



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY
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Submission Cover sheet

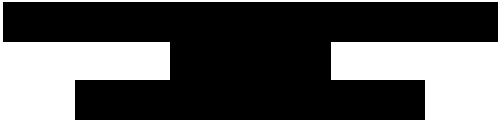
Inquiry into the future of the working week

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Submission to the Inquiry into the future of the working week
Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality

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This submission addresses terms of reference a) to d), focusing on the four-day working week's benefits and addressing some of its criticisms.

This submission defines the concept of a four-day work week as:

A reduction of the total length of the full time working week from five days to four days with a proportional reduction in total hours, without a reduction of pay. For example, if someone currently worked 7hrs 30min each day for a total of 37hrs 30min per week, they would transition to 30hrs per week (distributed as flexibly as is appropriate for the work) and be paid as they previously had at 37hrs 30min per week.

Introduction

I thank the legislative assembly and broader ACT Government for taking interest in the 4-day working week. It displays an innovative approach to governance and above all else shows genuine interest in maximising the wellbeing and potential of the ACT community.

I doubt I will be providing much information the committee does not already know, but I hope an articulation of my support of this inquiry and this conversation will further impress its value.

Many people I know, from across different generations, suffer from a level of mental and physical exhaustion due to a culture of long work hours where the focus is often 'how many hours have you worked this week' rather than 'how productive were you this week?'. For too long our work culture has rewarded people for their time spent at the job rather than their productivity. This practice harms our community and wastes time that could be spent enjoying or improving our lives and communities outside of work, disadvantaging both employees and employers. With work being the largest component of the people of the ACT's life, the scale, constituent relevancy and impact of this issue makes it a high priority consideration for the ACT Government.

Whilst I understand any caution that comes with major change, I cannot empathise with those who see the current state of affairs and are satisfied for themselves and their community. This is why a thorough study, trialling and overall investment in the idea of the four-day working week is an extraordinary opportunity.

How the four-day working week aligns with the ACT's values

When providing a values driven approach to the four-day working week discussion, it's clear that it is a major opportunity. More personal time means there are greater opportunities for community work, volunteering, study, the arts, families, hobbies, environmental stewardship, rest, mental and physical health maintenance, personal, social and financial admin, pleasure and any other non-work activities people prioritise. This approach synergises with the ACT Government's implementation of their Wellbeing Framework to measure the ACT's progress.

With these values in mind, we should approach this topic asking 'how do we make people's lives better?' rather than 'how do we keep them productive?'. This isn't to say productivity isn't an important part of wellbeing, but rather, recognising and emphasising productivity as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Ultimately, the rights to rest, leisure, and the limitation of working hours are integral aspirations of our society, and as such, their execution warrants optimisation.

Productivity

In my experience of this discussion, the threat of productivity loss is the most common criticism of the four-day working week. I do not believe that higher material production standards are necessarily always higher living standards. As many environmental crises display, our world is rife with overproduction and overconsumption, and it is to our detriment. However, even if we were to look through the lense of prioritising productivity, further inquiry and investment into the four-day working week is still justified.

A key consideration of the four-day working week is the relationship between time and productivity. As trials of the four-day working week have shown no changes to productivity or even increases in productivity to be possible¹, its study and trial by the ACT Government is already warranted. Whilst it seems likely that minimal decreases to productivity are worth the other wellbeing benefits that come with the transition, even an individual exclusively interested in a worker for their capacity to produce can see the merit in giving the four-day working week a highly resourced and time generous consideration, trial, and overall effort.

A complex consideration is that the types of productivity and the role productivity plays in work will change from job to job. Some service providers such as those in retail or care roles can be producing utility to the extent that they are present rather than through the creation of a product. In that sense, they are paid directly for their time. This creates challenges for the four-day working week's implementation, but not impassable barriers to it ever being implemented or to discourage the idea's exploration. Whilst fairness is important, I do not see why the four-day working week could not be applied in some areas where they work and not in others where they don't. Chances are that the four-day working week will have to be introduced in gradual implements rather than collectively overnight anyway. Overall, when it comes to the variety of jobs and the difficulty of implementing the four-day working week in certain industries, proper stakeholder engagement and codesign will provide more meaningful insight than any of my external inputs could.

Productivity can be measured in other benefits for a workplace too. Staff retention is a major issue for retaining corporate knowledge and the longer that knowledge and skill set stays with the organisation, the more productive they will be because of it. Given a four-day working week is likely to increase wellbeing, retention is likely to be higher at workplaces that implement it. Workers that are happier and better rested have also been shown to perform their task to a higher quality².

There is also the potential for broader economic benefits, with time rich individuals having more time to engage and support local businesses (e.g. more time to engage in local retail, cinemas, gyms, sport, arts, hospitality, education...etc)³.

¹ References 1-3 and 5, individually and as outlined in Reference 6 (page 22).

² Reference 6 (page 47).

³ Reference 6 (page 29).

Workforce issues the four-day working week could help address

There are a variety of workforce issues the four-day working week could help address. These include structural imbalances in employment (underemployment and overworking), gender inequalities, a rise in insecure work, environmental degradation and unsustainability, and work related health issues.

Environmental Degradation and Unsustainability

Less time working means less resources used to support the work. This is not just in the form of lower emissions through reduced commuting time (both to/from and as part of work), but also in the form of less usage of cleaning supplies, work facilities, equipment, resources, and the energy costs associated. This reduces costs for those who run the spaces and is more sustainable. In the ACT's goal to achieve net zero emissions by 2045 and to reduce congestion through the ACT Transport Strategy, this behavioural change should be a key consideration.

Sustainability benefits can also come from the increases to personal time. More time allows us to make more environmentally mindful decisions. This could be in the form of slower but more sustainable transport like public transport, walking or cycling; taking more time to prepare meals that are more sustainable; fixing or recycling things instead of replacing them; or even just taking the time to engage with the natural world and consider what the extent of our impact is.

Gender Inequalities

The current working week structure supports gender inequalities. In our culture, a large proportion of women do not have time to work full time as they are often the primary caregivers to children or have other care related roles⁴. If we worked less, caring roles could be shared more equitably between the genders and caregiving women would have a better chance of having the time to work. With more women having the time to work, they have more opportunities to contribute to the world and develop themselves and their aspirations. By better synergising work and care roles, we will also help increase opportunities for care and care quality⁵. This could have a significant impact on both the carers and who they care for. In a broader sense, the four-day working week would allow more people with diverse roles, responsibilities and skills (like women in non-work care roles or even those past traditional retirement age) to participate in the workforce.

⁴ Reference 6 (page 25).

⁵ Reference 6 (page 47); Reference 7 (pages 7-8).

Structural Imbalances in Employment

There are currently significant structural imbalances in employment where we have significant underemployment, insecure work, significant overworking, and job polarisation⁶. Theoretically, we could share the load by having a shorter working week per person. We could expect less from the individual, and spread the weight over the broader workforce. If we share the load in this way, those unemployed or working insecurely will have more opportunities for secure work. However, this prompts the question: if changing to the four-day working week doesn't have a major impact on productivity, is it not the case that more jobs won't need to be created? Or is it more that we should be expected to do less and should share the load? These questions could be answered through further study and trials.

Work Related Health Issues

Working less and improving wellbeing have significant benefits to our mental and physical health and their related costs. It results in the reduction of stress, less burnout, less accidents, better diets, higher fitness levels, less sick leave taken, and increased staff retention⁷. This in turn reduces the costs on healthcare systems and improves the wellbeing of healthcare staff⁸.

Conclusion

I cannot provide much input on how the four-day working week would be implemented, but naturally it would require extensive research, trialling, and consultation with a variety of workers, employers, businesses (small and large) and unions. For example, a reduction of hours and not necessarily days may be more preferable as it would allow for work arrangement flexibility. This flexibility helps individuals and businesses that benefit from providing customer service throughout the week.

Finally, another common criticism of the four-day working week is that it's too hard and the logistics in implementing it in certain industries is unapproachable. Not only is this a disappointingly unambitious response to a major opportunity for public wellbeing improvement, it also neglects that we've recently tackled logistically difficult working rearrangements in responding to the pandemic. Across all industries, there were major changes to how people worked, where they worked and when they worked to support public safety and wellbeing in an incredibly short period of time. We are capable of widespread difficult changes when we know it will be worth it. With the extraordinary benefits that the four-day working week has the potential to provide, we are obliged to explore its potential impact and implementation regardless of its complexity.

Ultimately, the advantages of the four-day working week cannot be overstated. It has the potential to provide people with more time to live as they want to, think, develop themselves and their ideas, and ultimately have a better, freer, and more authentic lived experience. The value of giving people a day more to live every week is far too high to not pursue and interrogate this concept with the greatest sincerity.

⁶ Reference 4, individually and as outlined in Reference 5 (page 22).

⁷ Reference 6 (pages 23 and 48); Reference 7 (page 7).

⁸ Reference 6 (page 48).

References

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