



Compressed workweeks

What are compressed workweeks?

Compressed workweeks involve working hours being scheduled over fewer than normal working days and result in longer working days, but fewer days being worked each week. A compressed workweek system, then, usually extends the working day to beyond eight hours, but reduces the number of consecutive days worked to less than five; for example, in a schedule of four days of ten hours or three days of 12 hours.

In addition, in some cases compressed workweeks can consist of a higher than usual number of consecutive working days. Due to seasonal fluctuations in demand, for example, compressed workweeks might be introduced which result in workweeks of more than five consecutive days, followed by a number of days off.

Compressed workweeks are often found in jobs which involve long distances between the worker's home and workplace, for example in the oil industry, merchant shipping and the airline sector.

Legal limits on compressed workweeks

Workweeks can be compressed only to the extent to which daily working time does not exceed the legal limit. Some countries do not impose any limits on daily hours: the federal law of the United States, for example, does not contain any cap on maximum daily hours. Many other countries, however, follow the International Labour Organization's Hours of Work (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1930 (No. 30), which prohibits daily working time from exceeding ten hours. The table below gives an overview of maximum limits on daily working hours in selected countries.

Statutory limitations on maximum daily working hours

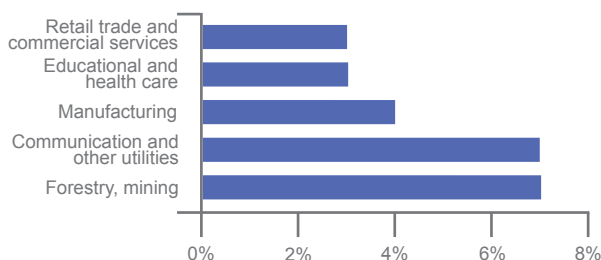
| | | | |
|---------|----|----------------|----|
| Austria | 10 | Germany | 10 |
| Brazil | 10 | Luxembourg | 10 |
| Chad | 11 | Morocco | 9 |
| China | 9 | Portugal | 10 |
| France | 10 | South Africa | 11 |
| Japan | 10 | United Kingdom | 13 |

Sources: Conditions of Work and Employment Database (2004).

Laws which limit average daily and weekly working hours over a reference period also have to be respected (see Information Sheets on annualized hours and overtime). Moreover, in many countries, legislation provides that the introduction of a compressed workweek system requires a collective agreement.

How widespread are compressed workweeks?

Few studies have examined the evidence of the extent of compressed workweeks. In Canada, however, it has been estimated that around 3 per cent of employees "compressed" their weekly working time in 2001. Compressed workweeks were more widespread in larger firms and were concentrated in the forestry, mining and communication sectors.



Source: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2001.

Advantages and disadvantages

For employers, compressed workweeks can be advantageous because they allow for the extension of operating hours and, therefore, they also lead to a reduction in the expenses associated with starting operations (start-up costs). The primary advantage of compressed workweeks for employees is that they work fewer days and thus have extended periods of free time. Working compressed workweeks also reduces employees' transport expenses and commuting time, since fewer days are worked.

On the other hand, workers engaged in compressed workweeks may suffer from fatigue and stress due to their longer working days and can face difficulties in fulfilling their family responsibilities during the workweek. Compressed workweeks may also lead to decreases in productivity and a higher risk of accidents. In addition, extended operating hours generally imposes additional costs on employers to cover expenses such as security, heating and lighting. In addition, if organizational operations are longer than the workweek, scheduling problems might arise.

To ensure the satisfactory implementation of compressed workweeks, employers should make sure that workers have agreed to the conditions of their implementation, for example the number of days to be worked and the distribution of hours of work over the week.

Case example

Due to the distance between their workplaces and homes, Italian oil rig workers on sea platforms or in desert regions in Africa and Asia usually alternate substantial working periods with long off-duty periods at home. Their periods of continuous work extend from a minimum of seven to a maximum of 35 days. These are followed by the same amount of off-duty days at home. Depending on the workplace (on the mainland, at sea or in a desert region) and the distance from home, their work periods are arranged as follows:

Work in Italy

| Mainland | Sea platforms |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Day work; night work only on call | Day work; night work only on call |
| 10 hours per day (7-12 am and 2-7 pm) | 12 hours per day (7-12 am and 1-8 pm) |
| 10 days' work / 8 days' rest | |

Shift work

"3x8" system (4-12 am/12-8 pm /8pm-4am) 6 days' work (2 afternoons, 2 mornings, 2 nights)/2 days' rest
 "2x12" system (12pm-12am/12am-12pm); 7 or 14 workdays/ 7 or 14 rest days

Work abroad (Africa and Middle East)

Only shift work in a "2x12" system (8am-8pm/8pm-8am or 12pm-12am/12am-12pm)
 Periods of 21, 28 or 35 workdays alternating with corresponding periods of 21, 28 or 35 days' rest

Source: Wedderburn (ed.): "Compressed working time", in *Bulletin of European Studies on Time*, Number 10, 1996 (Dublin, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions), pp. 37-38.

Among a group of these workers who moved from an eight-hour to a 12-hour shift, most were found to be highly satisfied with the new schedules, reporting better sleep, less tiredness and more time for recovery.

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