

# The Future of the Working Week

# Introduction

In many ways, it is surprising that the five-day week continues to underpin when office work is done, when there has been ample opportunity for disruption. This manmade construct of the early 20th century has persisted, despite the fact that for decades, all the major economists, philosophers and sociologists have believed that globally, individuals should be working less.

Yet instead of scaling back, some businesses have moved closer to a six-day week and increasingly we are hearing of an 'overtime epidemic'. The Citrix 'Future of the Working Week' survey goes some way to supporting this and finds that across all counties included, almost half (47%) of respondents claim they are working outside of their 'preferred working hours' every day, or most of the week. On average, this equates to an additional four hours 36 minutes per week of 'overtime', and in many cases this is because it has become the culture of the business to do so.

On the face of it, the concept of a four-day working week, on full pay, seems almost too good to be true, which is possibly why only 1% of survey respondents say they are offered it currently. However, there is much research to suggest that a four-day week is good for businesses and employee wellbeing, while also benefitting the economy overall. Above all, there is a strong argument that a shorter working week allows individuals to be more productive and creative, placing the emphasis on output and achieving targets, while also enabling a better work-life balance. It is logical that a shorter week, and increased flexibility and control in how employees can work, can also lead to lower stress levels and improved staff health and happiness. In the UK alone, heavy workloads, as well as work-related stress and anxiety, are costing public services and companies millions each year, with one in four of all sick days being taken as a direct result of workload pressures.<sup>1</sup> A more flexible approach to work is also good for recruitment and retention, in today's competitive world of business.

Additionally, there is an important environmental benefit to be had from working less. According to the World Economic Forum, "our current working time and lifestyle models are deeply intertwined with a fundamentally unsustainable economy, which demands us to endure long commutes due to overpriced housing and eat carbon-intensive, frozen foods since we lack the time to prepare decent quality meals ourselves."<sup>2</sup> Drastic global action is needed to tackle climate change, and a reduction of working hours could help to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of many businesses, across all industries.

Many progressive companies, and countries, have experimented with a shorter working week, and although there is no silver bullet, the overall results have been positive. In the Netherlands, for example, the average weekly working time (including both full-time and part-time workers) is approximately 29 hours: the lowest of any industrialised nation, according to the OECD.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, a four-day week is not the only option for creating a shorter working week, and there is no one-size fits all solution. It is the creation of flexibility that is key, in striving for a healthier work-life balance, and more productive output. "The focus needs to be creating 'useful hours work'," says digital advisor, Jos Creese. "It is not just about how many hours you work, it's how productive and valuable they are and how you perceive this. The working day seems very long if it is wasteful and not enjoyable. Equally time flies when you are having fun. Ultimately the most important thing is that employees are happy in their jobs and being given the opportunity to work smartly."

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1. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>  
2. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/06/a-shorter-working-week-isnt-a-luxury-its-an-ecological-necessity/>  
3. <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/infographic-this-country-has-the-worlds-shortest-work-week/>

# Flexibility: how are working hours contracted?

‘The Future of the Working Week’ survey presents a comprehensive, global study of the premise of a four-day working week, also offering insight into how viable it would be and the likelihood of it becoming commonplace in businesses across the world. A sensible starting point for the conversation, therefore, is investigating the hours that employees are contracted to work currently, across all countries surveyed.

## Contracted hours

Overall, more than half (53%) of respondents are contracted to work regular set hours (i.e. the traditional nine to five), while comparatively, 28% are contracted to work core working hours with some flexibility either side. Only 4% overall have complete flexibility in the way they work, with no set number of working hours.

As Figure 1 below reveals, Denmark offers the highest levels of flexibility overall, with 34% of its respondents having complete flexibility in their contracts, with or without a set number of hours. However, France leads the charge when it comes to completely flexible working with no set number of working hours, and 11% of its workers are contracted to work in this way, and also do so in reality: this is despite the fact that more than half (54%) of its respondents still work regular set hours, without any flexibility.

Germany has the lowest levels of workers (23%) contracted to work regular set hours without any flexibility, and the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway) also fare well in this respect. In contrast, office workers in Italy are most likely to be contracted for regular set hours with no flexibility (73%), closely followed by those in Mexico (69%).

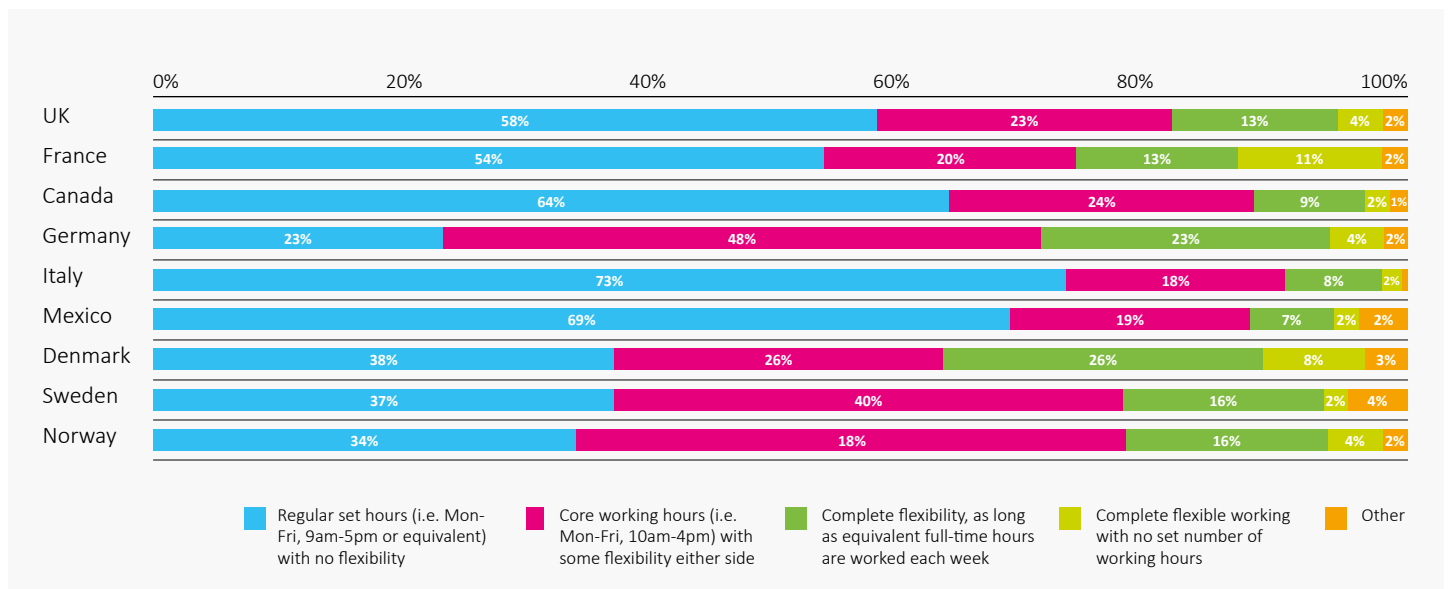
## Actual hours

Of course, the hours that individuals are contracted to work don’t necessarily reflect the reality. The survey reveals a certain level of cynicism in this respect, with just over half (52%) of respondents claiming that when they consider the hours they work, their week feels closer to a six-day week than a four-day week.

When it comes to the hours that employees ‘actually work’, Denmark remains the country offering the highest levels of flexibility, with 31% working when they choose. In reality, workers in Mexico are most likely to work regular set hours with no flexibility (65%), while Italy fares a little more positively with 59% saying that in practical terms, they work regular hours without any flexibility, compared to the 73% who are contracted to do so.

“Increasingly there is the opinion that work is something you do, and not somewhere you go; but that is only partially true. Most people still ‘go’ to work,” says Christian Reilly, VP and CTO of Citrix. “Although employees are becoming more mobile and the technology allowing them to work flexibly is the most sophisticated it has ever been, in the majority of cases, there is still a traditional contracted amount of time that they are expected in the office.”

**FIGURE 1:**  
What working hours are you contracted to do?



# The question of overtime

When asked about overtime, 86% of the office workers surveyed say it is commonplace for them to work outside of their ‘preferred working hours’, whether that is to join a work-related call, or to respond to an email or instant message, for example. Of these, almost half (47%) are putting in these additional hours “daily” or “most days”.

Mexico and Italy emerge as the two countries where ‘overtime’ is most prolific: in Mexico, 95% are working outside of their preferred hours, and 44% find themselves in this situation “every day”; while in Italy, 93% are actively working overtime, and for 37% this is an everyday occurrence. Germany is the country least guilty of overtime: just 15% work outside of their preferred hours “every day”, and 23% say that they are “never” required to work additional hours.

The survey findings reveal that the average amount of time spent working outside of preferred hours is four hours 36 minutes per week, while 21% work an additional eight hours or more. Norwegian employees work the most overtime and on average they are putting in an additional 10 hours 45 minutes per week, with 36% working 16 or more hours a week outside of their preferred hours. However, Sweden, a sister Nordic country to Norway, has the lowest level of overtime across the countries surveyed, with the average amount of additional hours worked equating to three hours 18 minutes. In addition, just 5% of Swedish workers say that they are required to work 10 hours or more per week, outside of their ‘preferred hours’.

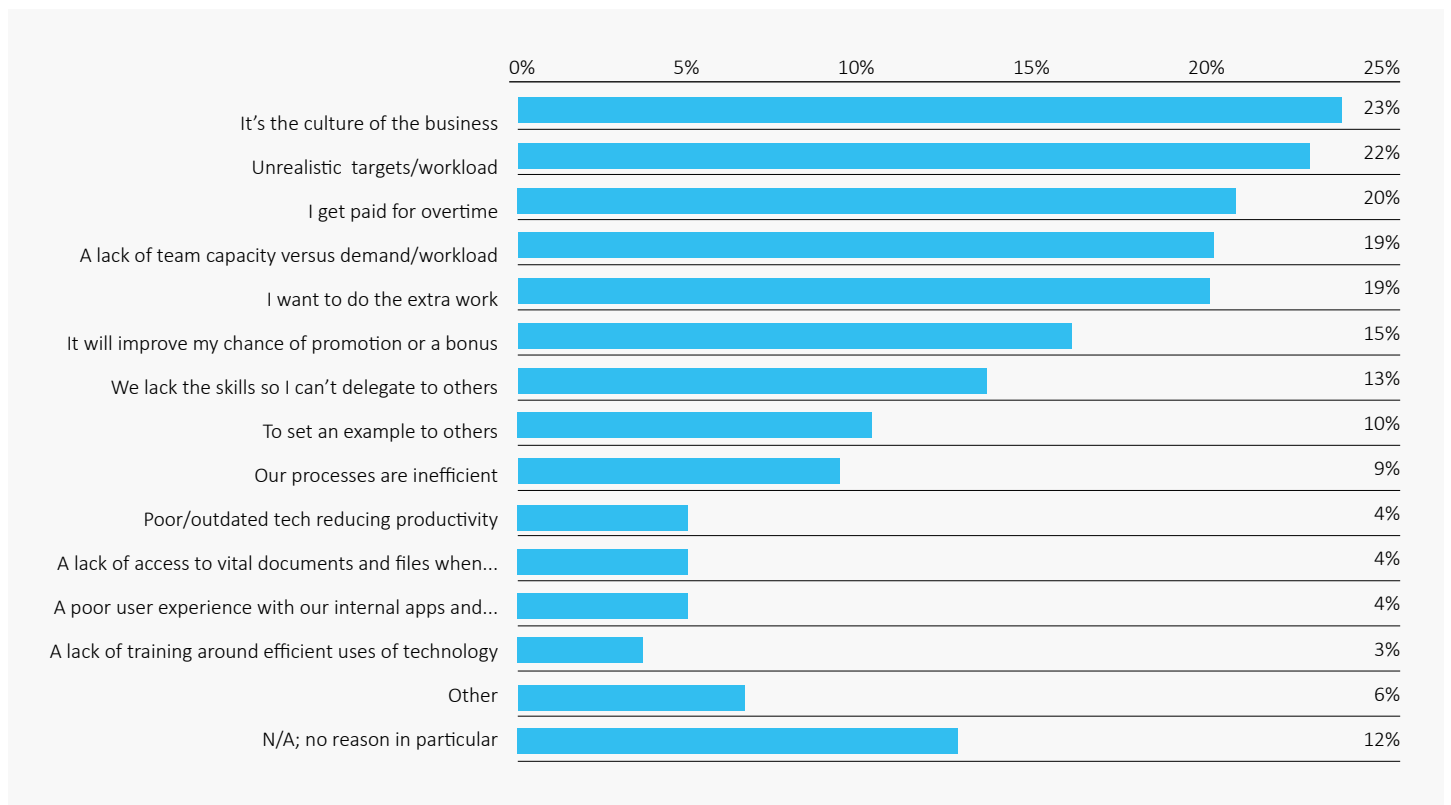
## Why do employees work outside of their contracted hours?

The issue of overtime can often be explained by cultural attitudes and other social factors, and indeed, 51% of survey respondents overall agree that their country is facing an “overtime epidemic”.

As Figure 2 below highlights, office culture is the most popular reason for individuals working outside of their preferred hours, as cited by 23% overall, and most highly in Canada (37%) and the UK (29%). However, unrealistic targets and workload, along with a lack of team capacity, also rank as popular reasons for overtime. In France, 39% attribute their additional hours to unachievable workloads.

It is notable that one fifth of respondents feel they are remunerated for the additional hours they put in. Additionally, 19% overall say they “want to do the extra work”; a perspective that is at its highest in Norway (26%) and Sweden (34%). This is a viewpoint that resonates with digital advisor Jos Creese, who says “I’m not convinced that people working overtime, aren’t being paid for it. Individuals put in these extra hours partly because they need to, and partly because they feel they ought to. Often it is a case of quid pro quo, in that if an individual is required to work late one evening, they will probably have the flexibility to come in late or leave early the next day.

**Figure 2:** Why do you work this extra time?



These arrangements often aren't written down contractually, but nevertheless, that unwritten flexibility is often there."

The issue of overtime can also be impacted by government policy. For example, in France, a law was passed in 2000 to reduce the statutory working week from 39 hours to 35 hours, for companies with more than 20 employees and, in 2002, for companies with 20 employees or less. Digital advisor Jos Creese, however, feels quite strongly that it is not the role of government to overly regulate working hours. He explains, "government policy in this area should be minimal since often it is out of date before the ink is dry on paper. Limiting the number of hours spent in the office is sensible and there obviously needs to be some legal protection in place, but beyond that, it should be down to the individual business to decide."

It is important to acknowledge that the number of hours worked, including overtime, does not necessarily correlate to productivity and output. In fact, often there can be evidence of an inverse correlation, whereby longer working hours lead to more mistakes being made. "We have some good experiments showing that if you reduce work hours, people are able to focus their attention more effectively," Adam Grant, a psychologist from the Wharton School in Pennsylvania told delegates in Davos this year. "They end up producing just as much, often with higher quality and creativity, and they are also more loyal to the organisations that are willing to give them the flexibility to care about their lives outside of work."<sup>4</sup>

### Smarter working

Just over a third (34%) of survey respondents overall believe that more staff would present the best solution to their overtime problem, helping them to tackle their growing workload. This is a view most supported by German workers (42%). Additionally, 28% of respondents think a more realistic workload could help to tackle the overtime culture, which Swedish workers are most inclined to agree with (35%).

Advances in digital transformation technologies and business automation could also help ease the burden of working hours for employees, to ultimately bring about a shorter working week. Business automation is the use of technology to execute time-consuming, recurring tasks or processes, where manual effort can be replaced without risk. Christian Reilly, VP and CTO of Citrix Systems, explains: "automation, when implemented effectively, has the potential to save office workers up to a day a week. However, we have seen many employers adopt it simply as a way to maximise productivity without sharing the surplus time with their staff, and this mentality needs to change so that a clear link is drawn between smart working technology and its potential to save time."

As Figure 3 below illustrates, Mexico is the most forward-thinking country, currently, in its understanding of how technology could help to tackle overtime. Just under a third of Mexican workers (31%) say that better technology could make a difference, and 23% cite cloud-based technology as being an additional solution to the problem. However, with overtime being so endemic to Mexican office culture, it makes sense that this country is looking most at alternatives.

**Figure 3:** What do you believe could help to reduce this extra time worked?

	Canada	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Mexico	Norway	Sweden	UK
More staff to tackle a growing workload	34%	30%	35%	42%	38%	31%	33%	31%	30%
More realistic targets / workload	27%	25%	32%	17%	30%	30%	28%	35%	28%
Improved processes	30%	20%	18%	24%	29%	39%	25%	24%	22%
Better tech, resulting in me being more efficient	13%	15%	14%	17%	20%	31%	17%	15%	23%
More empathetic business culture	16%	10%	14%	15%	26%	24%	11%	18%	15%
Cloud-based tech	7%	6%	10%	14%	14%	23%	10%	7%	23%
Better training around using tech	9%	7%	10%	7%	18%	17%	12%	10%	18%
A better user experience with our tech	8%	5%	16%	8%	13%	11%	5%	7%	17%
N/A; nothing in particular	26%	33%	22%	25%	10%	8%	29%	22%	18%

4. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/03/where-people-work-longest-and-shortest-hours/>

# How likely is a four-day working week?

Although there have been many successful experiments with a four-day working week, it remains out of reach for many, with business leaders continuing to doubt its viability.

The fact is, a shorter working week may still be a long way off: respondents globally believe it will be an average of 6.54 years before their employer offers a four-day week on the same salary. Overall, as many as 54% of workers think their employer will ‘never’ be able to offer a four-day week on the same salary, and this view is felt most strongly among German workers (68%).

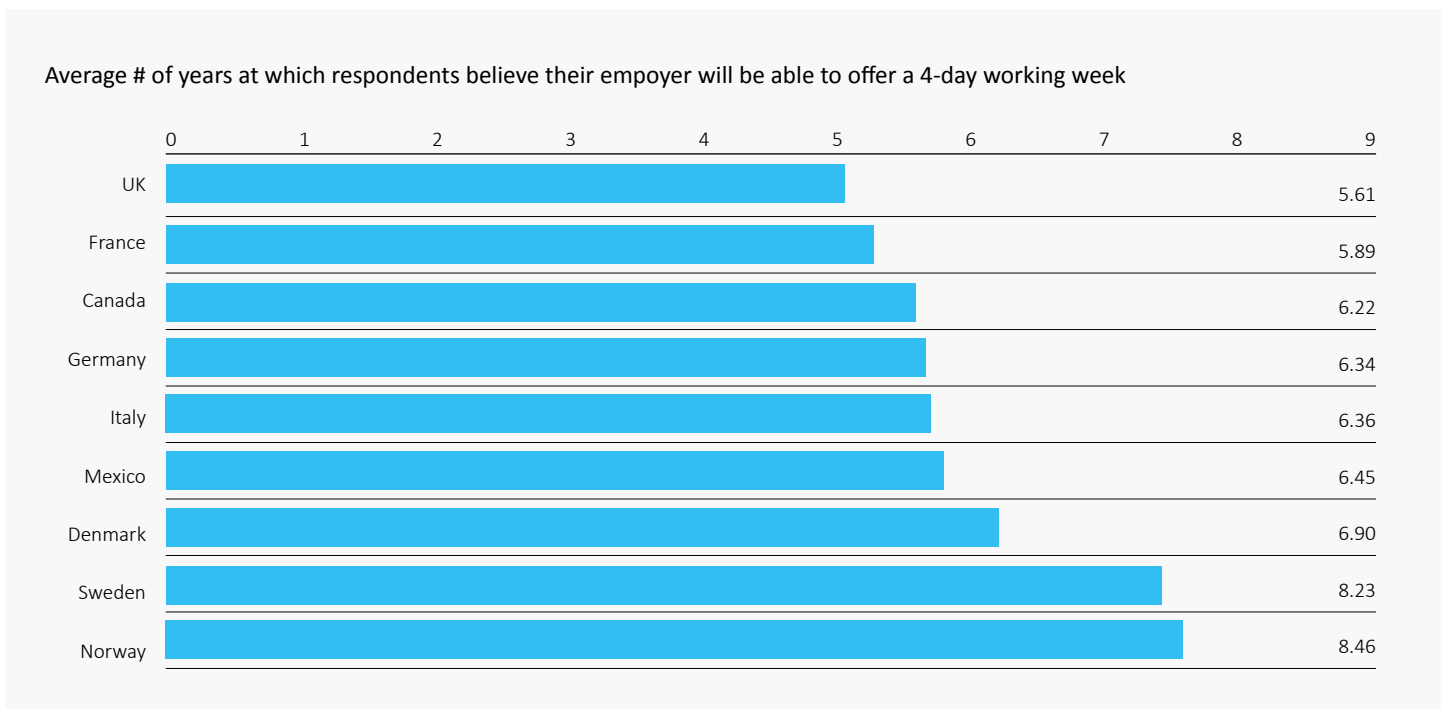
As Figure 4 below highlights, the UK holds the most optimism, believing a shorter working week will be possible in 5.61 years. It is notable that Norway, Sweden and Denmark, countries already offering some of the highest levels of flexibility within their employment contracts (see page 3), sit at the bottom of the table and see a four-day week as being the furthest off. Additionally, Swedish workers are most likely to think it is “not at all likely” that a four-day week will happen (73%), compared with the 54% who support this view overall. Arguably, the need for a four-day week is less obvious or less urgent in these countries, if workers are happy with the flexibility that they already have.

## The question of pay

Retaining the same pay is critical for a four-day working week to be feasible for most individuals, and this is where the conversation often falls short of becoming reality. Indeed, 82% of survey respondents interested in a shortened working week would only take the option if they could keep the same salary.

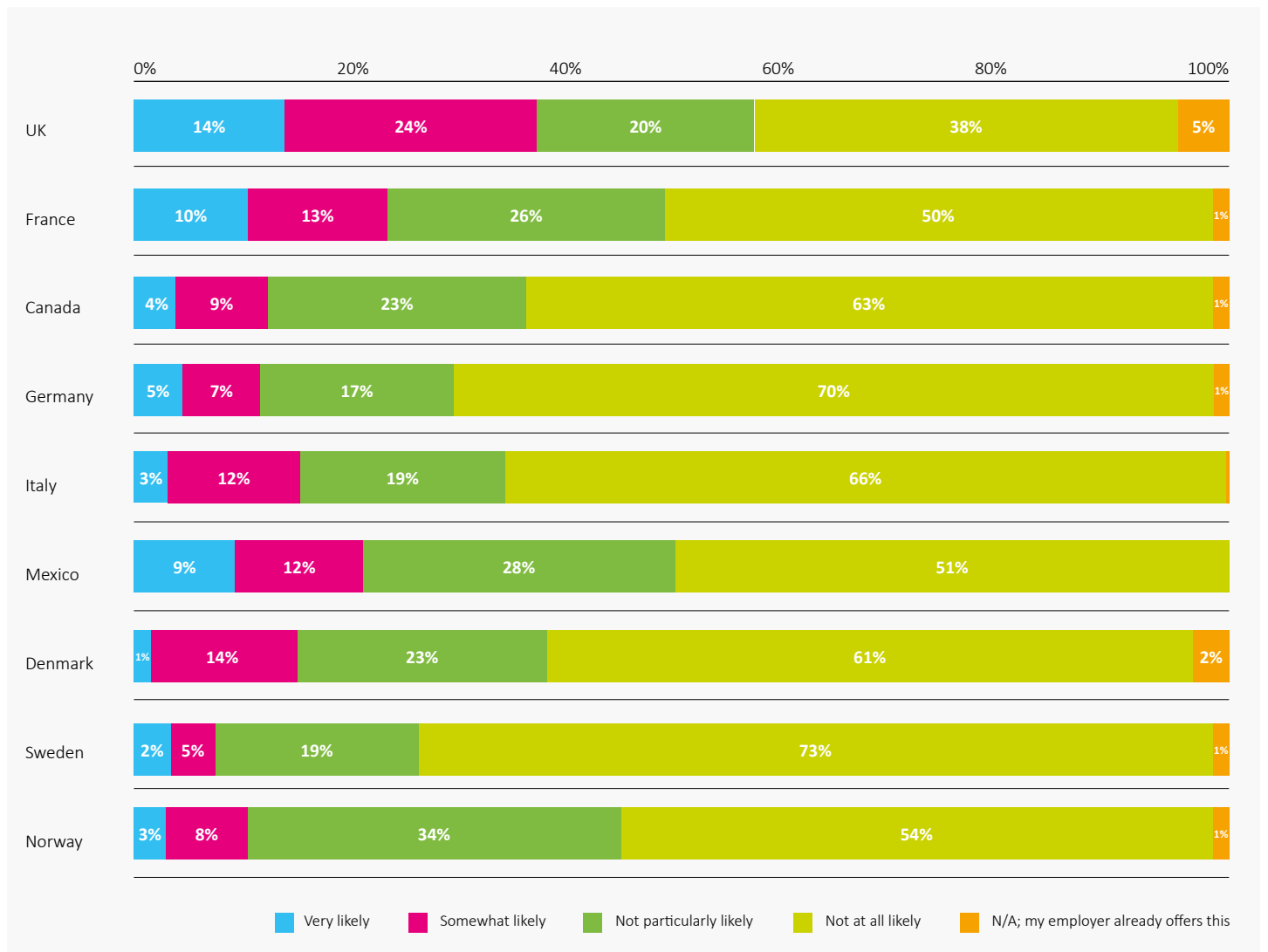
The survey finds that overall, 81% of respondents believe it is unlikely their employer would soon be able to offer a four-day week on the same salary. Only 18% think it’s likely that the option of a four-day work week would be made available to them on the salary they receive currently.

**Figure 4.** How imminent is a four-day working week?



As Figure 5 below highlights, workers in the UK are most likely to think their employer will soon offer staff a four-day work week on the same pay (38%). Additionally, workers in the UK would be most willing out of all countries to accept a four-day week on a reduced salary: a view supported by 24% of British respondents. Meanwhile, workers in Sweden (73%) and Germany (70%) hold the least optimism, believing a four-day week is “not at all likely” without remuneration being affected. Equally, only 11% of Swedish workers would be willing to accept a shortened working week on less pay.

**Figure 5:**  
How likely is it that your employer will soon offer employees a four-day work week on the same salary as a five-day week?



# The future of the working week

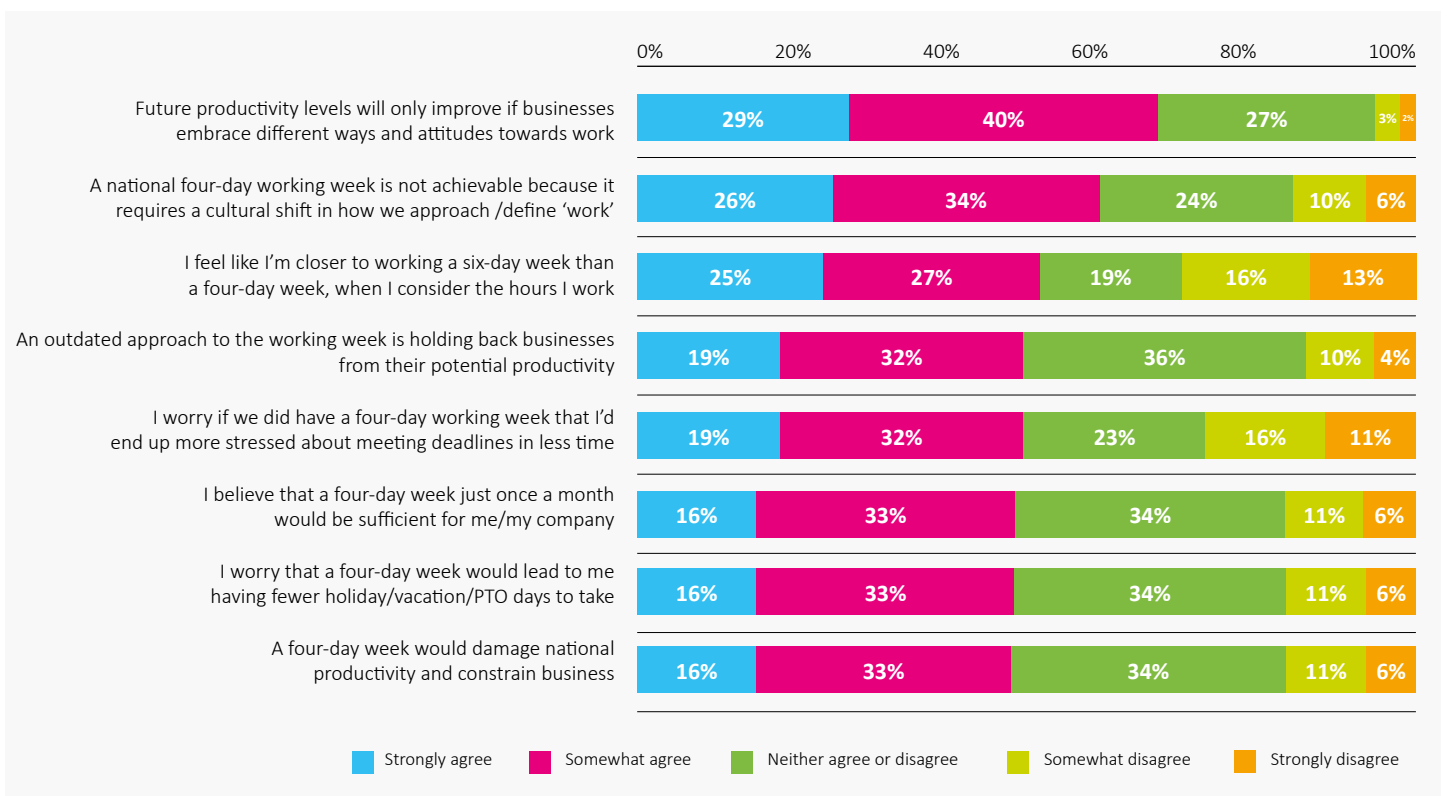
A shortened working week is a subject worth pursuing since 87% of respondents overall say they would take a four-day week if their employer offered it to them. In Mexico, 97% of workers would accept the option, if it became available.

However, the survey findings point towards a lack of urgency or belief that the concept of the working week will be reduced anytime soon, and this may be to do with the fact that 37% of respondents who were not interested in a working week, were already happy with the flexibility that they have. In Norway, this figure rises to 50%. Additionally, as Figure 6 below illustrates, 60% agree that a national four-day week is not achievable currently, because a change in mindset or cultural shift must happen first.

A degree of disillusionment is also apparent within the survey findings due to the volume of overtime being asked of individuals currently, which makes it difficult to move the conversation forward. This is reflected in the finding that 52% agree they feel closer to working a six-day week than a four-day week: a view felt greatest in Mexico, by 74%. There may be the perception that change is a long way off, but this only helps to create a stronger case for disruption.

A notable concern, for businesses and employers alike, is the impact a shorter week might have upon productivity. A third of those who would not take a four day working week (33%) feel they wouldn't be able to get their work done in four days: a view that concerns Danish workers the most (41%). Just over a third (38%) of respondents also worry that a shorter working week would damage national productivity and constrain business. However, there is much evidence to suggest that shortening the working week would lead to higher levels of productivity, and instead a rethink of efficient and effective working is needed. Indeed, 69% of respondents agree that future productivity levels will only improve if businesses embrace new ways and attitudes towards work, while 51% feel an outdated approach to working is holding back potential productivity.

**Figure 6.** To what extent do you agree or disagree with the below statements?





# Conclusion

The five-day working week was conceived in the early 20th century, and there is a wealth of research to suggest that it is no longer fit for purpose. Instead, work is consuming more of our daily lives, as this survey data attests to, and increasingly, work-related stress, illness and burnout are costing businesses and the economy. There are far more efficient ways to work and much benefit to be had from giving employees the opportunity to work more flexibly and ideally less hours. Above all, the survey findings indicate...



## It is time for a shorter-working week

Half (51%) of survey respondents feel their country is facing an “overtime epidemic”, and in some countries, such as Italy, this figure rises as high as 72%. With 86% of the office workers surveyed admitting that it is commonplace for them to work outside of their preferred or agreed hours, there is much evidence to support a shorter working week.



## A four-day working week is a viable option

Sceptics may worry about the viability of a four-day week, but a notable finding of the survey is that 41% of survey respondents agree a four-day working week would be feasible with their current workload.



## The impact on productivity would be a positive one

Many studies on the four-day working week have shown that productivity relies not just on the number of hours put in, but on the wellbeing, fatigue levels and overall health of the worker too. The survey findings show that workers believe outdated approaches to work are holding back productivity, and that productivity levels will only improve if businesses embrace more efficient ways of working.



## Remuneration should remain the same

In theory a salary drop should not be necessary with a shorter working week, as the outcomes or output should be the same or greater. However, clearly this is an issue that workers care about, with only 15% of respondents saying they would accept a shorter working week that incurred reduced pay.



## Automation technology will help to support smarter working

Currently, the average office worker wastes much time on repetitive administrative jobs, while the technology exists to allow for smarter working. In the future, automation technology could help to remove these jobs from an individual’s workload, freeing up time for more cognitive or creative work, and enabling them to complete their weekly tasks in a far reduced timeframe.



## Methodology

Citrix commissioned OnePoll to carry out an online survey of 3,750 office and home workers across the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Canada, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The online cross-country survey took place in September 2019.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact Rebecca Taylor-Cottle, Senior Communications Manager of Northern Europe at Citrix [rebecca.taylor-cottle@citrix.com](mailto:rebecca.taylor-cottle@citrix.com).



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