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Illuminating Shades: A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of a Four-Day Workweek on Subjective Well-being in Hungary

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of the four-day week in a small Hungarian company, using qualitative research before and after the change. By conducting semi-structured interviews with all employees and the CEO, the paper explores, how social, organisational and individual factors influence the ability of employees to improve their subjective well-being through reduced working hours. The results indicate that the effects of mandated schedule changes are less about increased freedom from work and more about the ability to engage in personally meaningful activities. Interviews revealed four dimensions of well-being: temporal harmony, social involvement, advancement and autonomy. While the majority reported improved well-being, particularly in terms of temporal harmony and strengthened social ties, barriers such as misaligned schedules, rigid working hours and limited external support hindered improvements in well-being. The paper also describes the different perspectives of the manager and the employees on the changes implemented. Recognising potential factors and considering different aspects of working time reduction and employee well-being can help organisations use their working time policies to maximise the well-being of their employees in terms of not only the quantity but also the quality of their leisure time. This study adds to our understanding of the impact of reduced working time on individual and societal well-being.

Keywords Four-day workweek · Working time reduction · Well-being · Work-life balance · Capability approach

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in exploring alternative working time arrangements that can potentially enhance employee well-being and work-life balance (Kamerāde et al., 2019). Most of the recent reductions in working hours have taken place at

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the organizational level, driven by management considerations (Campbell, 2023). Employers seek benefits such as increased productivity, reduced absences, lower turnover rates, and easier recruitment, while employees aspire to achieve a better work-life balance (WLB) with less stress and burnout (Müller, 2023).

This case study examines the details of a 13-person wholesale company seeking to unravel the effects of adopting a shorter workweek on its employees. The investigation focuses on the impact of a reduced work schedule, accompanied by a seemingly unchanged pay and a certain reduction in workload. It takes a comprehensive look at the actual implementation of a four-day workweek, encompassing the viewpoints of both employees and employers. Conducting interviews before the implementation of the new policy, and then again a year after its introduction, reveals not only the plans and intentions but also actual actions. This research was carried out in Hungary, within Central and Eastern Europe, a region that has been comparatively underrepresented in discussions regarding preferences for reducing working hours (Antal et al., 2023; Müller, 2023). The study delves into how this shift affects the ability of employees to make the most of their newfound free time, emphasizing the significance of engaging in personally meaningful activities. It is argued that the effects of compulsory changes in work schedules are influenced not so much by the increased freedom from work, as is the case with voluntary reduction (Balderson et al., 2022) and more by the capability to engage in actions and states that hold personal significance. The interaction between social norms, organisational culture and individual actions in the field of working time is poorly understood (Antal et al., 2023). In a work-oriented society characterised by clear inequalities in access to fulfilling employment (Frayne, 2015), a crucial consideration emerges: Will the *advantages* of decreased working hours be equally accessible to everyone? The application of the capability approach developed by Sen (1999) in the empirical analysis of working time reduction (WTR) helps to consider the impact of different factors on subjective well-being.

To gain a deeper understanding of these dynamics, the paper follows a structured approach. It begins with an exploration of the potential impact of WTR on work-life balance. Thereafter, the paper outlines the theoretical framework, the capability approach, exploring its components, addressing operationalization challenges, and examining its applicability in comparable settings. Subsequently, it explores the concept of work-life balance within the Hungarian context. Following this, the research methodology is defined. The findings are categorized into two key dimensions: workplace-level insights and individual-level perspectives. At the workplace level, the implementation of the policy is described, and the diverse viewpoints of the manager and employees are examined. The individual-level findings are structured around the four identified capabilities. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Dynamics between Different Working Time Arrangements and Work-Life Balance

Changes in the labour market, including the growth of part-time work and shifts in family models, have underlined the relevance of research on WLB (Anxo et al., 2006a, 2006b; Gregory & Milner, 2009). Different working time arrangements, from standard full-time work to flexitime and compressed workweeks, offer different benefits and challenges for WLB (Fagan et al., 2012; ILO, 2022; Wong et al., 2023). The ability to control work schedules has been identified as a key element in achieving a positive

WLB, particularly beneficial for those with caring responsibilities or personal limitations (Anttila et al., 2015; ILO, 2022; Russel & McGinnity, 2024). National policies, labour market structures and cultural norms also influence WLB. Nordic countries are praised for their family support policies that facilitate the integration of work and care responsibilities (Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016). The availability of jobs, working time arrangements and family leave policies either facilitate or limit the ability of individuals to pursue their preferred work arrangements. Gendered effects arise from household responsibilities and societal gender norms, which often result in part-time work for women. Financial constraints and personal motivations for working also shape these preferences, as do life stage and age, highlighting changing priorities through the life course (Fagan, 2001). There are potential pressures experienced in both work and family domains, such as the impact of role stressors, including conflict, ambiguity, and overload, and the beneficial effects of social support in reducing work-family conflict. In the work domain, job characteristics like task variety, autonomy, and family-friendly organizational policies also play a significant role (Michel et al., 2011).

The interdependence between WTR and WLB is influenced by a variety of factors, including societal norms, labour market structures, welfare regimes, household and individual characteristics and preferences. Research highlights the complexity of implementing WTR, with different approaches, such as voluntary part-time work or mandatory reductions, leading to different outcomes for employee well-being, productivity and gender equality (Bosch & Lehndorff, 2001; Irastorza et al., 2007; Karhula et al., 2023; Lepinteur, 2019; Pullinger, 2014). While voluntary WTR can improve WLB by allowing for more time outside paid work, it can also reinforce traditional gender roles and contribute to the gender pay gap due to the financial disadvantages associated with part-time work (Antonie et al., 2020; Matteazzi et al., 2017). Moreover, part-time workers often face stereotypes that question their commitment, which can hinder their career progression and access to opportunities. This disproportionately disadvantages women, who predominate in part-time jobs and suffer both direct and indirect financial penalties (Anxo et al., 2006a, 2006b). While mandatory WTR can improve work and leisure satisfaction and potentially increase employment (Irastorza et al., 2007; Lepinteur, 2019), its success often depends on additional strategies, for instance to facilitate equitable income distribution (Bosch & Lehndorff, 2001). Recent trials, such as the coordinated global initiative by 4 Day Week Global in 2022, have demonstrated the effectiveness of a 4-day workweek without salary reductions, showcasing significant enhancements in employee well-being (Schor et al., 2022).

The distinction between individual and collective WTR focuses on coverage and outcomes. Individual WTR offers flexibility, but may lack collective bargaining protection and may affect the economic independence and career progression of participants (De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). Collective WTR, achieved through collective bargaining, aims to reduce working hours across an organisation or sector, with broader objectives such as improving WLB and reducing unemployment. Management-led WTR is often driven by objectives to increase productivity and reduce costs, which can lead to heightened work intensity and control, pointing out the need for critical evaluation of such approaches (Cieplinski et al., 2021; Delaney & Casey, 2022). In Hungary, WTR experiments often involve trade-offs, such as increased or tighter control over working time, reduction of holidays, and increased productivity (Hidasi et al., 2023).

The Capability Approach

An Overview

This study examines WTR from the standpoint of the capability approach. The capability approach, rooted in the works of philosopher-economist Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum, has emerged as a prominent framework in sociological research for assessing human well-being and social justice. This approach provides a comprehensive viewpoint that goes beyond conventional economic measures, such as income or GDP, to assess the genuine freedoms and opportunities of individuals to live the lives they value.

A fundamental tenet of the capability approach is the disentanglement of the means of human development from the ends of development (Sen, 1999). The approach posits that the value of human life is not contingent upon the mere possession of resources but hinges upon the opportunities and possibilities that these resources offer. "*Capabilities*" represent the substantive opportunities available to individuals to choose and pursue various ways of life, in terms of aspects like health, education, and personal fulfilment. "*Functionings*" denote the realized capabilities. These distinctions hold significance due to the absence of a straightforward link between resource possession and the realization of capabilities. The extent to which individuals can convert their available means into valuable actions and states of being is contingent upon diverse "*conversion factors*" (Robeyns, 2005). In other words, ''[…] *Sen's use of the term 'capability' refers to a range of lives from which a person can choose one, and that if one has to list things which make a life good these are best understood as (valuable) functionings. The capability approach—[…] sees wellbeing in terms of an evaluation of functionings—and the quality of life is seen in terms of the freedom to choose between lives*'' (Qizilbash, 2011, 27). Central to this approach is the emphasis on *freedom* and *agency*. It asserts that the well-being of individuals should be evaluated not solely by their resources or outcomes but by the extent of freedom they possess to pursue their chosen functionings, highlighting the importance of human agency in shaping one's life. *Conversion efficiency* signifies a person's ability to convert their resources into capabilities. The genuine capacity of an individual to attain something valuable is contingent upon both their available means and the prevailing conversion factors. It is influenced by three types of conversion factors: individual/personal, social, and environmental (Kuklys, 2005; Robeyns, 2005), which are intertwined. Accordingly, these conversion factors define a set of individual capabilities which impact agency freedom and thus the real opportunity for people to achieve a balance between work and life.

This research delves into a 4-day workweek program (the additional free time is a resource in this model), analysing how various conditions (conversion factors) may impact how people experience shorter workweeks, and under what circumstances such a change in working time can broaden the set of possibilities (capabilities) and improve people's well-being (functionings).

Operationalization Challenges

As Kuklys (2005, 21) pointed out, there are four methodological problems with Sen's approach, including "*the selection of the relevant functionings, the measurement of these*

functionings at the individual level, the aggregation of these functionings into a composite measure of individual welfare, and finally, the aggregation of individual welfare to social welfare". When conducting qualitative research within the framework of the capability approach, several methodological challenges that may be more pronounced in quantitative research become less problematic. In-depth interviews define functionings based on the experiences and preferences of participants. Qualitative research delves into the interaction and influence of functionings within individual lives, allowing for a deeper understanding of complexities and trade-offs. It is also well-suited to consider contextual and social factors impacting well-being. This qualitative study primarily focuses on understanding individual well-being, leaving the broader concern of aggregating individual welfare to social welfare outside its scope.

Identifying Capabilities and Functionings

The choice of relevant capabilities is a critical aspect of this approach, as it informs what aspects of lives of individuals are being considered. The capability approach, in its essence, refrains from prescribing what should constitute a valuable action or state of being and how these entities should be ranked. Sen (1999) contends that the selection of valuable action is subject to open social deliberation and decision-making. In contrast, Nussbaum (2000) posits that adopting a predefined list of ten elements, encompassing life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, belonging, other species, play, and control over one's environment, is more appropriate. The literature on the capability approach argues that the central capabilities under analysis should be tailored according to the specific objectives of the assessment, rather than adhering to a predetermined list (Robeyns, 2005).

This research adopts the definition of well-being from the Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi report, wherein "*the well-being of a person is considered a summary index of the person's functionings*" (Stiglitz et al., 2009: 151). Accordingly, the term 'well-being dimensions' is employed to encapsulate the crucial aspects of individuals' lives that contribute to their overall sense of well-being. These dimensions represent the identified capabilities, reflecting both the potential and realized facets of capabilities and functionings of individuals. This method ensuring that the selection of relevant capabilities is rooted in the actual experiences and preferences of the study participants.

During the interviews four well-being dimensions were identified that individuals deemed significant.

1. Temporal harmony
2. Social relations
3. Advancement
4. Autonomy

These capabilities resonate with the latent functions of work by Jahoda (1981), emphasizing non-monetary aspects of work such as experiences of time structure, activity level, social contact, status, and collective purpose. These dimensions also align with a prior study on capabilities among the long-term unemployed (Velterop et al., 2020) and the core needs of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Social relations fulfil the relatedness need, advancement corresponds to competence, and autonomy addresses the need

for autonomy. The study by Balderson et al. (2022) found that voluntarily reducing formal employment allowed individuals to dedicate more time to activities that met these needs, reinforcing the importance of these functionings in well-being.

The main goal was to investigate whether implementing a four-day workweek would enable interviewees to achieve increased well-being according to their most important well-being dimensions. It is essential to acknowledge, as emphasized by Robeyns (2005), that assessing the freedom to achieve a functioning is a complex task due to the unobservability of the capability set. The challenge lies in determining whether the non-achievement of a certain functioning is a result of a deliberate choice to forgo it or simply because it was not accessible within the capability set, highlighting the difficulty in collecting information to evaluate the 'freedom' of a choice. This assessment may be somewhat more manageable in an interview situation compared to a survey because the depth of qualitative information allows for a more nuanced understanding of individual capabilities.

The Applicability of the Capability Approach in Similar Contexts

At the heart of this paper is an exploration of the relationship between WTR and individual well-being, viewed through the lens of the capability approach. Hobson and Fahlén (2009) shed light on the value of the capability approach within the context of work-family balance. They argue that this approach encourages a shift in the evaluation of policies, emphasizing agency freedom and the enrichment of quality of life over instrumental productivity. The model they present highlights the interplay of institutional context, resources and cultural factors that shape and are shaped by individuals' capabilities. It provides a strong foundation for understanding the nuances of well-being in the context of WTR.

Hobson et al. (2011) extend this model by delving into the cognitive aspect of agency and capabilities. This expanded analytical framework places agency at its core and aims to encompass an additional dimension: how conversion factors influence the subjective experiential dimension of *claims* for work-life balance – the realm of agency where entitlements connect with the *sense* of entitlement. They carried out a thorough investigation of agency and capabilities in the pursuit of work-life balance, conducting a comparative analysis between Hungary and Sweden. Their research reveals marked differences in the ability of individuals in these two countries to convert resources into agency for work-life balance. These disparities are rooted in structural features of the economy, labour markets, and job security, which significantly influence the agency individuals have to make claims for care at the workplace. The findings illustrate that individuals in Sweden exhibit stronger agency and capabilities for achieving work-life balance due to well-established rights supported by union organizations, collective bargaining, and public discourse. In contrast, Hungarian parents face encounter formidable obstacles when confronting gendered norms at the workplace and in the home. The study underscores the relevance of the capability approach in understanding agency inequalities and evaluating policies for work-life balance and suggests that the conversion factors identified in the study could also play a role in the current research.

This research employs a synthesized framework that integrates the capability set outlined by Robeyns, (2005) and the multi-level model proposed by Hobson and Fahlén (2009). Additionally, it incorporates supplementary factors identified in previous studies on work-life balance and working time preferences. This model considers individual and household factors, work organization, and societal-economic elements. This composite framework serves as the theoretical foundation for the current study (Fig. 1).
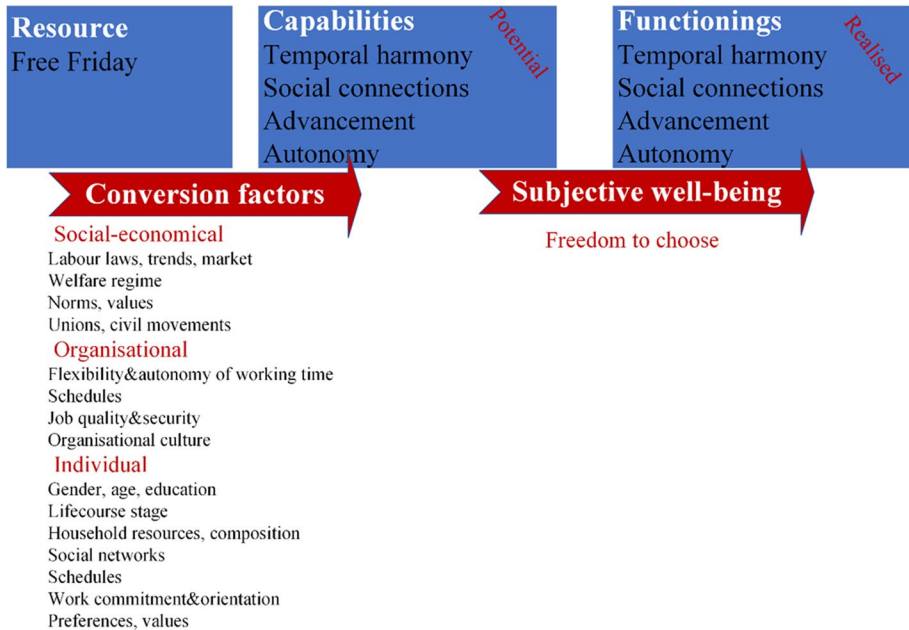
Fig.1 Capability set for Temporal Well-being. *adapted from* Robeyns (2005); Hobson and Fahlén (2009)

The Hungarian Context

The peculiarities of working time in Hungary also make the implementation of and the experience with four-day workweek in Hungary different. Hungarian employees work longer hours on average—39.3 h per week, with women working 38.7 h—compared to their EU counterparts who work 37 h per week and 34.3 h for women (Eurostat, 2023). This reflects a unique labour market dynamic, as most Hungarian women work full-time for the majority of their careers, with only 6% in part-time employment (OECD, 2022). Single mothers, who bear the primary responsibility as breadwinners, have a higher rate of employment than those living in a couple (Monostori, 2019). After childbirth, many women leave the workforce for 2–3 years (Erős et al., 2022), while paternity leave uptake is low, with only 5–6% of fathers taking it (Murinkó 2014), highlighting entrenched cultural norms.

In Hungary, in contrast to the favourable conditions in the Nordic countries, the issue of long working hours and limited control over work schedules underlines the critical need for temporal flexibility in work arrangements and highlights the country's struggle to provide such flexibility (Anttila et al., 2015; ILO, 2022; Russel & McGinnity, 2024). Contrary to the broader EU trend, where working time standards are often set through collective bargaining, this mechanism plays a less significant role in Hungary and seven other Central European countries (Eurofound, 2016).

The industrial relations are marked by a 'company-centred governance' model, characterized by low unionization and decentralized wage bargaining (Makó & Illéssy, 2020). Post-2010, Hungarian trade unions have been weakened by the focus of the government on political centralization and economic nationalism, which has sidelined

social dialogue and imposed restrictions on union activities. The transition towards a workfare-based social policy since 2014 has prioritised employment over traditional welfare models, advocating for merit-based benefits over entitlements, requiring stable labour market participation for citizens to receive redistributive benefits (Neumann & Tóth, 2018; Szikra, 2018). This shift has introduced a 'flexibility without security' dynamic in the labour market, leading to significant employment growth but also heightened social vulnerabilities, particularly for women, the youth, and older workers (Makó & Illéssy, 2020). The European Working Conditions Survey reveals that jobs of 'poor quality' are especially common in Hungary. These jobs offer minimal career prospects, low earnings, and limited opportunities for skill development, underscoring the significant disparities in job quality within Hungary and across Europe (Parent-Thirion et al., 2017).

In the above mentioned comparative study of Hungary and Sweden (Hobson et al., 2011), it becomes evident that Hungarians generally have lower expectations of achieving WLB due to these structural and normative factors. WLB is typically regarded as an *individual* matter to be resolved through pay increases. In contrast, Sweden embraces a family-friendly workplace culture characterized by well-defined policies and practices, including flexible working arrangements, remote work options, and childcare support. This stark disparity in employee expectations and *workplace cultures*, where employers and colleagues exhibit understanding and support for parents, highlights the distinct approaches to WLB in the two countries. A Hungarian study on WLB highlights the tension *women*, especially in low-income and working-class groups, face between caregiving and work (Gregor & Kováts, 2020). These women often describe their experiences as "exploitation" and "slavery," with conflicts over WLB being common.

Surveys and interviews with young Europeans indicate a shift towards prioritizing WLB and rejecting work dominating their lives (EVS, 2022; Méda & Vendramin, 2017). However, in Hungary, *work and family* often take precedence over socializing, leisure activities, volunteering, or political participation (Méda & Vendramin, 2017), partly due to the longer average working hours and the prevalence of full-time employment among women. Additionally, the location of Hungary at the cultural and political crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe may result in a delayed embrace of evolving value systems (Csepeli and Prazsák 2011) and a greater tendency toward *uncertainty avoidance* (Hofstede, 2001).

Financial security holds greater significance in Central and Eastern European nations compared to the majority of EU countries, possibly due to recent experiences characterized by low wages and job insecurity (Tóth, 2009; Kapitány and Kapitány 2012). The purchasing power of the median wage in Hungary hovers around 50% of the EU average (Eurostat., 2022). This heightened emphasis on financial stability might also be connected to *lower levels of trust* among individuals and within public support systems (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018). Alongside these factors, the combination of low wages, escalating prices, and reduced leisure opportunities resulted in substantial leisure-related stress and a deterioration in the overall quality of life for Hungarians (Haller et al., 2013).

Research Methodology

To address the central research question of how the capabilities of employees to derive meaningful outcomes from a four-day workweek are influenced by social, organizational, and individual-level conversion factors, qualitative methods were employed.

The company functions as a wholesale distributor, with a focus on a specific product category. The majority of its employees are shop assistants with stocking duties, and even those in office positions with computer-related tasks often perform manual work. Overall, the workplace is predominantly blue-collar in nature, with a significant proportion of employees holding secondary education qualifications. The study participants had an average age of 48 years (Table 1).

It is important to note that the participants of this study are mostly manual workers, many of whom are the primary breadwinners in their families and lack control over their working hours. These factors can significantly contribute to reduced WLB among this group. Consequently, implementing a reduction in working hours can be particularly impactful in enhancing their overall well-being by addressing these challenges. The company was selected through non-probability purposive *sampling*. This is because the company was known for implementing the 4-day working week, and its willingness to participate in the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all employees of the company, resulting in an exhaustive sample to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the 4-day workweek policy on employee well-being. The sample initially comprised 12 individuals and later reduced to 11 because one person left, possibly due to the revised work arrangements. Additionally, the owner was interviewed, who both conceived and executed the introduction of the four-day workweek. The study took place over two distinct *time* points: initially before the introduction of the four-day workweek in June 2021, and subsequently, one year after its implementation in July 2022. Conducting interviews at two separate points in time allowed for mitigating potential biases that might arise from participants' initial reactions or perceptions of the 4-day workweek policy. By allowing time for the policy to be implemented and employees to adapt to its changes, more detailed and reliable feedback on its impact on their well-being were obtained. The *semi-structured interviews* were conducted face-to-face, in Hungarian, at

Table 1 Some characteristics of the participants

The serial number used for quotations	Gender	Age at first interview	Education	Work
1	female	46	secondary	blue&white-collar
2	female	54	secondary	blue-collar
3	male	47	tertiary	blue-collar
4	female	50	secondary	blue-collar
5	female	52	secondary	blue&white-collar
6	male	35	secondary	blue-collar
7	female	34	secondary	blue-collar
8	female	53	secondary	blue&white-collar
9	male	54	tertiary	blue-collar
10	female	48	secondary	blue-collar
11	female	59	secondary	blue-collar
12.*	female	41	secondary	blue-collar
13	male	n.a	tertiary	manager

*Participant left the company by the time of the second interview therefore was only interviewed during the pre-implementation phase

the workplace of the participants, adhering strictly to ethical and data protection regulations. All quotes from Hungarian interviews were translated into English using DeepL Translator. The translations were then reviewed by myself and a native English speaker to ensure accuracy and fluency. The interviews encompassed a wide array of *topics*, including family backgrounds of the participants, work histories, time management practices, and their attitudes toward both work-related and non-work-related activities. More details regarding the standard interview questions can be found in Appendix 1. The *duration* of the first interviews typically ranged from 60 to 90 min. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

In line with methodological considerations for qualitative research and the limited number of interviewees, manual coding techniques were employed instead of resorting to dedicated computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Manual coding is particularly beneficial in qualitative research with small sample sizes due to its ability to facilitate a detailed and rigorous analysis of the data. It allows researchers to delve deeply into the data, ensuring a thorough exploration of themes and patterns that might otherwise be overlooked (Majumdar, 2022). The analyses followed the stages of *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were coded for all relevant topics discussed. Quotations were considered relevant if they related to subjective well-being (capabilities) and elements that either facilitate or impede the realisation of the identified capabilities (conversion factors). In conjunction with the thematic coding, demographic information of participants was included to contextualise experiences and perceptions and to enrich our understanding of how individual differences shape the impact of workweek adjustments. The themes that emerge from the initial coding are carefully organised under thematic 'umbrellas' that represent broader narratives that encompass the essence of the experiences of the modified workweek. This organisation facilitates a layered analysis in which individual quotes are continually referenced to ensure that interpretation remains grounded in the data. This qualitative capability-based analysis not only captured the subjective experiences of the participants but also encompassed the broader sociocultural context and norms shaping these experiences. By employing this method, the aim was to examine how conversion factors shape the capabilities of the individuals and, consequently, influence their well-being within a specific context. What *distinguishes* this analysis from many other studies is its dual-phase approach, encompassing both pre- and post-implementation phases of the four-day workweek. This unique structure allows not only to explore changes in the perspectives of employees but also to make a comprehensive assessment of the actual impact of the four-day week on their ability to engage in valued activities and conditions. Moreover, this study incorporated the employer's perspective, providing valuable insights into the attitudes of both employees and management towards the forthcoming changes.

Findings

Findings on the Workplace Level

The Four-Day Workweek Policy

A 4-day workweek does not always mean less total work; some companies may compress the workload into fewer days, while others may reduce the workload proportionately. A recent review of WTR policies highlights the well-being benefits of fewer workdays

without longer daily hours, as opposed to compressed workweeks. This approach maintains advantages like reduced work-family conflict and increased job satisfaction while avoiding the drawbacks of extended daily working hours (Hanbury et al., 2023). The studied policy occupies an intermediate position, somewhere between a compressed workweek and conventional working-time reduction. Before the introduction of the new policies, the standard work schedule was a Monday through Friday structure, with working hours spanning from 7:40 AM to 4:00 PM, inclusive of a brief 20-min lunch break. Employees' time in the kitchen was electronically monitored, and strict limits were imposed on the allocated break period before and after the new schedule. Following the implementation of the new policies, several modifications were introduced. The workday was extended by 30 min on the four workdays; however, for most employees, the workload has decreased almost proportionally since the shop maintained its 4 pm closing time, according to the previous schedule. However, there were a few employees whose workload was unaffected by the closing time as their responsibilities related to online orders, resulting in more intense work during the four-day workweek.

There were significant changes to leave policies. Before the policy implementation, workers aged 50 or above had approximately 30 days of annual leave in accordance with Hungarian labour legislation. Younger colleagues had fewer days, with a minimum of 20 days. However, post-implementation, all employees got 12 days of leave, with any additional time off affecting the bonus. In the pre-policy era, employees became eligible for a 10% annual salary bonus contingent upon error-free performance. With the new policies, 1% bonus reduction was imposed for each day off taken above the 12 days, potentially affecting bonus earnings. In terms of sick leave, the initial policy allowed for 15 days per year with 70% pay. However, post-policy alteration, sick leave exceeding 15 days could only be taken with a bonus deduction of 1% per day. In this arrangement, all employees work only four days, with each day being eight and a half hours long instead of the typical eight-hour workday. This adjustment ensures that employees maintain their full salary while reducing usual *weekly* hours to 85%. However, the estimation of total annual working time becomes more complex when annual leave adjustments are taken into account. Although weekly working hours have been reduced, when adjusted leave days are taken into account (no change in bonuses), the overall impact on total annual working hours is reduced to 88%-92% of the pre-policy level.

Perspectives on Working Time Reduction: Manager vs. Employees

The focus of this study is a small family-owned business that changed hands from father to son 23 years ago. Interviews were conducted not only with the staff members but also with the current owner both before and after the implementation of the policy changes.

Extra Free Day vs Impaired Autonomy in Leisure Time Spending and Scheduling

The introduction of a four-day workweek, coupled with reduced working hours, was initiated by the owner as a means of motivating employees beyond traditional monetary compensation and promoting a work culture that valued time away from the workplace.

"*And I noticed that after a while, the increase in wages was not always necessarily an incentive. So it was fine for a while, and then the employees would get back on track, so I was trying to figure out, really, what is it that they want, what is it that* I *want? And what*

do I want? To be with my family more, to relax more, to go on more trips, to be in nature. And I would like to give that to the employees, that was the main motivation. I believe that maximising profit cannot be maintained forever, it cannot be all about work, and more time off for employees will not adversely affect the operation of our company" (owner, CEO).

While it is commendable for a businessman to sacrifice a portion of his profits to enhance well-being, it is essential to recognise that his perspective is primarily based on his circumstances. He mentions that he introspectively conceived the idea of a four-day workweek. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the owner occupies a higher social status, which grants him greater flexibility to prioritize leisure over profit. He has the privilege of making choices that favour more free time. In contrast, many of his employees, who may serve as the primary breadwinners for their families, do not enjoy the same luxury. Furthermore, the statements of the owner reveal a potential disconnect regarding the financial challenges faced by his staff. He expresses a desire for his workers to avoid the temptation of "*cheap airfare for weekend trips to London*". However, he overlooks the fact that for most employees, the primary constraint is not the availability of time but rather the scarcity of financial resources for such a trip. Several employees may not have the financial means to afford such luxuries and often face constraints that limit the number of days they can spend away from home each year. The owner's oversight regarding financial constraints faced by staff echoes the importance of recognizing that the impact of leisure on well-being extends beyond quantity, aligning with studies on structural disadvantages in the qualitative aspects of leisure time experienced by specific social groups (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012; Sullivan, 1997).

The manager highlights the significance of the meaningfulness of the time spent outside of work. The workplace atmosphere, expectations, and norms within the company could significantly influence how employees feel about their additional free day. According to the manager, there exists an unspoken understanding among employees regarding the preferred ways to make the most of this extra time. He states, *"The most important benefit is more free time. I always say that – more rest, more meaningful rest. You can attend training, courses, or, for me, spending time in nature is crucial. For those who prefer other activities, Fridays can be used for family-oriented pursuits. However, it is stressed that this doesn't mean taking kids to the mall. I can't play the role of a teacher, but they are aware of my views on this matter, and that's likely how it will be"* (owner, CEO).

There is a notable difference between the views of management and staff on the reduction of leave and sick leave entitlements. Nevertheless, the employees did not voice any legal complaints in this matter. However, the employer setting the leave at 12 days for everyone is not aligned with legislative intent, which seeks to increase the number of days off by years in service and number of dependents. Hungary, like many other EU nations, legally requires employers to provide their employees with a minimum of 20 days of annual paid leave (Eurofound, 2021, 19) which "may not be replaced by an allowance in lieu" (Directive, 2003/88/EC 2003, 11).

The manager's standpoint is that the switch to a four-day workweek with free Fridays means staff members still receive the same amount of time off, as they receive 52 free Fridays per year. This change benefits the manager by preserving a predictable and continuous workforce presence, leading to the seamless functioning of operations. However, the change could be perceived differently by employees, as they could be faced with a difficult decision between using their entitled leave or accepting a reduced bonus. For people with caring responsibilities, this is a dilemma with no good outcome. Moreover, staff members cannot opt to return to their previous work timetables, intensifying their sense of reduced influence over their working hours and leisure time.

Decrease Energy Consumption vs Lower Overhead Costs of the Workplace

The owner's intention to decrease energy consumption during reduced work hours is presented as part of his commitment to environmental conservation. Nevertheless, employees perceive this as a cost-cutting strategy, even though they acknowledge the environmentally conscious reputation of the owner. There are mentions that lower overhead costs can be among the primary purposes of the reduction, a concern that the owner has not explicitly addressed. Employees consistently pointed out that Friday sales used to be significantly lower than on other weekdays. They unanimously agreed that Fridays typically witnessed reduced activity due to fewer customers. One participant candidly expressed their feelings, stating, "*We complained a lot about Fridays, to be honest. On Fridays, very few customers come in, it's very boring. We've tried to stretch everything out so that the eight hours go by"* (7). This resulted in a more relaxed atmosphere on Fridays, although employees could not use their idle time for personal activities like browsing the internet or using their phones due to the manager's monitoring, both in the office and via remote surveillance cameras.

Six Hours Decrease in Working Time without Pay Loss vs Rigid Working Time

Single parents encountered difficulties in aligning the schedule of the school with their work hours. Neither the manager nor the parent initially thought about the possibility of addressing this issue with a simple 15–20-min adjustment to the schedule. This minor modification, if implemented, could have allowed parents to align the workplace schedule with the public schedule of the school. Unfortunately, this practical solution was not considered, and instead, one had to accept a reduction in working hours with a corresponding decrease in pay, adding to the difficulties she faced as the sole breadwinner for her family. The other left the company, although employees noted that the extra 30 minutes on workdays was seldom necessary to complete their tasks, and her absence would likely not have been noticeable. These examples of *inflexibility* highlight the challenges faced by workers in reconciling their working hours with their personal commitments. In this typical Hungarian work environment, achieving WLB is seen as an individual challenge (Hobson et al., 2011) and workers typically do not expect to receive significant support from their employer, not even a small degree of flexibility. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the employees appreciate the adherence of the owner to legal employment practices, which represents a significant improvement from their previous experiences. Another unique disadvantage of working longer hours on weekdays was experienced by the artist, who expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that it was already dark outside when he finished work in the winter months. This underlines the different ways in which the change in working hours affected individuals.

Findings on the Individual Level

During the interviews, the objective was to investigate the well-being dimensions individuals deemed most significant in their lives and the capabilities linked to these dimensions, with a particular focus on the implemented working time schedule as a critical resource. Analysing the circumstances under which individuals were able to realize their identified

capabilities provided valuable information on the contextual (conversion) factors influencing the achievement of capabilities. In this section research findings are organized by each capability identified.

Temporal Harmony

Temporal well-being, encompassing factors such as time perspectives and satisfaction with how one spends time, is intrinsically connected to the *subjective well-being* of an individual (Burke et al., 2009; Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). With extended working hours on the four working days and a universal day off on Fridays, participants experienced changes in their daily routines, so it is especially important for them. Structuring time and managing daily activities emerged as a prominent theme in the interviews.

Time Structuring

There is a strong connection between structured activity and well-being in line with the latent function of time structuring explored in the seminal work of Jahoda (1982). Participants emphasized the importance of purposeful engagement, whether it involved work-related tasks or leisure activities. A prevailing sentiment among interviewees was the observation that they felt more efficient and had a heightened sense of time passing quickly when their days were structured without idle intervals. As one participant noted, "*When there aren't as many customers, it's more tiring. It can be more exhausting when there's less to do. It's easier to be productive when you're in the flow and have things to do*" (10). As the day off was scheduled for Friday, the extension of the weekends had a positive impact on the well-being of employees, aligning with previous research that links uninterrupted leisure time to improved overall well-being (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Sullivan, 1997).

Asynchronous Schedule

The timing of leisure activities, whether within a single day or spread across a week, and their synchronization with the social environment, hold considerable significance (Adam, 1994; Reisch, 2001; van Klaveren and van den Brink 2007). Many individuals aspire to synchronize their leisure time with established norms and the schedules of those around them, recognizing that desynchronization can also hold significant value (Urry, 1994). The *asynchronous schedule* of the new structure provided many participants with valuable leisure time, as their day off did not align with the weekends of the majority. It proved beneficial for activities that employees typically had scheduled during their time off from work, such as doctor appointments and other services. There were, nevertheless, situations where these services were inaccessible on Fridays, raising questions about the potential consequences of a societal four-day workweek. In certain cases where children were at school and a partner was at home on Friday, the opportunity for time alone without the child was considered attractive.

"*And then we can really spend more time alone because obviously, we get free time from the grandparents, but it's different, because then we know that the child is in daycare or school*" (7).

Schedule Synchronization

The synchronization of schedules within close social networks also played a crucial role in the perceptions of this new schedule. For those whose partners or family members had schedules aligning with their new day off, it was viewed as advantageous. Nevertheless, harmonious dynamics within relationships were equally important, highlighting the significance of both schedule coordination and positive feedback from partners. *The lack of synchronization* between working hours and other public schedules posed challenges for some participants, especially those with caregiving responsibilities or children with school schedules.

"*The rest of the colleagues are fine (with the new schedule), it was only us with small children who have to really think about how we can manage this. So it's very good for those people who have a backup or have bigger kids. But for me, it's a burden, a problem to be solved*" (12).

This incongruity between work and family roles, particularly among women creates conflicting responsibilities (van Klaveren and van den Brink 2007; Gregor & Kováts, 2020), hindering their ability to convert the new work schedule into capability. For this demographic, harmonizing individual and public temporal frameworks appears challenging (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012). In the case of one participant, the only option was to leave her job, highlighting the lack of support not only at the individual level but also at the workplace (Hobson et al., 2011) and social policy (Monostori 2019) levels. The experiences of individuals who were single parents or had caregiving responsibilities highlighted that even minor changes in the working schedule can make synchronising the temporal structures of the two domains impossible (Morehead, 2001).

Rest vs Productivity During Leisure Time

For some individuals, the transition to a shorter workweek resonated with their personal need for rest, particularly if they had been experiencing exhaustion by the time Friday arrived. A few interviewees would already take a few hours off on Fridays due to this fatigue, or they were actively considering adopting a reduced working hours schedule themselves. This group welcomed the prospect of improved well-being through more ample rest, which aligns with research showing blue-collar workers tend to rest more during leisure time (Burton & Turrell, 2000).

"*I was happy for it. I was very tired on Friday. I'm one of those people who usually took two hours off on Fridays... I shortened the day* (2)."

At the same time, many interviewees expressed a strong inclination to utilize their free Fridays productively, seeking to avoid idle moments at home. The concept of motivation to engage in work during leisure time should be understood as a broader structural element of prevailing work-related norms and it is influenced by external factors that go beyond personal preferences. Such factors include societal norms that prioritise *work-centred values* (Williams, 1983), the *blurring of boundaries between work and leisure* (Voswinkel and Kocyba, 2007), and how *productivity* permeates leisure activities (Shir-Wise, 2019).

Many participants articulated their desire not to squander their additional free time. One participant succinctly stated "*If I have some free time, I like to spend it on useful things*" (11). Notably, the same participant who had previously expressed feelings

of fatigue and a need for rest also voiced a similar aspiration in the second interview, saying "*I wanted to make plans for myself for these Fridays so that I didn't spend my morning doing nothing at home. No, no! I must have a plan so that I spend those free hours doing useful things that I haven't had time to do*" (2). This quote illuminates the interplay between the inclination toward productivity during leisure time, often driven by societal norms (Shir-Wise, 2019), and their concurrent subjective experiences of needing rest.

Over time, a notable transformation unfolded within the interviewed group, revealing a shift in perspective in terms of their functionings. As time progressed, a growing number of participants came to recognize how they could harness their recently acquired leisure time to enhance their overall well-being. This aligns with the findings of Roberts (2008) that a better WLB is not solely about adopting specific work schedules, such as a four-day week. Instead, it is deeply connected to a *mindset* that is committed to carving out 'me-time'. However, those with caring responsibilities can afford less me-time. Insights from a study of a shorter workweek experiment in Belgium, focusing on an all-female workforce, suggest that employees had planned to spend their increased leisure time with more me-time than they actually experienced (Mullens et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in global attitudes towards work. The rise of remote work has brought about newfound autonomy and flexibility, challenging traditional workplace norms. This has led to a desire for meaningful work that aligns with personal aspirations (Causa et al., 2022) and a healthier WLB. Although participants were never able to work remotely, the shift in global preferences may also influence their perspective, affecting at least their feelings towards leisure time.

Social Connections

Leisure time holds a pivotal role in determining the overall quality of life. It is influenced not only by its quantity but also by the context in which it occurs and the *company* one keeps during leisure activities (Stiglitz et al., 2009). In this section, the dimension of social relations is explored, which also emerged as a central theme during the analysis of the interviews. It pertains to the capacity of individuals to cultivate and partake in meaningful social interactions, often limited to the domains of work and family in Hungary, as evidenced in the study of Méda and Vendramin (2017). The exploration of social relations grounded in its recognition as one of the latent functions of work (Jahoda, 1982) and as a basic need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additionally, it is supported by the capabilities framework of Martha Nussbaum, where the concept of affiliation is recognized as a core capability.

Extended Time with Family

Many of the respondents discovered that the additional free day provided a unique opportunity to extend and deepen their social connections, especially with family members. One respondent, when reflecting on the value of this newfound time, shared a heartfelt perspective: "*My first thought was, wow, it's nice to be able to go swimming together with my husband on Fridays (because he usually works at the weekends)… It's a moment to treasure. At this age…I'm 59, and he's 67…and we've been together for*

many years… It's interesting that with the passing of my mother, it has become increasingly apparent that we should make the most of our time together" (11).

Another respondent, a grandmother, willingly chose not to pursue additional paid work on her free Fridays. Instead, she opted to care for her newborn grandchild, who was born after the reduction in working hours. Previously, her free time had been predominantly devoted to fulfilling family responsibilities, which held significant importance for her. However, productivity norms discouraged her from dedicating excessive and unpaid time to caring for her adult children. With the arrival of her newborn grandchild, she saw an opportunity to engage in an activity that aligned more closely with her own well-being, priorities and social obligations. This shift allowed her to exercise her capability to nurture familial bonds and engage in meaningful activities that enhanced her overall quality of life.

Socialising Outside the Family Domain

For only one respondent, a man living independently, the primary focus was on cherishing his friendships rather than family bonds. His established routine of travelling to Lake Balaton with *friends* on weekends remained unchanged, but it gained an extra layer of enjoyment when they could now leave the city on Fridays. He also observed that individuals who owned a house by the lake often had the privilege of working-time autonomy, allowing them to have Fridays off. His newfound freedom on Fridays contributed to an elevated social status for him. In these cases, the well-being of individuals was tied to the theme of social connections, which emerged as a recurring pattern among most interviewees. Having an additional day off allowed individuals to strengthen their social links, but only if they could synchronise their free time. Aligned schedules played a crucial role in enhancing well-being through social connections, highlighting the significance of *temporal alignment* as a conversion factor at the individual level. Increased and consistent interaction with family members, partners or friends has shown the potential to enhance subjective well-being (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011). This extended capability enabled them to engage in valued functionings, reinforcing their well-being through social connections.

While these cases illuminate the positive impact of the extra free day on social connections and well-being, it is crucial to underscore that it does not always enhance well-being to increase time spent with otherwise important others. For one person, for example, the only option to spend time with people outside work and family was attending a sports club at a specific time. But this opportunity was lost because of extended working hours on the four workdays. Furthermore, she was unable to engage in personal well-being activities during the three-day weekend due to her circumstances. As Stiglitz et al. (2009) emphasize, the quality of leisure time is influenced also by *context and companionship.* This participant highlighted the challenge of finding mental escape within the confines of her domestic responsibilities, underscoring the importance of external environments for true relaxation.

"*We don't have a weekend house or a holiday home at Lake Balaton. So I'm at home, cleaning, shopping, cooking (...) But for a real, mental escape, you need to get away from home* (4)."

Additionally, this individual served as the primary *breadwinner and caregiver* in her family, since her husband had health issues. This situation could potentially lead to a

reduction in her salary because her bonus would be affected if she used up her available (reduced) leave. However, it is noteworthy that after half a year, she did not exceed her leave limit, thus preserving her bonus at its full amount. During the second interview, she had a slightly more positive attitude to the four-day workweek, but it did not significantly improve her well-being, as the extra time spent with her family was more of a challenge than a benefit. Although she could have benefitted from *social policies supporting* vacation opportunities or assistance with caregiving responsibilities, she perceived these challenges as individual issues. Also, *workplace flexibility*, such as the ability to leave work early once a week to attend her socialising activity, could have been a pivotal conversion factor. However, she regarded these challenges as personal, never asking for help or even considering that she could request support. This reluctance to seek help highlights the interplay between individual circumstances, the workplace environment and social factors, echoing findings from the study by Hobson et al. (2011), in which it becomes evident that Hungarian employees face distinct hurdles. These contrasting experiences underscore that not only individual circumstances and temporal alignment influence social connections, but social supporting systems and workplace factors also can play a role.

Advancement

Advancement, inclusive of the acquisition of new skills and knowledge through activities such as pursuing courses outside of one's primary job or engaging in endeavours like learning music or participating in sports, could be a meaningful aspect of lives. It might also involve the more intensive utilization of existing skills, either through career progression within the workplace or through voluntary contributions outside of work as in the case of a study conducted among voluntary working time reducers in Britain (Balderson et al., 2022). In Hungary, it is not typical to have a *life beyond work and family* (Méda & Vendramin, 2017), and *the level of political or social involvement is lower* than in Western Europe (Gerő 2012). Moreover, the sample, comprised primarily *older* individuals *in blue-collar* occupations, where career progression is even less likely. Motivation decreases with age and there are fewer prospects for advancement in manual labour. Sports and artistic activities were prevalent in the sample as hobbies but remained unaffected by the reduction in working hours. Simultaneously, the workplace did not align effectively with the diverse skill sets that respondents had acquired in the past. There was a need to establish opportunities outside the workplace for those who considered this aspect significant. However, a more detailed discussion of this matter is presented in the following section since it is intertwined with autonomy.

Autonomy

In the interviews, autonomy only took place outside the studied workplace. There were two distinct cases where participants harnessed autonomy outside their primary jobs, each with its unique approach. An interviewee, driven by the pursuit of advancement and self-improvement, considered financial security paramount. In a country where *financial stability* holds greater importance (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Tóth, 2009; Kapitány and Kapitány 2012), than in many other European nations, she sought a delicate balance between autonomy and security. This participant, influenced by the experiences of her parents who ventured into entrepreneurship and faced bankruptcy, valued the *safety of her primary job*.

However, she also aspired to become an autonomous entrepreneur (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003), allowing her to explore new opportunities without compromising her financial well-being.

> "*My parents worked as entrepreneurs for a couple of years... and they went bank-rupt. So the reason I'm like that is…for me safety comes first. If I work eight hours a week as an entrepreneur, I can probably earn twice as much as I do here. If everything is optimal and if I can work eight hours a day. If there are guests. If I don't have to close the shop and there are all those ifs (1)."*

After a year of transitioning to a four-day workweek, she successfully established a business venture. Importantly, the added hours dedicated to this secondary endeavour did not diminish her well-being. Instead, the autonomy she gained through this venture, coupled with the stability provided by her four-day job, and utilizing her recently acquired knowledge, significantly contributed to her overall sense of well-being. This demonstrates that a reduction in working hours alone does not necessarily increase well-being. Rather, the existence of opportunities for meaningful activities promotes well-being.

In contrast, another participant found autonomy in his artistic pursuits, which he deliberately separated from his paid work. He believed that the autonomy of his artistic endeavours could be compromised if he relied on them for a living.

> "*So I had to come here to work because I took the advice of André Kertész to separate art from paid work, because the two cannot go together. What I realised during my previous artistic business that the two must be separated*" (9).

As a result, he chose to maintain his primary job while safeguarding his artistic autonomy. Despite contemplating the option of engaging in paid work related to his art on his days off, he refrained from doing so. Instead, he dedicated his Fridays to personal 'me-time', ensuring that his entire weekend remained focused on his artistic pursuits.

> "*So I spend time on seemingly unproductive things, but it's better for me in that way, less constrained. I usually prefer to engage in artistic activities on the weekends because it allows for a more relaxed approach, which suits me better.*" (9).

This case demonstrates that autonomy can be found in the deliberate separation of one's passion from the necessity of earning a living. After a year of experimenting with the new working schedule, he discovered a personalized approach that suited his needs and preferences, allowing him to integrate 'me-time' into his capabilities and functionings.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Responding to recent calls for more longitudinal research focusing specifically on the four-day week and suggestions to use methods other than surveys (Antal et al., 2023; Campbell, 2023), a study was conducted to examine the long-term impact of a policy shift to a 4-day workweek on employee well-being. Through two rounds of interviews conducted one year apart, a comprehensive account of the varied experiences of WTR was obtained.

Theoretical conversion factors **Confirmed conversion factors**

Social-economical

- Legal frameworks • Norms, values
- Economic factors • Gender roles
- Welfare regime • Unions
- Labour trends • Civil movements

Traditional gender roles
The primacy of work and family
Financial security Woman working full-time
Risk avoidance No claim for WLB/support

Organisational

- Policies • Flexibility&autonomy of WT
- Organisational culture • Job quality
- Presence of unions • Job security
- Performance metrics • Co-worker dynamics

Less&longer workdays Less leave days
Small&homogeneous community
  Manual labor tasks
No flexibility&autonomy

Individual

- Age, gender, education • Household composition&resources
- Life stage • Social network
- Health&well-being • Work commitment&orientation
- • Personal preferences, values

Women Middle aged Secondary education
One-parent/earner household Lower income
  Blue collar worker
Family is the most important Work is a job

Fig.2 Theoretical and Confirmed Conversion Factors in Working Time Reduction

Four distinct well-being dimensions and a range of conversion factors that influence the capabilities of participants and choices regarding their temporal well-being were identified.

  Individual circumstances and structural constraints influence the effectiveness of a four-day workweek. A simple reduction in working hours does not always translate to enhanced well-being. The capability to engage in meaningful leisure time pursuits and the potential drawbacks of the specific policy are also important. Therefore, well-informed implementation strategies are necessary, prioritising open communication with employees and considering the subjective nature of their well-being. This ensures that the initiative benefits the greatest number of individuals. The key factors to consider are summarized in Fig. 2.

Theoretical Contribution

Applying the capability approach provides a robust framework for analysing WTR, as it accounts for both individual and contextual conversion factors. It offers a comprehensive lens to examine how individuals perceive and utilize their additional free time in the context of a reduced workweek policy, taking into consideration the subjectivity of well-being. A synthesized framework that integrates the capability set outlined by Robeyns (2005) and the multi-level model proposed by (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009) is employed. It builds on previous studies that have used the capability approach to examine WLB more broadly (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Hobson et al., 2011), but applies the approach to the specific context of a four-day workweek. Adopting this perspective offers a more refined insight into the impact of WTR, going beyond simply alleviating the immediate burdens of work-life conflict. Instead, it analyses the range of freedoms and options available to individuals to improve their quality of life, thereby adding a richer dimension to the discourse on the potential benefits of a four-day workweek.

  The findings suggest that a four-day workweek mostly have a positive impact on employee well-being, but this impact is depending on individual, workplace, and social factors, as well as the specific policy in place. The modified work structure, encompassing a mandatory day off, extended working hours, and altered holiday and bonus policies, does

not automatically translate into capabilities for everyone. Although the four-day workweek policy may appear to be universally beneficial to all employees, a closer look reveals that it introduces a latent element of reduction by forcing employees to choose between their vacation time and a reduction in pay. The autonomy of employees with regard to days off has been reduced. Despite the absence of explicit productivity goals, this echoes critiques of similar management-driven initiatives aimed at boosting productivity. The lack of synchronization between working hours and other public schedules also posed challenges for some participants. These workers had no choice, the only alternative was to leave the company if dissatisfied.

Four key dimensions of well-being were identified: temporal harmony, social interactions, advancement, and autonomy. These diverse goals reflect a wide array of personal aspirations and preferences. The exploration identifies influential conversion factors operating at different levels, which either facilitate or hinder the conversion of working-time reduction into valuable functionings (Fig. 2). The findings corroborate the observations of previous research concerning Hungary, indicating that the primacy of work and family overshadowed the tendency to socialise, while aspects such as volunteering or political involvement did not emerge (Méda & Vendramin, 2017; Gerő 2012). Aligned with previous findings, traditional gender norms persist, where women disproportionately shoulder caring responsibilities, and the use of external support remains minimal (Gregor & Kováts, 2020). Reconciling work and family life is generally seen as an individual problem (Hobson et al., 2011). Given the modest wages (Eurostat., 2022) concerns related to material well-being consistently overshadow considerations of WLB (Tóth, 2009; Kapitány and Kapitány 2012).

The individual-level factors are not isolated but interact dynamically with workplace and societal influences, collectively moulding the capabilities of the participants. Individual agency, shaped by gender, age, and education, also serves as a conversion factor, directly influencing diverse aspects of life. This impact extends to life stage, health, household composition, social networks and alignment with different, public and private schedules. Life stages, such as parenthood or caregiving, significantly influence capabilities. Different needs arise in various life stages: taking care of a young child, later a grandchild, or an elderly parent, or partner. Caring significantly shapes the use of time outside of work and may require adaptation to the schedules of other organisations and persons. Household dynamics and resources, including income levels, distinctly affect capabilities in utilizing WTR for enhanced well-being. If the partner is also earning or is the primary breadwinner, the potential decrease in income may be less concerning, and more expensive leisure activities can be included in the capabilities. This is in contrast to those who are the sole breadwinners and have dependents in the household. Other characteristics of the partners, including schedules and attitudes, actively shape potential well-being activities. Also, the existence and composition of social networks significantly influence capabilities. Not only because time can be spent with them outside of the family, but also because seeking help is easier from a larger circle of family or friends when it is challenging to reconcile non-work obligations with the new work schedule. The crucial alignment of personal, institutional, and workplace schedules is fundamental for effectively converting WTR into a positive impact on well-being.

This study provides insights that previous research has overlooked, according to recent reviews of the existing literature on WTR (Antal et al., 2023; Campbell, 2023; Delaney & Casey, 2022; Karhula et al., 2023; Müller, 2023). It focuses on a country in Central and Eastern Europe, a region that has been relatively neglected in previous discussions (Antal et al., 2023; Müller, 2023). The impact of the investigated policy is influenced by specific

socio-economic factors, such as the prioritisation of work and family, the significance of financial security and limited agency for making claims. Additionally, the study specifically examines the four-day workweek, rather than other flexible working arrangements (Campbell, 2023).

The implementation of the four-day workweek was not dependent on the research outcome and the analysis reflected the perspectives of both employees and employers, ensuring the objectivity and validity of the findings (Delaney & Casey, 2022). Considering both sides facilitated to outline and evaluate all the components of the policy. In the examined case, the extension of the workday by half an hour caused challenges in reconciling work and personal life in certain instances. This was further complicated by the rigidity of the working hours, the lack of willingness from the management to provide flexibility, coupled with the individual inability to seek support beyond the family level. The reduction impacted not only the freedom in terms of time off but also indirectly affected income. The study uses a longitudinal approach, conducting pre- and post-implementation interviews to gain a deeper understanding of changes in expectations and actions over time (Campbell, 2023).

Moreover, this research extends the theoretical foundation by integrating supplementary factors identified in prior studies on WTRs, working time preferences and work-life balance thereby enriching the current discourse (Antal et al., 2023; Campbell, 2023). While existing literature acknowledges multi-directional approaches to employee well-being (Rajashekar & Jain, 2023) and the fundamental issues of mismatches between preferred and actual working hours (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2009; Nogues & Tremblay, 2023; Wooden et al., 2009) the specific application of the capability approach framework to the four-day workweek has been notably absent.

Practical Implications

These findings suggest that WTR policies need to be carefully considered and tailored to specific circumstances to ensure their effectiveness in promoting well-being. The importance of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to the design of future policies is highlighted in this study. There can be points where the interests of employer and employee do not align. In case of reduction of working hours initiated by the manager open discussions about the potential and actual benefits and challenges of a four-day workweek are recommended. An intermediary, such as a trade union or a coach, can be useful in validating and coordinating different interests. The experiences of participants highlight that a four-day workweek can have different impacts on individuals depending on their circumstances, priorities, and preferences. Recognising the diversity of employees' needs and preferences can help employers to adapt to specific circumstances, even if this requires compromises, in order to maximise the overall benefits for both employers and employees. Employees possess the capacity to make informed decisions about their leisure activities and personal development, which contribute to their overall well-being. For some individuals it takes more time to develop new habits and routines that support their well-being. Employers can play a supportive role by facilitating access to resources and opportunities that empower employees to enhance their well-being. There was a significant discrepancy between the employer and employees regarding the impact of the revised leave policy in terms of pay and autonomy. The success of a reduction in working time will depend on whether everyone benefits equally

from its advantages and possible disadvantages. It is therefore not recommended to link it in any way to a reduction in pay.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

A temporal limitation of this study relates to the timing of the interviews. The initial interviews were conducted shortly after the lift of various restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the turnover of the company, potentially influencing the decision of the manager to introduce the four-day workweek. However, the subsequent interviews were conducted in a different economic context, preceding a period of significant inflation in Hungary (Eurostat, 2023). The changing economic circumstances may have influenced the perspectives of participants on the trade-off between time and money. This temporal variation should be considered when interpreting the findings and their relevance to different timeframes.

The findings are based on a relatively small sample size, which may limit their generalisability to other organisations or countries. However, the insights gained from these interviews provide valuable perspectives on the potential impact of a four-day work week on employee well-being. Further research exploring similar cases in different workplaces, samples or countries using the capability approach would contribute to a more extensive understanding of the factors influencing well-being under this working arrangement.

Conclusion

This study examines the impact of a four-day working week on employee well-being in the context of a Hungarian company. Drawing on the capability approach, pre- and post-implementation interviews were conducted with participants to explore their experiences and identify influencing factors. The findings highlight the different dimensions of well-being and underline the importance of recognising contextual factors at different levels when implementing a four-day working week. It emphasises the need to consider specific circumstances and adopt a flexible approach to design and implementation. While acknowledging challenges and areas for improvement, the study also highlights the promising benefits of this policy for employee well-being. By responsibly tailoring the policy to local context, and ensuring that it does not unfairly disadvantage any group, organisations can harness the positive effects of a four-day week to improve the overall wellbeing of employees and ensure that the policy is in the interests of both parties.

Appendix

Interview Guide for the Research on the Impact of a Four-Day Workweek on Subjective Well-being	
Topic	**Standard Interview Questions**
1. Introduction	Can you introduce yourself?
	Age, occupation, education, hobbies, interests, leisure activities.
2. Brief introduction to the family	Can you introduce your family?
	a. Children: age, do they attend an institution (kindergarten, nursery, school)? Do they live with you?
	b. Partner: age, job, hobbies, interests. How many hours a week does he/she work?
	c. Is there anyone else living in your household?
3. Working time reduction	I'd like to hear your views on the upcoming change in the working time schedule.
	a. When and how did you find out that the manager wanted to make Friday a day off?
	b. What was your first thought? And the second?
	c. What do you know about how the other employees reacted to this plan?
	d. What did your family say?
	e. What did your friends say?
	f. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this reduction in working hours?
	g. What do you know about why the manager is doing this?
	h. What do you think about his aims?
	i. Could the reduction have an impact on the environment?
	j. How do you think it will affect the company's business processes?
4. Part-time work	
	a. Do you know anyone who doesn't work 40 hours a week?
	b. What do you know about them?
	c. Has it caused them any difficulties at work?
	d. How do they feel about it? What are the advantages and disadvantages for them?
	e. Who works part-time in Hungary today? Why do they do it?
5. Current non-work time	
	a. What do you usually do after work?
	b. Is Friday different from other days of the week?
	c. What do you usually do at the weekend?
	d. What do you usually do outside of work? How often? With whom?
	e. Is there a colleague with whom you often talk about things other than work? And meet up with outside of work?
	f. What makes you feel rushed? Do you try to do something about it? How?
	g. What do you need to feel well?
	h. Have you ever thought about changing your lifestyle? What made you do it, what did you want to change and what did you change?

6. Non-work time after the implementation of WTR		
	a.	What will change after the implementation of the new policy?
	b.	Will you actually work less?
	c.	What will you have more time for? And less?
	d.	How will this day off change your weekend?
7. Work Attitude& Working conditions		
	a.	What has been your best and worst work experience so far?
	b.	What do you like most about your current job?
	c.	And what do you like least about it?
	d.	What makes you feel good at work?
	e.	Are there moments of inactivity?
	f.	Are there times when you are overwhelmed?
	g.	Is there a set pace and amount of work you are expected to do? Is this monitored?
	h.	Will this change with the shorter working week?
	i.	What will your job and work be like in 5 years? And before retirement?
	j.	How did you imagine work when you were a child? How has this changed over the years?
	k.	How do you remember your parents' attitude towards paid work?
8. Lottery		
	a.	What would you do if you won the lottery and could live modestly with your family for the rest of your life?
	b.	What would you do if you won the lottery enough to live very well with your family for the rest of your life?
9. Good life		
	a.	When you think about the good life, who is a positive example for you?
	b.	Do you have a negative example?

Declarations

Conflict of Interest I declare no conflict of interest.

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