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Are Employers Resistant to Change the Traditional Work Environment? A Pilot Study of Employer Perceptions on Remote Work and Shortened Work Weeks

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to re-visit changes and trends in the workplace environment, including how to recruit and retain new employees. In particular, how are employers adjusting to prospective employees looking for remote and hybrid working conditions along with the option of more flexible schedules, including the possibility of a shortened work week? This study focused on two specific trends: remote work and shortened work week. A survey was sent to business leaders and hiring managers in the local community. A similar survey was conducted to upper-class students looking for internships and full-time employment opportunities. The results show that while employers may recognize the possible benefits of a flexible work environment, there are also disadvantages to this type of flexibility. Many of the study respondents reported they are open to implementing a hybrid work environment, but they are unlikely to implement fully remote work or shortened work weeks.

Keywords: Remote Work, Hybrid Work, Shortened Work Week, Covid, Employee Recruitment, Retention

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Are Employers Resistant to Change the Traditional Work Environment? A Pilot Study of Employer Perceptions on Remote Work and Shortened Work Weeks

Phillip Kim, Rachel Harker and Jennifer Breese

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide calamity that uprooted the way business' function. The traditional business model had to be adjusted in the face of lockdowns and uncertainty. During this time, there were many shifts in the standards of workplaces, and some of these changes altered the way that employees expected their working lives to be (Surma et al., 2021). In particular, it changed the way employees worked and what their expectations were. It also changed the way managers recruited, directed, and retained their workforce (Agba et al., 2020; O'Rourke, 2021). While the effects of the pandemic continue to persist, much of the research continues to lean toward employee data. This study focuses more on how employers and hiring managers are responding to the changing landscape of employee expectations.

The traditional business model was turned on its head as employers tried to create a "new normal" working environment for their existing employees, global partners, suppliers, regulatory agencies, and their customers. The "Great Lockdown" caused by the pandemic pushed many employers to provide completely new approaches to handling the average workday. These new approaches and tools have remained in place for many businesses even after the pandemic has concluded (Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). In 2021, the "Great Resignation" suggested to many employers that the traditional business model was no longer desirable to the majority of employees (Richter, 2022). This subtle but significant shift in power places the onus on employers to adjust to the increasing needs of the employees but also forces management to look at their existing practices to ensure a more efficient and productive workforce.

This research looks at two major trends that were spurred by the pandemic, and how these trends have altered both the expectations of employees entering the workforce and those of the employers potentially hiring these employees. The first major change that is examined is the trend towards remote and hybrid working conditions that were started by government shutdowns. Remote working conditions are specified as being when an employee works solely from home. Hybrid working conditions are when an employee works an equal balance from home and in-person at the office. The second topic considered is creating a more flexible work schedule. One component of this is creating a shortened workweek or 4-day work week. This study collected responses from both employers looking to fire the next generation of employees and upper-class students preparing for full-time employment and internship opportunities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the prominent changes during the height of the pandemic was a resurgence of remote work or a hybrid mix between working in-person and virtually from any location. When the global pandemic spread across organizations, many companies had to come up with contingency plans to rapidly adapt to the government curfews and closures, supply chain disruptions, employee absenteeism, and high sickness rates (Hou et al., 2021). A viable option that arose during this time for many companies was to send their employees home and have them work remotely (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). This solution seemed suitable for more traditional office jobs, but it did not encompass all working situations. For example, over 40% of jobs involving finance and business industries increased their remote/hybrid working occurrences because of the pandemic. In comparison, those working in transportation, mining, and food services were unable to switch to remote working scenarios at all (Dalton & Groen, 2022). This transition to remote/hybrid working has remained a permanent aspect of many companies that switched over to it during the pandemic. Before the outbreak, 23% of those surveyed revealed that they were able to work remotely. In 2022, over 60% of USA workers who believed that their jobs were able to be done remotely were found to be working from home at least some of the time (Parker, Horowitz, & Minkin, 2022).

Advantages for Employers and Employees

The adapted working environment that employees and employers were forced into had many advantages for both parties. One of the largest advantages of teleworking during the outbreak was increased safety for employees and managers alike. COVID was a very turbulent time that was filled with uncertainty and huge health concerns. This distanced working environment helped to reduce the number of people who got exposed to COVID and it also helped to bolster the wellbeing of employees during this challenging time.

Remote working not only prevented people from getting sick, but it also opened the door to greater diversity for those who were not able to work in a traditional working environment. Those with disabilities or illnesses or even those with young children were now offered a different kind of working environment that could fit their unique situations.

Another great benefit that working from home created was increased flexibility for employees. With this style of work, employees are able to have more flexibility and control over their own hours, their own breaks, etc. This can help employees who have other responsibilities and schedules (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Some studies suggest that remote working can help employees to be even more productive than the traditional working model (George et al., 2022; Ozimek, 2020). Remote workers are found to spend "10 minutes less a day being unproductive, work one more day a week, and are 47% more productive" (Bradshaw, 2024, para. 4). This increased productivity should lead to a more effective organization. The remote work style appears to be able to attract a more diverse workforce. Young mothers are still able to care for their families while building a career (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Remote work flexibility has also increased improvements in mental health, physical health, and more satisfaction with work (Chung et al., 2020).

Another ancillary benefit of telecommuting is the cost savings. For employees, there is no commuting or travel expense. For employers, there are fewer facilities and utilities to maintain as well as reduced custodial and physical security services (Silverman, 2024). It is apparent that businesses have seen the benefits that remote/hybrid working conditions are providing for their employees. Bloom (2021) found that of the companies surveyed, 70% were planning on implementing a form of hybrid/remote working conditions for their employees in the near future. Beck and Henscher (2022) conducted a study following the lockdowns in Australia. They compiled information from three waves of data: the beginning, middle, and end of the COVID-19 lockdowns. They collected data on employers that had to introduce new working conditions because of absenteeism and sickness. The survey revealed that despite the challenges of the situation, the majority of the study population wanted to keep remote working conditions in place. This was also supported by the Australian government in the form of introducing compliance and regulatory guidance for companies to favor remote/hybrid working conditions (O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

Beyond the cost savings of fewer employees onsite, employers are able to delegate tasks and manage across multiple departments and geographic limitations (Beck & Hensher, 2022). Other benefits that employers are citing from employees working from home include "increased autonomy, reduced informal communication, improved productivity, and increased job satisfaction" (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020, p.1).

Disadvantages for Employers and Employees

There are also disadvantages following the increase in remote/hybrid working conditions. One of the largest disadvantages is that employees report feeling socially isolated from their coworkers and from their managers. This can lead to increased stress and anxiety for employees (Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). There is also a lack of consistent communication and feedback. The lack of face-to-face conversations can lead to increased confusion, less immediate feedback, and even negative emotions from employees. This feeling of dissatisfaction may not relate to the job, but to the modality of the work being done. Employees may lose enthusiasm for their jobs due to the lack of connection with other employees (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011). A recent survey (Chung et al, 2020) found the following reasons employees disliked working from home including "blurred boundaries between work and home, too many distractions at home, increased family stress, negative relationship with colleagues, increased workload/hours, can't work due to lack of space" (p.15).

Another concern from employers is the difficulties of managing a hybrid team. When half of the teammates are not in the office, this can create levels of mistrust and miscommunication (Giacosa et al., 2023). Managers have reported that hybrid working teams struggle to clarify their expectations because half of the team is not present when making critical decisions. Another

concern from managers is that if employees are offered the chance to work remotely two days a week, the majority of them will try to extend their weekends, which could lead to a gap in the workforce and a misallocation of resources for the company. Managers are also concerned with risking a lack of diversity because of working from home initiatives (Hsu & Tambe, 2022). Bloom's (2021) study surveyed college graduates with young families and found that women were 50% more likely to want to work from home than their male counterparts. This obvious skew of who wants to work from home and who doesn't could lead to other potential issues for employers in terms of equity and inclusion. Employees who work from home had a 50% lower rate of promotion after 21 months compared to those who had more traditional working conditions (Bloom, 2021).

An argument can also be made that hybrid/remote working conditions can be even more costly for certain employers. This is due to increased technology needs, increased training, and increased information security measures. Organizations may not have to pay for physical assets, but the long-term costs of maintaining a technology-driven workforce are increasing (Hofschulte-Beck, 2022). These disadvantages have prompted many employees to return to onsite work requirements. This creates a difficult predicament for employers who are attempting to recruit and retain talent, managing employee expectations, ensuring viability in the long-term then must toe the line between what works for certain employees and what works best for the company as a whole (Turner & Baker, 2022).

Shorter Work Week

While the concept of a four-day work week has long been discussed amongst management scholars (Fottler, 1977; Hedges, 1971; Kenny, 1974), there has been a recent surge of interest for employers to implement a shorter work week in order to address hiring and retention challenges in a post-pandemic environment (Chung, 2022; Mirella, 2020). The benefits of a shortened work week can include improved morale, increased productivity, and reduced sickness-related absenteeism (Knight, Rosa, & Mallory, 2020). Perlow and Porter (2009) found that reduced working hours can lead to more focused and efficient work. Chung (2023) describes the traditional 40-hour work week to be more about form over function. That is employees may show up for 40 hours, but the actual work being done is much less. For organizations that implement a shorter work week, due to time constraints, employees tend to prioritize essential tasks and eliminate non-essential activities, thereby enhancing overall productivity (Lewis et al., 2023).

Spicer and Lyons (2023) conducted a pilot study in Ontario where they assessed the impact of a shortened work week for local township employees. These positions included full-time staff as well as part-time employees. A pre and posttest was administered to compare and contrast the results of the employee satisfaction survey. The participants were initially surveyed in August 2020 and then post tested in October 2021. Of the multiple criteria measured, the three responses that showed a slight increase in employee satisfaction were work-life balance, enthusiasm for coming to work and working well with colleagues (Spicer & Lyons, 2023). While there wasn't a significant difference between pre and posttest results, it should also be noted the results for negative impacts such as decreased job satisfaction, increased burnout, and fatigue were not found either.

3. METHODS

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from two distinct groups. The first group were business leaders and hiring managers who have previously or currently provide internships and full-time entry-level jobs to recent college graduates. The second group were college students that were planning on applying for internships or full-time employment opportunities within the next two semesters. The primary data collection tool was a pair of surveys, each tailored to the respective group, administered via SurveyMonkey.

Sample and Data Collection

The business leader/hiring manager group was identified using the resources of the local university's Career Service Center. This group received an email invitation containing a link to the survey, which was designed specifically for employers. The prospective employee (student) group was targeted through a presentation that included a QR code linking to their survey. These students, within one year of graduating from the Business School of the same local university in northeast Ohio.

Survey Design

The survey for business leaders consisted of 24 questions, including demographic inquiries (Questions 1-3), assessments of hybrid versus remote working conditions (Questions 4-14), evaluations of a shortened workweek (Questions 15-18), and queries regarding employee wellness

programs (Questions 19-22). The student survey mirrored the business leader survey but was adjusted to focus on the perspectives of individuals entering the workforce.

Both surveys were informed by previous research conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with employer and employee questions adapted from similar studies (Boland et al., 2020; Lipman, 2021; Chung et al., 2021; Laker, 2022).

We sent out survey requests to 40 prospective employers. The number of total respondents for employers was (n=34). We sent out over 100 invitations to upper-class students within the School of Business and received a total number of 40 responses.

Study Population	Sample Size:
Employer	n = 34
Student (prospective employee)	n = 40

Table 1: Study Population

4. RESULTS

Hypothesis 1*: The majority of the businesses surveyed will see the benefits of remote/hybrid working conditions.*

The following are survey questions (questions #5, 7, 10, and 12) that relate to the benefits of remote and/or hybrid working conditions and the data results and pie charts.

Question #5: Select all that apply: Potential positives that I foresee if the organization that I represent offered remote working conditions to their employees include.

Interval	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
Increased productivity	14	0.222	22%
Increased work satisfaction	25	0.396	40%
Increased company loyalty	13	0.206	21%
None of the Above	3	0.047	5%
Other	8	0.126	13%
Total	63	1	100%

Table 2: Frequency Table for Question #5

Most of the business leaders who participated in this survey responded that an increase in work satisfaction and productivity are the two most impactful benefits of offering remote working conditions to their employees.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 2.

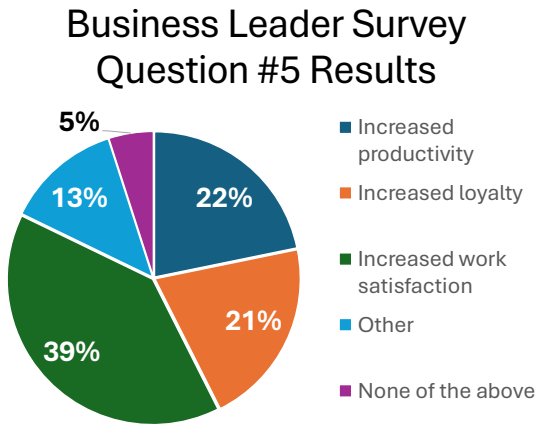

Figure 1: Business Leader Survey Question #5 Percent Frequency

Question #7: Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: As an employer, I see the benefits of remote working conditions.

A floating scale was utilized for this question. The respondents' selections were not discreet. They could range anywhere from 1-5 including intervals in between them. For the purposes of reporting the results, the data was standardized from 0 to 100, and so when reviewing the results can be evaluated from 0 to 100.

Interval	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
0-10	5	0.147	15%
11-20	1	0.029	3%
21-30	1	0.029	3%
31-40	1	0.029	3%
41-50	4	0.117	12%
51-60	2	0.058	6%
61-70	1	0.029	3%
71-80	7	0.205	21%
81-90	3	0.088	9%
91-100	9	0.264	26%
Total	34	1	100%

Table 3: Frequency Table for Question #7

Most of the business leaders' survey responses show a slight benefit to fully remote working conditions. The top three responses ranged from 91-100 (26%), 71-80 (21%), and 0-10 (15%). The overall mean was 63.47. On a standardized scale, this results in an average of 3.17. The mean falls within the "Agree" category. A majority of hiring managers either agree or strongly agree they can see the benefits of a remote work environment.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 3.

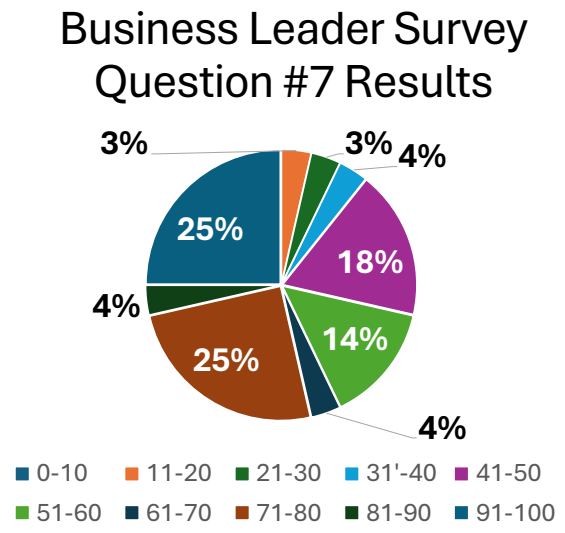

Figure 2: Business Leader Survey Question #7 Percent Frequency

Question #10: Select all that apply: Potential positives that I foresee if the organization that I represent offered hybrid working conditions to their employees include:

Interval	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
Increased productivity	21	0.272	27%
Increased work satisfaction	26	0.337	34%
Increased company loyalty	19	0.246	25%
None of the Above	2	0.025	3%
Other	9	0.116	12%
Total	77	1	100%

Table 4: Frequency Table for Question #10

Respondents were able to choose multiple responses to this question. The majority of hiring manager responses recognize the benefits of a hybrid work environment, including the potential for increased productivity, work satisfaction, and loyalty.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 4.

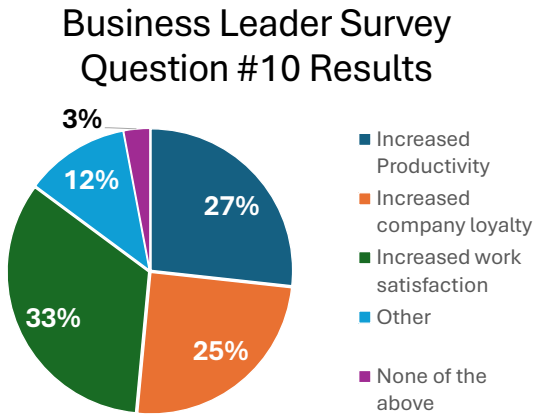

Figure 3: Business Leader Survey Question #10 Percent Frequency

Question #12: Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: As an employer, I see the benefits of hybrid working conditions.

A floating scale was utilized for this question. The respondents' selections were not discreet. They could range anywhere from 1-5 including intervals in between them. For the purposes of reporting the results, the data was standardized from 0 to 100, and so when reviewing the results can then be evaluated from 0 to 100.

Interval	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
0-10	6	0.176	18%
11-20	2	0.058	6%
21-30	0	0	0%
31-40	0	0	0%
41-50	3	0.088	9%
51-60	0	0	0%
61-70	4	0.117	12%
71-80	1	0.029	3%
81-90	1	0.029	3%
91-100	17	0.5	50%
Total	34	1	100%

Table 5: Frequency Table for Question #12

Many of the business leaders who participated in the survey recognized the benefits of utilizing a hybrid working environment. The highest response fell within the 91-100 interval range (representing 50 % of the responses). The overall mean was 68.88. On a standardized scale, this results in an average of 3.44. The mean falls within the "Agree" category. A majority of hiring managers strongly agree they can see the benefits of a hybrid work environment.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 5.

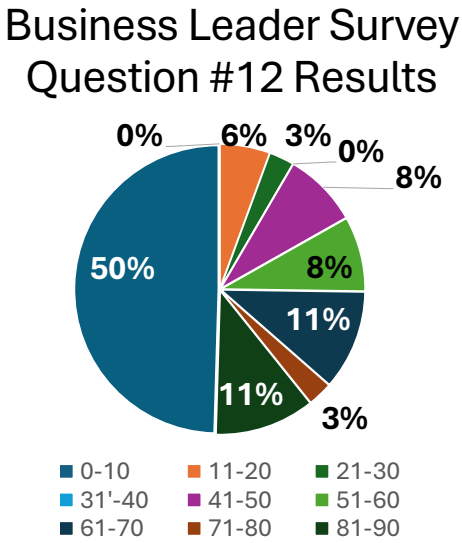

Figure 4: Business Leader Survey Question #12 Percent Frequency

Hypothesis 1 Results

The information collected from question #5 reveals that work satisfaction and increased productivity are the most important potential positives that employers anticipate from implementing a fully remote work option. This is supported by the results of question #7, which shows that employers can see the benefits of fully remote working conditions. Question #10 reveals that work satisfaction, work productivity, and increased company loyalty are all potential positives that employers anticipate coming out of offering hybrid working conditions. The responses from question #12 demonstrate that a majority of the employers surveyed see the benefits of offering hybrid working conditions.

Hypothesis 2: A majority of the businesses surveyed will see the benefits of a shortened work week and be willing to move employees to a shortened work week.

The following are survey questions (questions #16 and #15) that relate to employers' willingness to implement a shortened work week and the data results and pie charts.

Question #16: Select all that apply: A shortened workweek would be beneficial to my organization.

Respondents were free to choose as many of these variables as they deemed appropriate for the select all that applies questions.

Intervals	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
None of the Above	8	0.125	13%
The employees would be more productive	9	0.140	14%
More people would apply to work at the organization (an increased talent pool to choose from)	16	0.25	25%
The employees would be less stressed at work	11	0.171	17%
The employees would experience high satisfaction levels	19	0.296	30%
Other	1	0.015	2%
Total	64	1	100%

Table 6: Frequency Table for Question #16

The responses in Table 6 suggest that a majority of business leaders see the benefits of a shortened work week, which include higher satisfaction levels, more applications, and less stress.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 6.

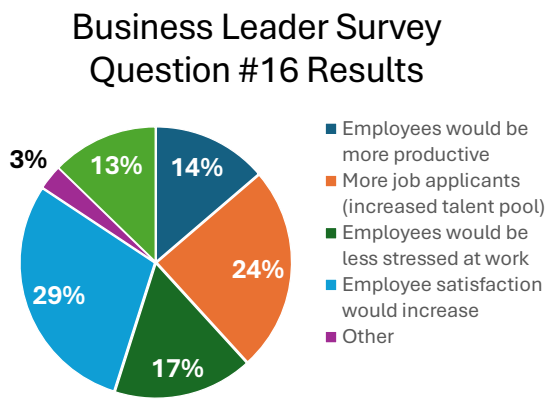

Figure 5: Business Leader Survey Question #16 Percent Frequency

Question #15: Rate your level of agreement with this statement: The organization I represent would be open to offering my employees a shortened workweek (4 days) in the future.

A floating scale was utilized for this question. The respondents' selections were not discreet. They could range anywhere from 1-5 including intervals in between them. For the purposes of reporting the results, the data was standardized from 0 to 100, and so when reviewing the results can then be evaluated from 0 to 100.

Interval	Frequency	Relative Frequency	Percent Frequency
0-10	15	0.441	44%
11-20	2	0.058	6%
21-30	3	0.088	9%
31-40	0	0	0%
41-50	6	0.176	18%
51-60	1	0.029	3%
61-70	4	0.117	12%
71-80	2	0.058	6%
81-90	0	0	0%
91-100	1	0.029	3%
Total	34	1	100%

Table 7: Frequency Table for Question #15

Many of the business leaders who participated in the survey recognize the benefits of introducing a shortened work week, but an overwhelming majority are unlikely to implement this strategy. The highest response fell within the 0-10 interval range (representing 44 % of the responses). The overall mean was 30.26. On a standardized scale, this results in an average of 1.51. The mean falls within the "Disagree" category. A majority of hiring managers strongly disagree that their organization would be willing to implement a shortened work week.

The pie chart below is a graphical representation of Table 7.

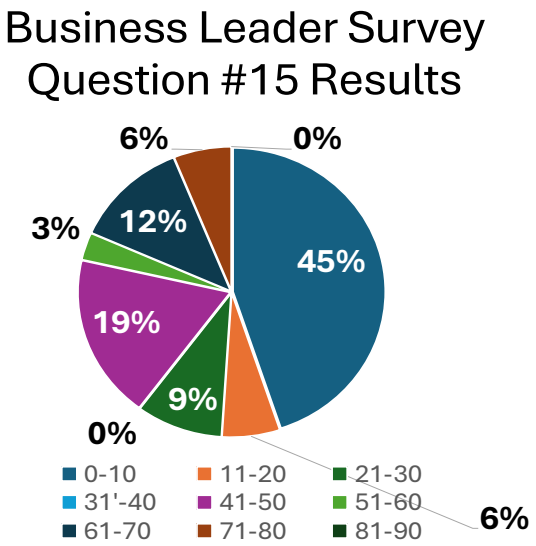

Figure 6: Business Leader Survey Question #15 Percent Frequency

Hypothesis 2 Results

The information collected from question #16 reveals that a shortened work week is a viable option to recruit and retain new and existing talent. However, the results of question #15 reveal a disconnect between the benefits of a shortened work week and the likelihood of implementing this benefit. Employers were unlikely to introduce this as an option at the time of this study.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this pilot study may provide valuable insights into what the future of the work environment post COVID-19. Both employers and employees were introduced to remote/hybrid working conditions due to government mandates and business contingency plans. This new working environment has many advantages and disadvantages to all parties. Employees were not able to enjoy the flexibility of managing their commute, work hours, and physical meetings. The freedom to work from home provided opportunities for employees to get more work done in less time. The disadvantages that employees experienced included reduced working relationships, social isolation, and potential

increased workload.

Even though the majority of employees have a favorable opinion towards adopting remote/hybrid working conditions, employers are not as certain about this change. Interestingly, the results of this study indicate that employers clearly recognize the benefits of a remote/hybrid work environment. The responses show that employees may feel increased work satisfaction, increased productivity, and a stronger sense of company loyalty if remote/hybrid working conditions were employed. This does not necessarily mean that companies are jumping to change their current working format. The data suggests that employers are only slightly willing to consider moving employees who currently work in person to hybrid working conditions and are not willing at all to consider moving employees who currently work in person to remote working conditions. Employers often cite the additional challenges of increased communication tools, cyber security risks, the potential for discrimination, and a lack of diversity and creativity among homogenous groups. Overall, employers seem to be more willing to entertain the idea of allowing their employees to work in hybrid conditions, but they are not racing to adopt a new system that may introduce new challenges and uncertainty.

Additionally, while employers also see the potential benefits of a shortened work week, the overwhelming majority of the respondents stated they would not be likely to introduce a four-day work week at this time. Part of the challenge may be the respondents representing the employers are mostly HR staff and hiring managers. This may not be within their realm of responsibility or scope of authority.

6. CONCLUSION

This research project is important when examining the working expectations of future employees and what current/future employers are willing to provide for them in the near future. The limitations facing this study included sample size limitations and the overall scope of discussions. One of the surveys created was sent to a local university's business students and the other survey was sent to full-time job and internship providers for the Career Services department of the same local university. This could make the survey hard to replicate. If this survey were to be replicated on a larger scale with multiple different universities and colleges and surrounding employers, the sample size limitations would be reduced. The data that was presented may help to provide insights into the tension unfolding between employees who want a remote/hybrid workplace with shortened work weeks and employers who are hesitant to provide these benefits. Future studies may focus on the specific challenges that employers are facing as they try to implement these organizational strategies.

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