


Flowing Fridays

*Reporting and reflecting
on our experimentation
with a four-day work week*



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Turning to the Literature

The concept of a five-day, forty-hour workweek in North America is generally attributed to Henry Ford, who introduced the structure [in 1926](#) as an antidote to unreasonable working conditions. At the time, with the prevalence of manual labour and 60+ hour weeks being common in the workforce, this new structure was viewed as a success for workers' rights. This shortened workweek [prevented overworking](#), improved workers' productivity, and supported their well-being. However, over the course of the last century, the nature of work and the workplace have changed significantly, as have expectations for employees.

As a result, many organizations are starting to rethink the necessity for the five-day, 40-hour workweek, and as a result, four-day workweeks have become more commonplace in recent years. Research emerging from organizations experimenting with four-day work weeks have experienced positive results in their workplaces. For example, [Microsoft piloted a 4-day shortened workweek](#) in Japan and experienced a 40% increase in productivity.

On a national scale, some countries are experimenting with shortened work weeks and experiencing similar results. For example, [Iceland ran a large-scale initiative](#) of a reduced working week, which included more than 2500 workers (over 1% of Iceland's entire working population). Results of the trial demonstrated that service quality and employee productivity remain the same or improved across most workplaces. The trial also significantly increased worker well-being, including work-life balance and stress levels. The pilots were so successful that at time of writing, 86% of Iceland's workforce have the freedom to shorten their work hours or have done so already.

From an intersectionality perspective, emerging evidence is demonstrating that four-day work weeks can be transformational in particular for [women](#) to create balance within their lives.

What the Literature Says...

Other research and real-life examples of a four-day work week have identified the following benefits:

For Organizations:

Increased ability to attract talent

Improved staff retention

Increased productivity

Decreased absenteeism

Financial savings

For Staff:

Flexibility in scheduling and improved work-life balance

Improved mental health

Increased connection with community

Increased life satisfaction

Some organizations that have implemented or are experimenting with a four-day work week:

- Imagine Canada
- pipikwan pêhtâkwan
- Greenpeace Canada
- David Suzuki Foundation
- Eco Superior
- Impact Organizations of Nova Scotia

Considerations

Workplace cultural habits and practices run deep. At the time of writing this brief, there is still a general lack of understanding of the theory and methods underpinning a four-day workweek in workplaces across Alberta. A general [lack of acceptance](#) on the concept of reduced work weeks persists, especially among especially among the organizations that perceive strictly as a reduction in the amount of time when employees can get work done. Perhaps there is an underlying concern about employees' ability to get "enough" work done.

However, research has indicated that [idle time already exists almost uniformly in most sectors](#). Interestingly, people's efficiency decreases when they are not given freedom over how to spend this idle time. On the other hand, these negative impacts reduce when employees are given this time to use freely. So having the freedom to spend one day a week how they would like should increase productivity by decreasing unused idle time.

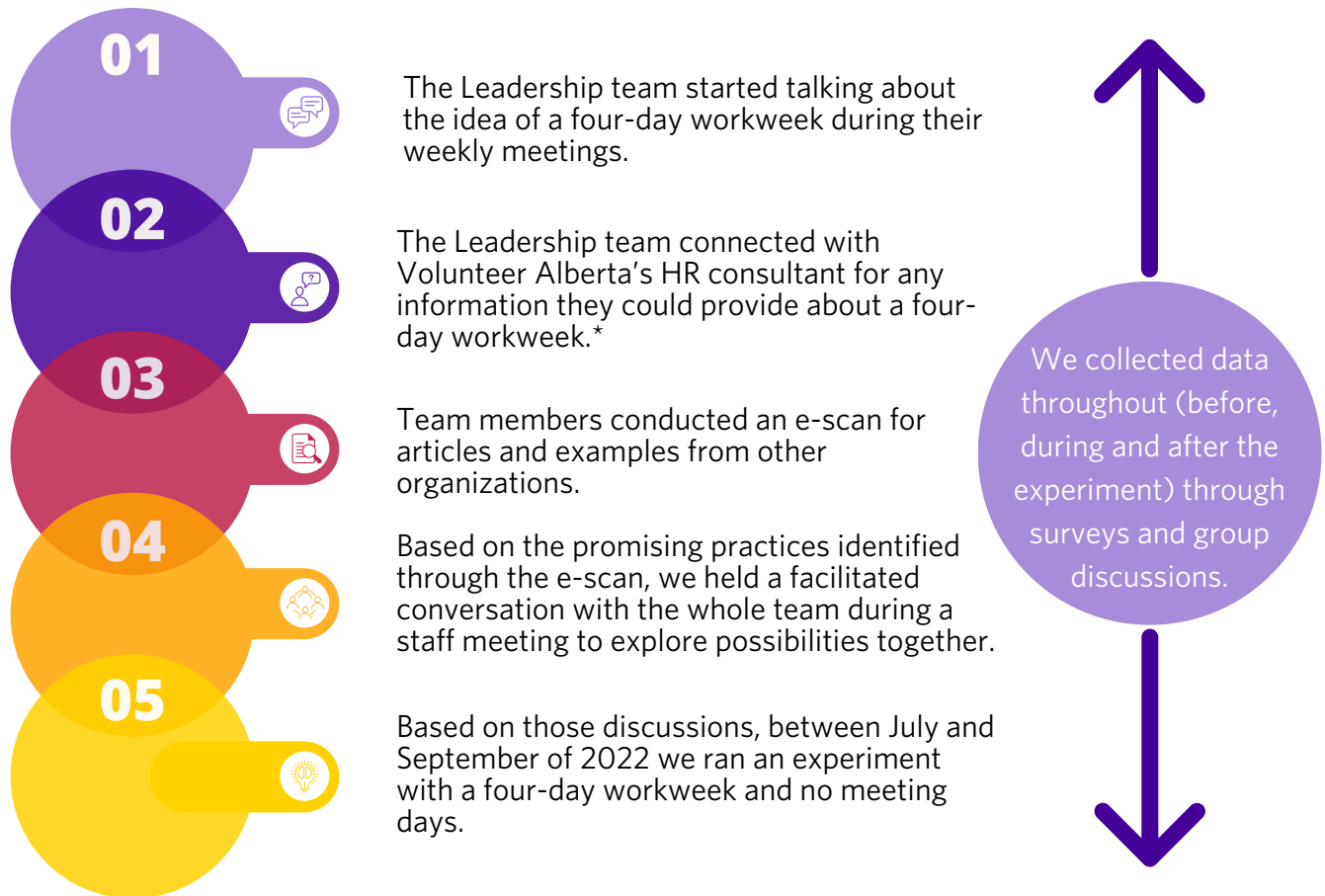
This freedom of choice can manifest through various flexible work arrangements, including flextime, freedom to choose working hours, and the freedom to decide where you work.

Research has demonstrated the positive effects of all these arrangements on work-life balance and job satisfaction, however, [forcing people into these different work arrangements without consideration for their perspectives reduces these positive impacts](#).

It's been our experience at Volunteer Alberta that staff members appreciate feeling like they are a part of the decision-making process when implementing changes to work structures.

Our Experiment: The Process

The process we undertook to run our experiment is summarized below:



* As part of our process, we consulted with an HR professional to help us understand what sort of things we would need to consider as part of our experimentation with a four-day workweek. They provided us with some helpful things to consider:

- Consider the difference between a compressed workweek (where people work the same number of hours, but in fewer days) and a true four-day workweek (where people are paid the same, but work fewer hours). What would the impact be of each scenario on wellbeing?
- If we changed our hours of work or rates of pay, contracts would need to be updated.
- What resources can be put in place to reduce workload or the number of meetings to help balance workloads?

The Options We Considered

Since there are many different variations of a four-day workweek, we thought it was important to consider different options for our experiment. We asked questions like: "what resources can be put in place to reduce workload?" and "how might workloads be balanced through the use of or reduction of meetings?" Through our discussions with the team, we considered testing out the following scenarios:

Four-day workweek

We all get one day a week off.

Compressed workweek

We all work longer hours per day so we can take one full day off every week.

No Meeting Fridays

VA collectively commits to not taking meetings of any kind every Friday (or a different day of the week) and publicly communicates this choice to the people, organizations, and communities we work with.

One day off every two weeks

We all get one day off every two weeks.

Status Quo

No changes, keep going as we are now. The status quo did provide the opportunity for team members to work out individualized compressed workweek agreements.

Contingent upon volunteer time

We all get one day a week off if we can provide proof that we have a regular volunteer gig of some kind.

We created space to explore other options from the staff team during our original discussions prior to starting the experiment, but no additional options emerged at the time.

A Side Note About the Practice Behind the Process

Volunteer Alberta (VA) is an (un)learning organization. Our (un)learning focuses on how we can nourish the conditions for civic engagement and volunteerism in Alberta. We ground our work in relationships and apply the practices of social research & co-design. We believe that we can nourish the conditions for civic engagement and volunteerism in Alberta through two primary ways:

- Navigating the “here and now.”
 - VA works to cultivate the capabilities of the communities and organizations we serve to navigate current structures and systems related to civic engagement and volunteerism.
- Transitioning into the “next and emerging.”
 - VA works to imagine futures in which civic engagement and volunteerism create engaged, connected, and empowered communities and we conduct research and experiments that help move our province in that direction. We then work to implement the promising ideas.

The Flowing Fridays experiment – also known as a prototype – is an example of our approach to social research & co-design. This approach includes applying the methods and practices of systemic design, design thinking, and human-centred design. For Flowing Fridays, we designed our prototype to test our uncertainties around transitioning into the “next and emerging” concerning good work practices in the social good/non-profit sector. As with all our new experiments, we started small and intentionally co-created and tested the idea with the people it would most directly impact (in this case, our team).

Through our approach, we are (un)learning as we go – making shifts and changes to the experiment as we discover and uncover new things. We are also (un)learning out loud – documenting and sharing our investigation even in the midst of it. This brief you are reading is part of this (un)learning out loud. Thanks for being a part of it!

Design Considerations for Our Experiment

As we embarked on the experiment, we intentionally created some design considerations of things that were important to us as we ran the experiment:

- ① We were committed to ensuring the team's salaries, benefits, and take-home pay would remain the same. No one would take a pay cut of any kind.
- ② To ensure we lived into our intention of being an inclusive and equitable workplace, everyone on the team was invited to be a part of the experiment. This included temporary summer staff and people working part-time.
- ③ We didn't want the experiment to be the source of more stress for people if they found they couldn't get their work done during their working hours. People were able to opt out at any time.
- ④ We wanted to ensure that the experiment did not affect our personnel policies and/or employment agreements. The benefits and policies outlined in the team's employment contracts remained the same.
- ⑤ We wanted to (un)learn as much as we could through the experiment - about our understandings about what is important to us; about our relationships to work; and about nourishing the conditions for wellbeing in a workplace.

The Experiment

Between July and September 2022, VA started the first phase of our Flowing Friday experiment and it began with some new practices. Every two weeks on Fridays, staff who work full-time hours had the day off and staff who worked part-time hours had half a day off. This time was theirs to spend as they wished. VA would pay for this day regardless of whether staff were working or not. On the alternate Fridays, we declared these days as “No Meeting Days” and the team was strongly encouraged not to book any meetings in order to have focused and uninterrupted time to work. The following email was the initial experiment outline sent to staff by VA’s Executive Director:

“Hello everyone, As you’ll recall, at last month’s staff meeting, we had a conversation about what it might mean for VA to implement a four-day workweek. Since that time, the Leadership Team has continued to have conversations about this. Our conversations have affirmed that we believe in the importance of challenging the current dominant paradigm around work and productivity. We believe that this paradigm has cultivated unhealthy conditions throughout the non-profit sector around perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, and exclusion. And we wonder what might happen if we were to build in more spaciousness into our ways of working. We are curious about how we might start to reimagine the role work plays in a life well lived. We are interested in understanding what might happen if we experimented with both a 4-day workweek, and a no-meeting day. Based on that curiosity and what we heard from you, between July 8 and September 30, 2022 we will experiment with Flowing Fridays.

Here’s how it will work:

- Starting on July 1, every 2 weeks staff who work full time hours will have Friday off. Staff who are working part time will have half of Friday off. The time is yours to spend as you wish. Even though you won’t be working, you will still be paid for this day.
- The Fridays that we will still be working will be deemed “No Meeting Days.” That is, you are strongly encouraged to not book any meetings on that day. Like none.
- Our extra long long weekends (i.e. with the existing planned-for Fridays and Mondays off) will still be in place during the experiment.
- This experiment will not affect our personnel policies and/or employment agreements. The benefits and policies outlined in your employment contract remain the same.
- We will create messaging for us to use on our various communication channels (e.g. email signature, phone messages, ME, etc) to let the people and communities we work with about our Friday plans.

To help us learn from this experiment, we will circulate a survey before, during, and at the end of the experiment so that we can understand the impact the experiment is having on things like wellbeing, team culture, achieving milestones, and the overall work of VA. We will use this data to help us determine what we might do next to nourish the conditions for spaciousness and wellbeing both within and beyond VA.

Now. Because this is an experiment, we simply do not know at this stage the sort of impact that it will have on individual members of this team -- both positively and negatively. We understand that it is possible that in the midst of this experiment, individuals on this team might experience feelings of “NOPE.” If this turns out to be the case for you, you have the choice to stop participating in the experiment and to return to working a regular 5-day workweek. The only exception to this will be respecting other team member’s preferences regarding No Meetings Days. If, at any time, you would like to opt out of the experiment please connect with your Manager and we’ll activate the escape hatch. If you have any questions, please reach out to any of us on the Leadership Team. And thank you for embarking on this experiment with us!”

At the outset of the experiment, we created a survey for staff to provide anonymous feedback about Flowing Fridays, with plans to develop new evaluations as the investigation continued. We also created communication messages to share with our network, partners, and stakeholders about our experiment to explain what we were doing, including our modified schedules.

Initial Survey Findings

We collected qualitative and quantitative data through an ongoing staff survey to understand the impact the experiment was having on the team. Some of our questions included:

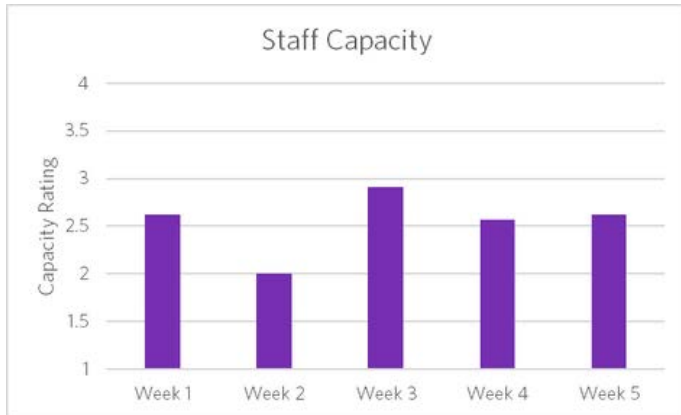
- “When I reflect on my capacity at work over the past two weeks, my average capacity level has been... Why did you pick that number?” (Scale of 1 to 4)
- “When I reflect on my experiences of stress over the past two weeks, my average stress level has been... Why did you pick that number?” (Scale of 1 to 4)
- “When I reflect on my experiences of wellbeing over the past two weeks, I notice...”
- “Were you able to take advantage of the most recent “No Meetings” Friday and not meet with anyone that day?”
- “What do you think made you able or unable to get everything done over the past two weeks?”

We requested that staff complete this survey every two weeks during the experiment period.

Things We Discovered Through the Qualitative Survey Data

- **Summer is a unique time of year.**
 - There are several reasons why Summer, particularly July and August (the experimental period), is a unique time of year for VA. To start, it is busier for some staff due to many program wrap-ups and start-ups occurring in the summer month. However, the summer tends to be slower for meetings because staff vacations are more common, and some organizations in our network take organization-wide summer breaks.
- **Workload fluctuated independent of 4- vs. 5-day workweek.**
 - Staff report many factors that influenced their workload. This includes being involved on multiple projects, catching up on work due to time away, the fluctuating intensity of work due to project cycles, and deadlines – both of our own making and those set by external organizations.
- **Many factors impacted stress levels.**
 - This includes trying to meet deadlines or learning new components of a role, external commitments such as volunteering, personal pressure to complete a certain number of tasks, general stress, or pressure to “catch-up” when returning from vacation.

Quantitative Data Visualization



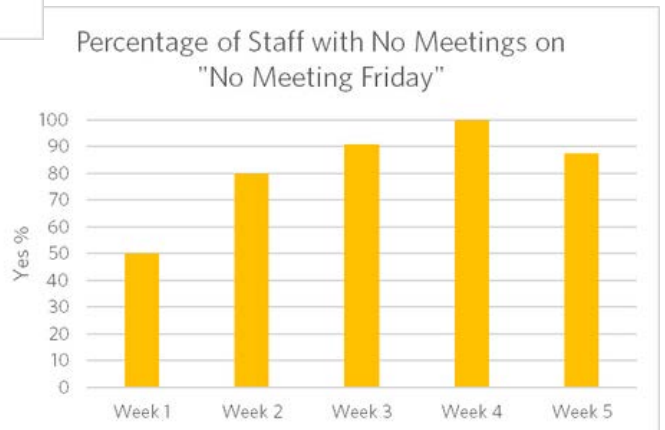
Staff capacity was approximately 2.5 which is exactly middle the one-to-four-point scale. Capacity ratings were the same for the first and last week of the experiment.

Average stress levels were about two across all surveys and there was little to no change from week one to week five.



Work completed changed from 100% for the baseline week two on average 74% for the experiment period.

Prior to instilling the Flowing Fridays format 50% of participants already had no meetings on Fridays. The percent of staff who had no meetings on a Friday during the data collection peaked at 100% but was on average 89% during this period.



Limitations of the Survey Data

We recognize that our data set has multiple limitations.

- Small amount of baseline data.
 - Only one week of baseline data was collected compared to four weeks of experimental data.
- Low response rate.
 - The number of participants completing the survey fluctuated between 5 and 11 people. This effect may be due in part to the temporary time students were part of the team. Summer students participated in the initial questionnaire but their placements ended before the last entry.
 - There were also not many reminders to complete the survey biweekly.
- Extraneous factors influencing work.
 - Factors mentioned include personal commitments, project wrap-up and start-up, summer holidays and commitments, and staff's general stress levels.

Overall...

Based on the initial data, Flowing Fridays had no apparent benefit or drawback. VA's Research and Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator recommended additional research to understand better and gain insight into Staff's experiences beyond what the survey targeted.

We suspected that the survey didn't provide us with a complete picture of what transpired during the experiment, and we wanted to better understand what we were missing.

To do so, we set up focus groups and one-on-one conversations to achieve a more holistic picture from the Operations Team.

Operations Team Discussions

VA's Research and Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator facilitated group and one-on-one conversations with VA's operations team. The operations team consists of all VA staff outside of the leadership team. The conversations were conducted without the presence of leadership team members in order for participants to feel free to speak and create a level of confidentiality for staff. The Research and Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator created a series of guiding questions to help gain more insight into the team's experience of Flowing Fridays.

Sample Questions:

What are your general thoughts and feelings about Flowing Fridays? What about specifically no-meeting Fridays? What about Day-off Fridays?

What did you like about Flowing Fridays?

What would you change about Flowing Fridays?

Looking back, did your stress level change once Flowing Fridays were instilled? What about your capacity? Work completed? Mood?

Things We Discovered Through the Conversations

Creating a community of care.

Staff expressed that the Flowing Fridays experiment made them feel more cared for by the leadership team. They also said feeling more grounded in their work and our organization.

Positive energy, improved mental health, better balance.

Staff shared that they have more positive energy and a better work-life balance that encourages rest and improves emotional and mental health. They also shared that they could enjoy the summer, and a designated day for no meetings felt peaceful.

Too busy to fully utilized.

Some staff shared they could only partially utilize No-Meeting Fridays because of their schedule demands (i.e. their schedule gets packed fast). It may be valuable to consider alternative stress reduction, including encouraging breaks.

Neutral feeling about work completed.

Staff reported that they felt they did not complete more or less work during the experiment but did their best with their time. There was not a consensus regarding the impact on productivity from staff. Some staff mentioned there might be slightly less output based on hours. On the other hand, others reported increased productivity.

Appreciate the time to focus on No-Meeting Fridays.

Staff expressed appreciation that No-Meeting Fridays gave them time and space to work through the day at their own pace. They didn't feel they had to be "on" to engage with other people those days. A potential idea from staff was to shift the framing of No-Meeting Fridays to Focus Fridays. This change would allow staff to prioritize their work rather than having additional tasks added last minute by other folks on the team.

Flowing Fridays as a motivator.

Staff tended to use Flowing Fridays as a carrot, making them feel less stressed and more optimistic during the week. They liked the idea of having Fridays off and looked forward to it throughout the week.

Timing seems ideal (every other week).

Staff appreciated the day off occurring every other week rather than weekly to adapt to the shorter week. They also stated that less frequently would seem too spread out.

Increased positive perception of VA.

After discussions with some external stakeholders, staff reported that VA's partners view the experiment positively. Also, staff reported pride discussing with friends and family this schedule change.

Other workplace stressors impacting staff

Staff reported that monthly three-hour staff meetings combined with No-Meeting Fridays make the week seem overwhelming. They noted it might be best for their workload management to schedule staff meetings during full weeks if possible.

More flexibility in when to take time off

Staff appreciate Flowing Fridays' flexibility, especially when they can combine it with Lieu Time. There was curiosity from some team members about whether there could be flexibility regarding which day of the week they could use or a way to make it optional. Staff expressed that when they are busy, it's nice to have five days, so it would have been beneficial to have all five workdays (especially when trying to make a deadline), but on slower weeks, a day off can be better afforded.

Limitations of the Data Collected from Facilitated Conversations

Here are some components that should be taken into account when considering the data we collected through facilitated conversations and the conclusions we made.

- Two staff members were not able to participate in the guided conversations.
 - These staff did provide their feedback via email or chat after the meeting.
- While every effort was made to create a brave and safe space for the conversations, it is possible that some team members may have felt they did not want to share their honest thoughts in front of their peers.
 - However, there was an open invitation to reach out to the lead researcher to chat one-on-one.

Overall...

Overall, the staff appreciated Flowing Fridays. Staff expressed a variety of reasons for this appreciation. Some team members expressed appreciation that Flowing Fridays improved their home-life balance, and allowed for more time to enjoy life outside work. Others team members appreciated having a specific time to focus and complete tasks on Fridays and using Fridays off as a motivator to work efficiently. Regardless, staff seem to generally appreciate the experiment, and noted that some minor refinements could improve Flowing Fridays.

What We Heard From Others

Throughout the experiment, VA team members often engaged in casual conversations with family and friends, and more formal discussions with community partners and networks about Flowing Fridays. During early conversations, the team received lots of questions and heard uncertainty about the experiment. Many people that VA staff spoke with professionally and personally asked for clarification about the concept of a four-day workweek. There was a general assumption that emerged during these conversations that a four-day work week meant the team was working more daily hours to make up the day off, or that there would be an associated pay cut with the time off. Once staff explained this would not be the case, there was a lot of enthusiasm from our network about the concept and our experiment. Some staff mentioned that this new work practice is a point of pride when speaking with family, friends, or colleagues about VA. While the concept of the four-day workweek is a benefit that more organizations are embracing, it still is not a commonplace practice. As such, we understand that it offers a competitive advantage for hiring and recruitment practices.

To garner feedback from the people, organizations, and communities we serve, we created a formal feedback survey link shared through our e-mail signatures during this experiment. We received some limited feedback on that platform. One respondent shared a concern about a lack of work due to our staff completing fewer hours. To us, this indicates a need for more communication regarding what a four-day workweek is and what it means to our external stakeholders to improve the understanding of our network.

During the experiment, VA's Executive Director had in-depth conversations with two other social impact/nonprofit organization's Executive Directors. Both expressed interest in running similar experiments in their organizations in 2023. These conversations are a big part of what prompted the development of this document and for us to broadly share our findings promptly.

Our (Un)Learnings so far...

Before starting this experiment, some staff members expressed hesitancy about participating, primarily due to concerns about workload. Many team members expressed feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work they needed to do. They were concerned that having one less day to work would mean less time to get the things they needed to accomplish completed. However, once we began, team members adjusted and found the time off and the no-meeting day in their calendars valuable to their work-life balance, ability to focus, and overall wellbeing.

As an organization, we did not experience significant productivity drops. During the experiment, we achieved all of our outcomes, delivered required outputs, and met all deadlines.

We saw benefits in a few main areas, many of which are like those found by [Hancock \(2021\)](#). First, staff morale increased. Many staff reported that they felt a sense of pride in VA when speaking about this experiment with family and friends. Our team also reported having more energy week to week. Productivity remained consistent week-to-week by using the Free Fridays as motivation and No Meeting Fridays as focus time.

Team members reported that their well-being improved through increased time spent engaging in their communities. People used the additional hours they were not working to engage in community-based activities and volunteering. Team members also reported the extra free time enabled them to create more time to complete life tasks, but also -- importantly -- for rest, rejuvenation, and for things that brought them joy. This included spending time with family, travelling, and participating in hobbies - many of which had been dormant for years. Although the data is early, we suspect these self-reported ways to create well-being through rest and joy will help VA retain staff and protect against long-term burnout.

What We Are Doing Next

Based on team feedback, we are refining Flowing Fridays for additional experimentation. At the time of writing, we are in the midst of the second iteration of our prototype (also known as round 2 of testing) and are experimenting with some refinements. First, we have defined and named the investigation (and its terminology) more clearly. **Flowing Fridays** is the name of the overall experiment, **Free Fridays** are the no-working days, and the no-meeting days are **Focus Fridays**.

For this round of testing, we have encouraged staff to fully embrace Focus Fridays. This involves going beyond simply not scheduling meetings on these days, but also setting their chats and status to "do not disturb" so they can focus on their work.

In this round of testing, we are also looking at how best to assess and measure this experiment. We have scheduled recurring monthly meetings with the Operations Team to have a guided conversation regarding Flowing Fridays. Still, we want to consider other methods and indicators for success. Some initial questions we have include:

- What impact is this experiment having on the quality of our work?
- How is this experiment impacting the quality and depth of conversations we can engage in?

Round 2 of testing will continue until June 2023. (Stay tuned for our update on our round 2 evaluation)

Areas for Deeper (Un)learning

Of course, an experiment of this nature reveals much about our individual and collective understandings of what and how we value things in the workplace. There's so much we are still working to (un)learn.

Some of the questions we are holding:

- How might we value ourselves and others outside of notions of "productivity" and the work we/they produce?
- How might we as an organization help address feelings of anxiety and negativity that are attached to the false standard of perfection?
- How might we (un)learn to distinguish between false urgency and true importance?
- What is the role of rest in nourishing connections within self and with communities?

Some Early Inferences

Places Where This May Work

Some social impact/non-profit organizations are better suited for experimenting with a four-day workweek than others. We know that an organization like ours is highly privileged to have the flexibility to experiment with new ways of working. Given the current demands on the social impact/non-profit sector, we recognize that a four-day workweek is currently only feasible for some organizations. Front-line organizations that provide direct services to communities might be unable to entertain the four-day workweek concept because of the larger systems and pressures they operate within. However, organizations that are a step or two (or more) removed from front-line service provision often have more flexibility in how they plan and manage work and time. We hope as more organizations start experimenting with four-day workweeks, we will slowly begin moving systems in a direction where this structure can become commonplace. After all, there was a time not too long ago when two-day weekends did not exist. We hope for a day when three-day weekends become the norm.

Wrapping Up For Now

The Flowing Fridays experiment is insightful and exciting for us at VA. We are inspired to continue exploring how we can nourish staff well-being through shifting organizational practices, rituals, and routines, and to share these (un)learnings with our network and offer support to them on their own journeys. We wanted to share our experience with this experiment so far to help spark conversation about how different work structures may benefit organizations and the people who work for them. We understand this experiment might have prompted many questions, and we encourage you to reach out to anyone in our organization. We would be happy to speak with you more about it. In the meantime, thanks for reading our brief. We'll keep you posted later in 2023 with updates about Flowing Fridays.

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