

Why three-day weekends are great for well-being—and the economy

May 5 2023, by Tony Syme and Maria Paola Rana



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The coronation of King Charles III has upped the UK's public holiday count this year. The special public holiday on the Monday after the May 6 ceremony, combined with the early May bank holiday and the spring bank holiday at the end, has certainly made for a month of celebrations for many workers.

Normally public holidays in the UK—and in England and Wales in particular—are much more rare occasions. The coronation celebration brings the total to nine in 2023, which is still fewer than any EU country. Given that hours worked in the UK over the whole year are [11% higher than in Germany](#), for example, it is not clear that working more and having fewer holidays is a sign of economic success.

Currently, [nine of the top ten most productive OECD countries](#), measured by GDP per hour worked in dollars, are in continental Europe. Yet this is a region with a [tradition of long holidays](#). There is also evidence that national holidays have a [small but positive impact on economic activity](#), or at least no ill-effect.

Having several three-day weekends in one month also brings into focus [the recent four-day working week pilots](#) (without loss of pay) in many countries. [Iceland led one of the earliest large trials between 2015 and 2019](#), with its success seeing it rolled out to close to 90% of Iceland's workforce. These people can now request a shorter workweek without any loss in pay.

Findings from [a New Zealand trial](#) among employees of Unilever also showed strong results against standard business targets such as revenue growth. The vast majority of participants reported feeling engaged and absenteeism dropped by 34% during the trial.

A similar six-month pilot program took place in the UK from June to December 2022, involving 61 companies and around 2,900 workers. As with the other trials, organizers said it was a "[resounding success](#)" for the companies involved—56 of these 61 businesses pledged to continue with the four-day week.

Paying 100% of the standard wages for 80% of the previous worktime may seem uneconomic, but the UK trial found that the "vast majority of

companies were also satisfied that business performance and productivity were maintained". Staff retention also improved with the number of people leaving the participating companies dropping by 57% during the trial.

Well-being and health benefits

But the most significant benefits to employees from these four-day week trials have been in terms of well-being. The UK trial reported that 39% of employees were less stressed and 71% said they had reduced levels of burnout by the end. The average mental health score (on a five-point scale from poor to excellent) rose from 2.95 at the beginning of the trial to 3.32 by the end—an increase of 13%. And in terms of anxiety, 54% of respondents reported a reduction in negative emotions.

A similar well-being boost was seen in [Ireland's four-day work week trial](#) completed in 2022. Among the 12 Irish companies involved, employees saw a reduction in anxiety and [negative feelings](#) and an increase in positive feelings (and expressions of those feelings) throughout the trial.

The [previously-mentioned New Zealand trial](#) also confirmed the strong positive effects of a four-day week on well-being. Over two-thirds of participants reported a better work–life balance, and measured stress levels dropped by 33% during the trial period.

Four-day work week versus public holidays

But the benefits from four-day week trials are permanent since they accrue from a long-term change in working arrangements, at least during the trial. So, the effects of this year's spate of May bank holidays in the UK could be different.

This was certainly shown to be the case by a study that looked at [the well-being benefits of national holidays across 200 countries](#). It found that one less public [holiday](#) reduces the probability of being happy by 0.8 percentage points, but that one less public holiday had no impact on the longer-term measure of life satisfaction.

But [other research shows](#) that, although the positive well-being impact of public holidays may not be permanent, it does lead to an increase in social cohesion or social capital. This brings its own economic and well-being benefits. For all but a minority of the workforce, public holidays ensure that people are using it for leisure time. And [social cohesion](#) has long been associated with positive well-being.

We need to focus on workplace well-being more than ever. In addition to multiple high profile workplace bullying and harassment scandals recently, calls to [employee assistance hotlines](#) are at record highs due to anxiety and depression among employees. These initiatives were designed to meet demand for a range of work-related queries and advice, not to act as an emergency mental health service.

And so, the coronation public holiday may give UK workers the much-needed celebration they need. Whatever your view of the Royal family, May's public holidays will benefit the economy, but more importantly, they will deliver a well-being boost for much of the country.

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