workaholics always choose work over personal life.

From the axiological perspective, there are three functions of work: punitive, instrumental, and self-realisation (Sztumski, 2017). Thus, people who must work to survive (instrumental work), and who work in unfavourable environments (punitive work) will always opt for shorter working hours. However, in the post-modern societies work is increasingly intertwined with personal identity and self-actualisation. Thus, employees enjoying their work, autonomy, and novelty, might not feel the necessity to reduce working hours.

Sociodemographic analyses in subsequent sections indicate that the preference of longer working hours vary among different employee groups, indicating that these are not merely irrational choices of naïve respondents.

## Company size and SWW

The table 5 outlines the preferences of employees from companies of different sizes regarding their willingness to work in a shortened working week (SWW) model for 100% of their salary. The results of a statistical analysis with a chi-squared test show a significant association between company size and preference for SWW models, given by a p-value of less than 0.001.

The analysis indicates a more pronounced preference for *Free Fridays* among employees in larger organisations compared to those in smaller companies. 59 percent of employees in large organisations favour a 4-day work week schedule, in contrast to just 44 percent of those in micro-companies.

Furthermore, employees in large organisations demonstrate the least interest in a compressed work week with intensive hours (16%), compared to their counterparts in smaller companies (27%).

**Table 5. Company size and SWW**

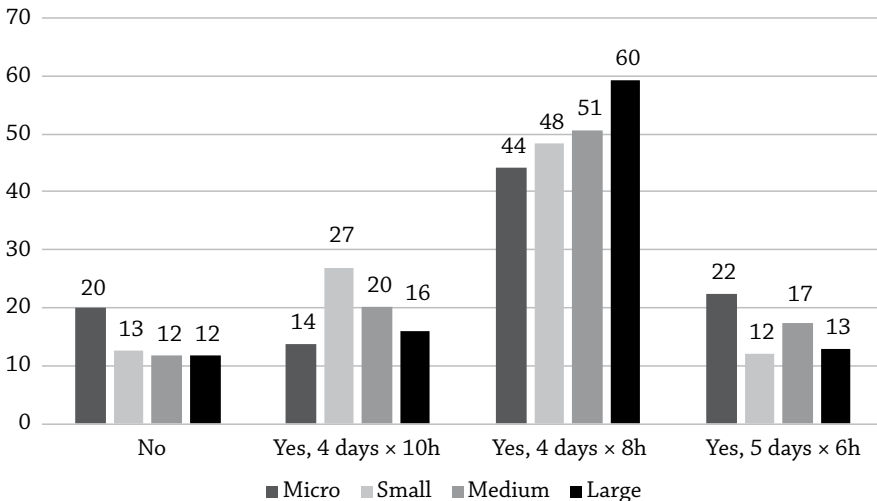
Parameter	Group	Would you like to work in a shortened working week model for 100% of your salary?			
		No	Yes, 4 days a week × 10 hours	Yes, 4 days a week × 8 hours	Yes, 5 days a week × 6 hours
Company size	Micro (N=138)	27 (19.57%)	19 (13.77%)	61 (44.20%)	31 (22.46%)
	Small (N=215)	27 (12.56%)	58 (26.98%)	104 (48.37%)	26 (12.09%)
	Medium (N=272)	32 (11.76%)	55 (20.22%)	138 (50.74%)	47 (17.28%)
	Large (N=342)	40 (11.70%)	55 (16.08%)	203 (59.36%)	44 (12.87%)

Source: own study; a chi-squared test, or Fisher’s exact test,  $p < 0.001$ , Cramér’s  $V = 0.101$

The data suggests that employees in larger companies have a stronger inclination towards an additional day off and are less willing to work longer hours in a compressed week. These findings could initiate discussions and further research into the aspects of organisational culture in larger companies that may contribute to increased stress and burden, thereby making their employees more favourable towards a longer weekend compared to those in smaller companies.

It is noteworthy that employees in micro companies exhibit a significantly higher preference for maintaining the standard 40-hour workweek (20%) compared to their counterparts in medium and large organisations (12%).

**Figure 7. Company size Shortened Working Week**



Source: own study.

This finding raises questions about whether the smaller, more intimate environment, or the autonomy and flexibility inherent in micro organisations, encourage employees to opt for longer, rather than shorter, working hours.

Another distinction is observed in the preference for working shorter hours: 22 percent of employees in micro organisations prefer to work 5 days a week, compared to just 13 percent in large organisations. This trend suggests that micro companies, often operated by sole traders or self-employed individuals, tend to promote more frequent and intensive work patterns than large organisations with salaried employees. Entrepreneurs running micro companies may be more inclined to work five days a week and for longer hours, potentially because they directly reap the benefits of their labour (e.g., increased profits).

In contrast, employees in large organisations may not see a direct benefit from their additional efforts or hours, as any increase in profits typically accrues to the company’s owners or investors.

## Gender and SWW

Gender was another variable examined in this study in relation to employees’ work preferences. According to table 6, male employees exhibit a pronounced preference for the compressed work schedule, working four days per 10-hours (23%), compared to their female counterparts (16%). In contrast, for the *4-Day Working Week* (4WW) model, consisting of 8-hour days, a higher percentage of female employees prefer this arrangement (55%) as opposed to male employees (51%).

**Table 6. Gender and SWW**

Parameter	Group	Would you like to work in a shortened working week model for 100% of your salary?			
		No	Yes, 4 days a week × 10 hours	Yes, 4 days a week × 8 hours	Yes, 5 days a week × 6 hours
Gender	Female (N=499)	61 (12.22%)	80 (16.03%)	276 (55.31%)	82 (16.43%)
	Male (N=495)	66 (13.33%)	112 (22.63%)	251 (50.71%)	66 (13.33%)
	Other sex (N=6)	0 (0.00%)	1 (16.67%)	4 (66.67%)	1 (16.67%)

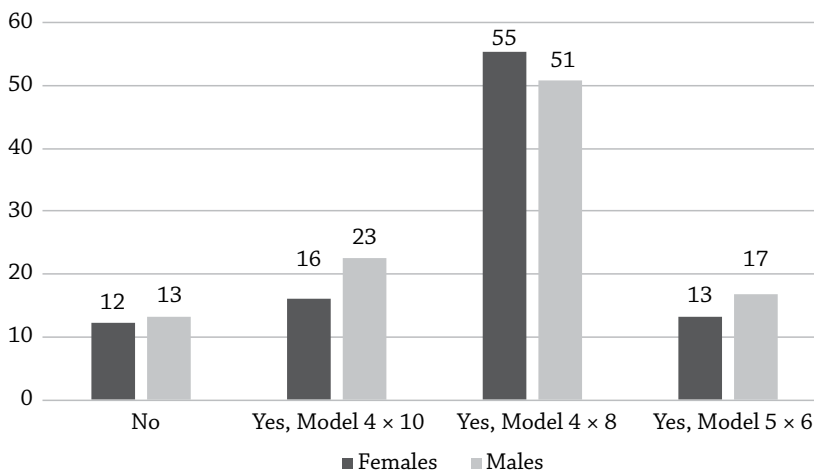
Source: own study; a chi-squared test, or Fisher’s exact test,  $p=0.038$ , Cramér’s  $V=0.092$ .

The statistical analysis reveals significant gender-based differences in preferences for SWW models ( $p=0.038$ ). This observed difference may be interpreted in the context of the *double burden* phenomenon, which highlights the disproportionately higher

responsibility undertaken by women in unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks, as compared to men, as documented in the literature (Hochschild and Machung, 2012).

The reduced preference among female employees for the compressed work model, which consists of four 10-hour days, may be attributed to their limited availability for managing domestic chores. Conversely, the slightly higher preference among females for the *4-Day Working Week* (4WW) model could be linked to their greater need for an additional day off to handle caregiving responsibilities.

**Figure 8. Gender and Shortened Working Week**



Source: own study.

These findings provide a basis for organisations to consider gender perspectives in designing work schedules but also highlight the need for a nuanced approach that takes into account the diversity within gender groups.

## Family status SWW

The previous studies suggested that the work-home conflict can be related with the family status (Duxbury and Higgins, 2017). In particular, the childcare responsibilities of working parents may contribute to stress, burnout and health problems. Therefore, it is important to examine the preferences of SWW in the context of having or not having children.

The data in Table 7 reveals distinct preferences between workers living with children (N=549) and those without (N=451).

**Table 7. SWW and family status**

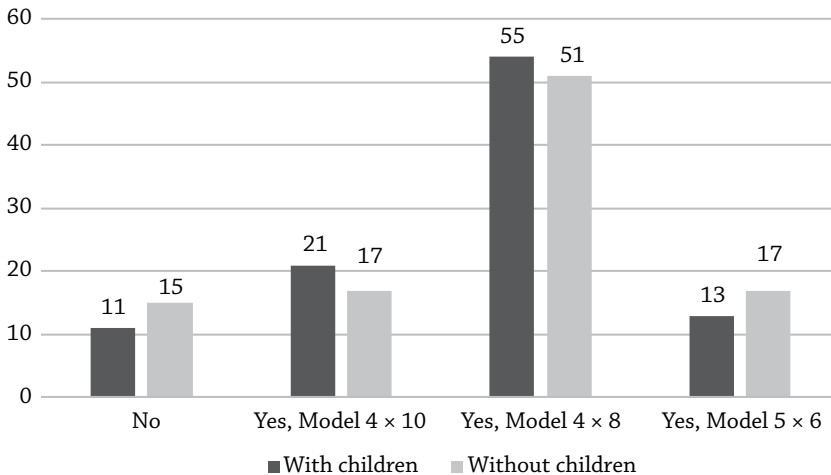
Parameter	Group	Would you like to work in a shortened working week model for 100% of your salary?			
		No	Yes, 4 days a week × 10 hours	Yes, 4 days a week × 8 hours	Yes, 5 days a week × 6 hours
Workers living with children	Yes (N=549)	61 (11.11%)	117 (21.31%)	299 (54.46%)	72 (13.11%)
	No (N=451)	66 (14.63%)	76 (16.85%)	232 (51.44%)	77 (17.07%)

Source: own study; a chi-squared test, or Fisher’s exact test, p=0.046

The most popular option among workers living with children was the traditional 4-day workweek at 8 hours per day, with 54.46% in favour. This preference underscores the desire for more extended periods of time off work without the increased daily working hours that come with the 10-hour shifts option. In contrast, workers without children showed a slightly less pronounced preference for this option (51.44%), indicating that while still popular, the difference in daily work commitments might be less critical for those without caregiving responsibilities (see Figure 9).

The preference for working 5 days a week for 6 hours each day was slightly higher among workers without children (17.07%) than those with children (13.11%), possibly reflecting a desire for shorter working days but a reluctance to lose the traditional workweek structure.

**Figure 9. Family status and Shortened Working Week**



Source: own study.

The analysis ( $p=0.046$ ) indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in the preference distributions between workers living with and without children, suggesting that family status influences the desired SWW model. This statistical significance reinforces the notion that work-life balance policies, including SWW, need to consider the diverse needs and preferences of the workforce, including family responsibilities.

## Conclusion

The theoretical analysis of the SWW in the context of the Triple Bottom Line model suggests that there is a potential of using SWW as an instrument promoting sustainable HRM. Empirical research conducted among 1,000 Polish white-collar workers reveals that, a significant proportion (53%) prefers the model of working 4 days per week for 8-hours (totalling 32 hours). The remaining 47 percent demonstrate a range of different preferences, underscoring the necessity for organisations, governments, and the employees themselves to recognise that the 4-day, 8-hour workweek (4WW) is not the only viable configuration.

Additionally, the study uncovered variations in work-time preferences across different demographics. The differences in SWW preferences were statistically significant when comparing company size, family status and gender. The analysis highlighted gender-based differences in the preference for a compressed work schedule (4 days at 10 hours each), with men showing a greater inclination toward more intensive work compared to women. The research also revealed that company size plays a role; employees in larger organisations have a greater need for *Free Fridays* than those in smaller companies.

The findings in this research provide new empirical data from the Polish job market contributing to the discussion about possibility of workweek reduction promoting SHRM.

The *4-Day Working Week* (4WW) concept, entailing four workdays for 8 hours each, proposes a significant shift in work-life balance. This shift moves away from the traditional 5-day workweek and 2-day weekend to a model incorporating 4 working days and a 3-day weekend. The adoption of this model would significantly transform the balance between professional and personal lives, contingent on the willingness of organisations to restructure their schedules to accommodate an additional day off each week.

In contrast, the *Shortened Working Week* (SWW) concept offers a more flexible perspective, advocating for various models to reduce working hours, thus can be adopted as a bottom-up approach. It encourages diverse considerations of



time modalities and the crafting of work schedules that are specific to different sociodemographic characteristic of workforce, and various organisational needs.

The practical implications of this study for organisations suggest that the adoption of the SWW could significantly benefit the workforce. This strategy can be effectively utilised in employer branding activities, talent recruitment, and retention efforts. Managers responsible for time scheduling and work-time arrangements are advised to account for the diverse preferences of white-collar employees, moving beyond conventional approaches such as *Free Fridays*.

The implications for the policymakers suggest that implementing reduced work hours can positively impact the social, economic, and ecological dimensions of SHRM. Considering the varied preferences for shorter work weeks among employees, it is essential to tailor strategies that meet the specific needs of both employees and their organisations. This paper argues that embracing the concept of SWW, modernising working time or exploring different models of work time reduction can stimulate and promote discussions about the sustainable HRM practices. However, there is a vital question for further research what is the best way of implementing the new working time norms?

There are two principal avenues for reducing the working week: state intervention or liberal market model. Each approach is underpinned by different political ideologies and has distinct implications for the labour market and equality.

The state intervention model (the top-down approach) involves national legislation mandating a universal reduction in working hours across all sectors for all workers. Such a strategy is grounded in the theory of welfare state, which presumes a paternalistic role of the state, intervening directly to regulate the labour market for the collective good. The only example of this approach is the reduction of the working week to 35 hours for all workers in France (Estevão and Sá, 2008).

In contrast, the liberal market-model (the bottom-up approach) emphasises market autonomy and individual company discretion. Here, the labour market is expected to self-regulate, allowing individual companies the freedom to alter working hours. This model assumes that market forces and negotiations between employers and employees dictate working conditions. Countries like the Netherlands and Germany exemplify this approach, where an average workweek of less than 40 hours has been already achieved through the interplay of market forces and trade unions negotiations.

Considering the issue of potential inequality on the labour market and the major differences in job characteristics between white-collar workers and blue-collar workers, or between different sectors of economy (for example IT companies can close on Fridays, but hospitals and public services cannot), it is recommended to conduct

more extensive research on economic and social consequences of bottom-up or top-down approach before introducing any radical changes.

## Limitations and future research

This research has presented perspectives only from employees; however, it is equally important to explore employers' opinions regarding the feasibility of shortening work hours

A further limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on white-collar workers, predominantly in knowledge-based sectors. To obtain a holistic understanding of changes in contemporary workplaces, it is essential to extend research to include workers from other sectors, particularly those where manual labour is predominant. Subsequent qualitative research is warranted to delve deeper into respondents' perceptions.

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