



A better work-life balance could improve both productivity and creativity. (UBS)

Health

Could a 4 day week equal more productivity?

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Microsoft introduced a program this summer in Japan in which the company shut down its offices every Friday in August and gave all employees an extra day off each week, and somewhat surprisingly, it resulted in a 40% increase in productivity.

In a press release, Microsoft said that the "Work Life Choice Challenge" meant that the amount of time spent at work was cut dramatically, but productivity — measured by sales per employee — went up by almost 40% compared to the same period the previous year.

CNN notes that the initiative is timely, with Japan having grappled with a grim — and in some cases, fatal — [culture of overwork](#). The problem is so severe, the country has even coined a term for it: *karoshi*, which means death by overwork from stress-induced illnesses or severe depression.

Similar experiments are being conducted globally at businesses both big and small to assess the work-life balance and its effect on productivity and creativity.

The idea is that companies should invest in the health of their employees, with a large number now offering workplace health and wellness (H&W) programs to staff.

A recent UBS report, [Executives & Entrepreneurs - Health and well-being: invest in your employees](#), looks at some of the evidence in support of H&W programs' benefits, as well as some of the pitfalls.

Highlights include:

- Over 80% of US large employers have H&W programs in place; many smaller employers, and many in developing markets, do not. This creates an opportunity for employers to stand out from peers.
- Successful H&W programs generate up to USD 3 in return for every USD spent. But H&W is not just about lowering health care costs. Evidence suggests companies that perform best on H&W also outperform financially.
- But the emphasis should be on the benefit to employees. Many employees believe their employer only offers H&W plans to serve its own interests. This fosters skepticism that can undermine the benefits of such programs.

- Employees respond positively when they believe their employer genuinely cares about their well-being. Hence, employers should offer H&W programs that go beyond the basic fitness and diet services to a more holistic well-being program aligned with the company's culture. When employees are more satisfied with H&W offerings they tend to be more engaged. A more engaged workforce has been shown to be causally predictive of better company financial results.
- Younger workers have different expectations to older workers, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Companies should take into account the specific characteristics of their workforce.

The report concludes that an employee health program is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of having a productive and engaged workforce. UBS expect more and more employers to broaden their offering to include holistic employee wellness programs to help employees manage their own health and well-being.

It's probably safe to say many employees would love a 4 day work week and more wellness benefits. Greater focus on health and wellness could be a win-win, with gains for both employees and their companies.

For more, see [Executives & Entrepreneurs: Health and well-being: invest in your employees](#), 1 November, 2019.

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