

Increasing Employee Well-Being and Productivity Through Decreasing Work Hours

Date: March 29, 2020

To: Alice and John Seashore

Business Owners at Your Local Workout Place

At Potomac and Bethesda

From: Emily Bell, Director at My Local Workout Place, Largo

Subject: Increasing Employee Well-Being and Productivity by Shortening Work Hours

Enclosed is the report you requested based on my earlier memo concerning issues I have observed surrounding the detrimental effects of long work hours on our employees.

The report includes secondary research on the ways that working long hours can negatively impact employee's physical health, mental well-being, and productivity. It will also include research showing the potential benefits of a six-hour workday and recommendations for implementing a new employee schedule that will include shorter workdays and include appropriate breaks for longer shifts.

I hope that by decreasing daily work hours we would be able to decrease the amount of sick days employees take and avoid employee burnout. I also believe that lower work hours will lead to increased employee job satisfaction and overall productivity.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my proposal and please let me know if I can clarify any information or answer any questions. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on my recommendations and hope to be able to implement the suggested schedule changes as soon as possible.

Executive Summary

Purpose and method of this report

As the director at two children's' fitness centers, I have observed over the past year that employees have been working long hours, typically over 8 hours a shift, which seems to be resulting in health issues for employees and a loss of productivity for the company. Employees are regularly given lists of daily and weekly tasks and have consistently been able to complete them efficiently and effectively. The purposes of this report are to:

- determine the negative impacts of working long hours
- recommend ways to increase employee well-being and productivity by improving employee scheduling

Secondary research was used to study the negative impacts of long working hours. The ways that work hours can negatively affect employee physical and mental health were focused on. Research was also conducted on the potential benefits implementing a shorter, six-hour workday, can have on employees and overall productivity.

Findings and conclusions

The results of the research showed that working long hours can severely impact physical and mental health. Employees who work long hours were more likely to suffer from heat conditions and various mood disorders such as depression and anxiety. Long work hours also led to higher levels of employee burnout which can lead to lower productivity and a higher likelihood of employees leaving the company.

The results show that a shorter workday can help employees physically, mentally and enable them to be more successful and productive.

Recommendations

Recommendations for improving employee health and productivity are:

- Implementing new employee schedules that will consist of six-hour shifts
- Ensuring that if an employee must work over six hours, their shift will not exceed eight hours, and they will take at least one 45-minute break during the shift
- Planning follow up meeting for six months after new scheduling protocols are enacted to discuss results and whether employee health and productivity has improved.

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Introduction

Background

The eight-hour workday has long been thought of as the standard for a full-time employee in the workplace. However, over the years research has shown that typically employees work closer to nine hours a day on average, and some up to twelve (Ward, 2017). As the director at both of our business locations, I execute the weekly employee schedule and per your instructions, regularly schedule employees for over eight-hour shifts. Research has shown that these long work hours can negatively impact an employee's physical health on many levels, can be detrimental to their mental health and well-being, and that a switch to a shorter workday can have many benefits for the employee and perhaps for the business. As a small business, we have a duty to ensure the well-being of our staff while maintaining a high level of productivity.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to identify the negative impacts long work hours can have on employees and to determine if a shorter workday would correct these issues. The analysis of the research helped to determine recommendations that would help each employee and the business.

Overview of methodology

Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic, primary research was not conducted. Therefore, to establish the problems and form recommendations I did the following:

- Conducted secondary research on the physical and mental health impacts of long work hours
- Conducted secondary research on the benefits of a six-hour work day
- Analyzed the research to create recommendations to benefit the employees and business

Findings and Discussions

Impacts of long work hours on physical health

There have been many studies done on the physical health risks associated with working long hours. There is proof that working too many hours can lead to various levels of heart disease. According to an article by Virtanen, et al, “our systematic review concluded that long working hours is associated with depressive state, anxiety, sleep condition, and CHD [chronic heart disease]” (Virtanen, et al., 2014). Another article added that extended work hours can cause stress and sleep deprivation which are additional causes of chronic heart disease (Nagai, Hoshida, & Kario, 2010). There has been some dissent concerning whether working directly contributes to the onset of heart issues, but these researchers have found proven links that connect the two and that while long work hours may not be the singular cause, they contribute to the larger problem.

Employees who work long hours can also experience other physical issues. In a study written up in *The Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, “results of the meta-analysis show a small but significant positive trend of increased health symptoms with increasing hours of work” (Sparks, Cooper, Fried, & Shirom, 1997). These health symptoms include contracting more viruses throughout the year and experiencing more workplace injuries. Employees working longer hours are also more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and eliminating exercise (Wong, et al., 2019). These unhealthy habits can contribute to a multitude of additional health issues such as cancer and obesity. It is also possible that working long hours could be correlated with a higher risk of developing diabetes mellitus, but there is some conflicting data and research on this topic. Ultimately employees who work long hours are at a higher risk of having work-related health problems (Wong, et al., 2019).

The research concerning health issues related to long work hours concerns me because I have observed an increase in the number of sick days employees have been taking over the past year. In the past two months there have been three instances where I have had to come into work because more than one employee has been ill and unable to work. This is a serious issue because as a small business, we have a very limited number of employees and we need to ensure that they are healthy enough to work scheduled shifts.

Impacts of long work hours on mental health

Working long hours can also negatively affect an employee’s mental wellbeing. Working overtime can deprive workers of valued time with friends and family which directly impacts mental health (Sato, Kuroda, & Owan, 2020). Sato, Kuroda, & Owan found that workers who worked long hours were more likely to experience depressive disorders and those who were asked to work extra weekend hours were more likely to have mental health deterioration and higher stress levels (2020). In addition, these workers are much more likely to experience high levels of anxiety which can also affect sleep conditions and cognitive functioning (Tamakoshi, 2014). I have witnessed symptoms of stress and anxiety during extended work shifts and have had to personally send an employee home who was experiencing symptoms of a panic attack. It is my experience that if an employee is on a long shift, as they get tired, their stress levels increase because they are unable to think as clearly as they were at the start of the shift.

Extended hours can also lead to burnout in the workplace which can cause lower productivity and unhappiness. The World Health Organization characterizes workplace burnout as “feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; reduced professional efficacy” (WHO Classifies Workplace Burnout, 2019). In a study on burnout in neurosurgery residents, results showed “that total work hours and on-call frequency in the hospital are significant drivers for resident burnout throughout the world” (Jean, Ironside, Felbaum, & Syed, 2020). Employee burnout can then cause additional feelings of depression and anxiety. Additionally, employee burnout can cause employees to become dissatisfied at their job and lead to higher turnover rates. We have had employees leave the company because they can no longer handle the perceived work stress or because they no longer think that the job is fun. Higher employee turnover exacerbates the issues because other employees must then work additional hours to cover extra shifts.

Benefits of a shorter workday

While there is not a universal consensus on the perfect number of work hours per day, research has shown that long work hours are detrimental to employees and that a shorter workday can be beneficial for productivity and employee well-being. An article in *Forbes Magazine* explained that long workdays, and even eight-hour workdays, are ineffective because human brains want to work in shorter increments and require quick rests to recharge (Bradberry, 2016). The article goes on to explain that longer working hours do not show increased productivity because employees are more likely to get distracted and off task when forced to work for such long periods of time (Bradberry, 2016). Shorter workdays with more frequent breaks could keep employees on task and ultimately yield higher productivity.

Some researchers have argued that shorter six-hour workdays are optimal for productivity and employee health. Steve Glaveski wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* about his experience using a six-hour day for his employees:

I conducted a two-week, six-hour workday experiment with my team at Collective Campus, an innovation accelerator based in Melbourne, Australia. The shorter workday forced the team to prioritize effectively, limit interruptions, and operate at a much more deliberate level for the first few hours of the day. The team maintained, and in some cases increased, its quantity and quality of work, with people reporting an improved mental state, and that they had more time for rest, family, friends, and other endeavors (2018).

Similar experiments were done with six-hour workdays in an elder care facility in Sweden and results showed that the nurses were happier, more energetic, healthier, and more productive when working the shorter hours (Heath, 2017). Ultimately, there is opportunity for more studies on what the perfect number of hours per work day would be, but existing research has shown that eight hours and above can be detrimental to employees, and that six hour work days can lead to increased productivity and employee wellbeing.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed on work hours shows that number of hours worked per day can have many impacts on employees. Long work hours can cause health issues including heart disease, can lead to mental health issues including depressive and anxiety disorders, and can cause employee burnout which can further affect mental health and employee productivity. More recent research has shown that a shift to a shorter workday can help alleviate these issues. Shorter, six-hour workdays can lead to increased employee happiness, overall well-being, and productivity.

This research and my observations over the past year show that employees are suffering due to long work hours. The amount of employee sickness, stress levels and turnover could decrease if a new schedule is implemented that includes shorter work hours.

Recommendations

It is my recommendation that once the business is running normally again, we decrease the number of hours employees work per day to six hours whenever possible. Employees typically work six days per week so if they regularly work six hours each shift, they will maintain full time status and qualify for applicable benefits. For this to be possible we will need to hire at least two additional employees to ensure that all shifts are covered. Additionally, if an employee must work a shift over six hours, it should not exceed eight hours and I would like to implement a policy that they are required to be given a break of no less than forty-five minutes mid shift.

To track the usefulness of shorter work hours for our business, I recommend that we plan a review in six months. During this review we will compare the amount of sick days employees have taken with the previous six months and will hold one on one interviews with all current employees.

During these interviews we will inquire about their overall job satisfaction and review their job performance to determine if individual productivity and success has improved.

These recommendations are based on research and general observations and may need to be modified based on employee reaction and impact of the new scheduling system on the business.

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