

# Flowing Fridays

*Reporting and reflecting  
on our experimentation  
with a four-day work week*  
(Un)learning Brief #2

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# Introduction

Volunteer Alberta (VA) works to nourish wellbeing and healthy communities of belonging by cultivating conditions for volunteering and civic engagement. One of those conditions – we believe – is that people have the necessary energy and time to engage in their communities meaningfully. In the summer of 2022, VA started to wonder how we might begin to challenge the current paradigm about work -- starting within our organization -- to create more time, space, and energy for our team. We were curious about how we might resist and reset some of the unhealthy conditions that exist in the social profit/non-profit sector around workaholicism, unrealistic expectations, perfectionism, and exclusion. We became curious about what would happen if our staff team had more time available. So, we initiated a journey of experimentation and knowledge gathering sparked by a pivotal question: “What if Volunteer Alberta created time and space for people on our team to experience well-being and connection in ways that were meaningful for them?”

As Volunteer Alberta continues our ongoing (un)learning journey, we see the increasing importance of reflecting on our ties to each other and the land. The land we call Alberta is the ancestral territory and present-day home of many Indigenous peoples, including the Nehiyaw, Dene, Iyarhe Nakoda, Anishinaabe, Niitsitapi, Inuit, and Métis. They have cared for and advocated for the lands, waters, and animals for many generations despite historical and ongoing harmful actions against their communities. We are grateful for their stewardship of this land, and as an act of reconciliation and good will, it is our intention to ensure that our organization, along with the entire social impact/non-profit/voluntary sector, can become good partners in supporting the land and communities. Our staff, board, and work extend into Treaty 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 Territories, and we affirm the importance of honouring these historic agreements as well as all future treaties.

*Thank you to the Suncor Energy Foundation whose generous support of VA's Intersectionality Initiative enabled our experimentation*

# Building on Our (Un)Learnings

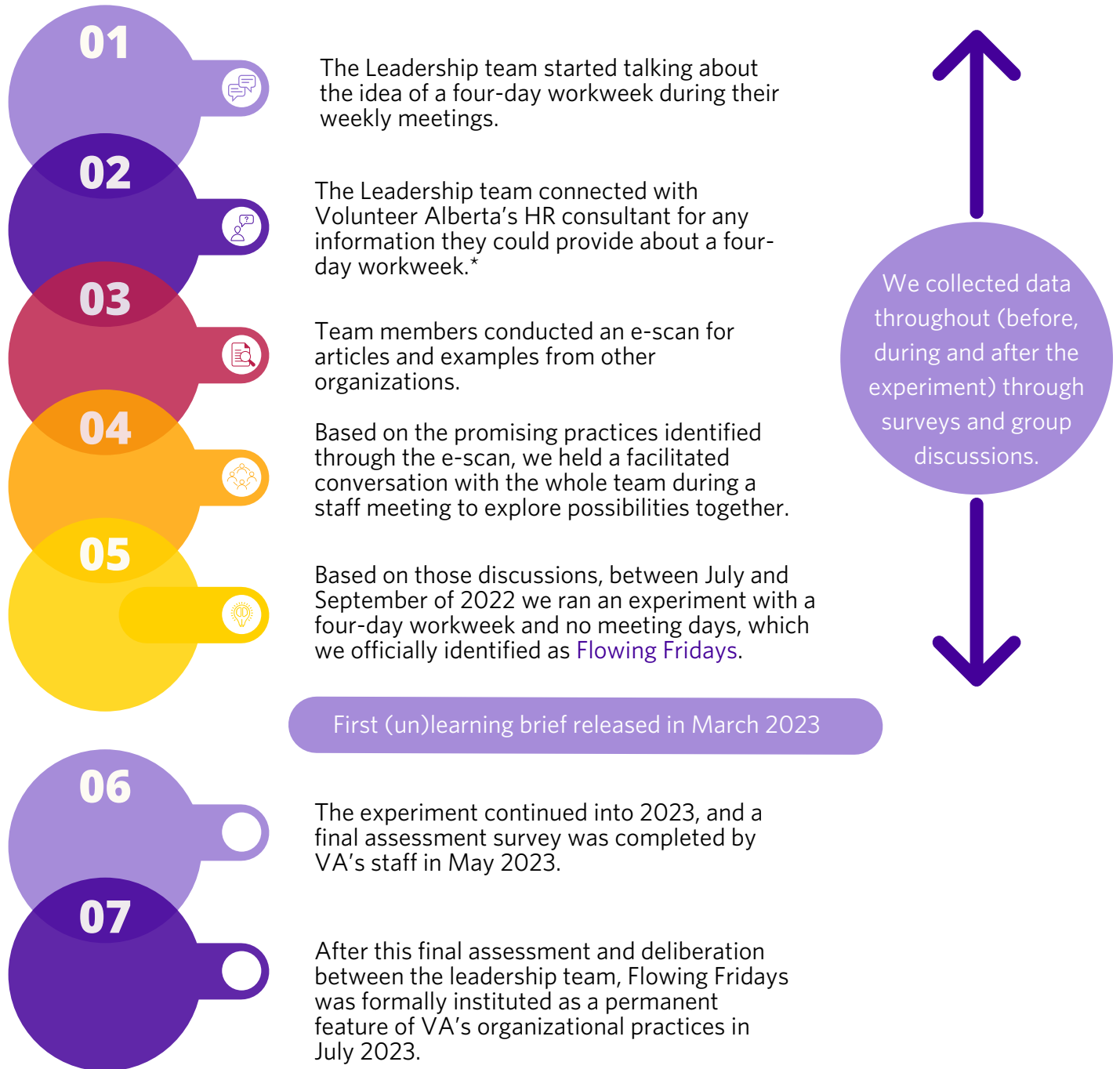
This second (un)learning brief builds on the first by encapsulating what we found in our initial exploration of the connection between rest and well-being. We share our (un)learnings and provide a closer look at the design methodologies and grounding principles that guided us in our journey. Our hope is that by sharing our findings, methodologies, and the processes that assisted us in our (un)learning, other people might discover insights that help them in their own explorations.

In this document, we share the following:

- **Our experimental method:** Grounded in human-centred design principles, our experimental approach provided us with mechanisms for adaptive learning and a "let's try it" mindset that allowed us to take those first steps in exploring and embracing something new and different.
- ◆ **Our Findings & (Un)learnings:** Experimenting with four-day work weeks was a success! Our iteration of four-day workweeks (Fridays off every two weeks, and no-meeting flex days on the Fridays we work) gave the team more time to attend to their wellbeing in diverse ways, and it is now an integral feature of Volunteer Alberta. This initiative has also sparked discussions on how we define well-being in the context of work. It has emboldened us to question traditional work values that often prioritize productivity at the expense of wellness and health.
- ◆ **Considerations:** Although we have succeeded in developing an iteration of four-day workweeks that works for us, we have come to recognize that many conditions and circumstances facilitated our success. We identify the privilege we've had in this journey as an organization that is a few steps removed from front-line services, while also noting the value of the experimental approach we have taken in this process.

# The Experiment

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



# Methodology & Prototyping

Our exploration of four-day work weeks at VA is grounded in social research and human-centred design principles. We specifically engaged in what's called prototyping — an experimental process to test and refine new ideas in the face of uncertainty. Instead of jumping straight into a four-day work week, this approach allowed us to identify potential challenges, explore different options, and engage in ongoing discussions to fine-tune the process before making any permanent changes.

Prototyping is all about experimenting with different possibilities [without the pressure of getting everything right from the start](#). It is a semi-structured process for exploring the unfamiliar and the unknown with the people who are most likely to hold key insights, if not answers, to problems that need solving. By providing an overview of our prototyping process, we identify the principles that guided us, the milestones that we aimed for, and overall, the different stages that led up to our eventual implementation of [Flowing Fridays](#).

## A Side Note!

We recognize that organizations can implement four-day work weeks in different ways, and we certainly recommend going with whatever process makes the most sense based on capability, resources, and know-how. For us, design methodology and prototyping suited our 'ways of doing' as an (un)learning organization. The main insight we encourage here is to find an approach that helps with creating pathways for open dialogue, flexibility, and participatory decision-making.

# Key Steps to Our Prototyping Process

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## We pinpointed key considerations

To start off in a good way, our prototyping journey began with open discussions about the purpose of the initiative, our options, limitations, and what best served the needs of our team. We made sure to have genuine and inclusive discussions about our initial hopes and reservations, how our work and salaries would be affected, and, ultimately, what options would be best for us to consider.

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## We started with something small

Getting started with something small and adaptable was crucial. For us, this meant implementing something that did not interfere with our policies, benefits, and salaries or cause any of us undue stress. Rather than immediately and completely shifting to four-day work weeks, we first wanted to experiment with what it would be like to have our days off every other Friday. This ensured that while we were still making a transition towards four-day work weeks, we initiated a process that caused little disruption to our work while also providing room for adjustments and (un)learning.

# The Options We Considered

As we highlighted in our first Brief, there were many different variations of four-day workweeks for us to consider. Discussing and understanding our different options helped us get a sense of what was possible, and what we could potentially explore. We considered the following:

## 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.

Starting off with open dialogue helped us narrow down what we wanted to experiment with. Prototyping is most effective when it centers the perspectives of those most affected by proposed innovations, in our case, the VA team.

# Prototyping Steps Continued...

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## We collected feedback

After determining what we wanted to experiment with, we established different pathways for feedback and dialogue throughout the prototyping process. This allowed us to refine and adjust our ideas before implementing anything permanent. We gathered feedback through diverse channels such as surveys, group discussions, and one-on-one conversations.

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## We evaluated the experiment

After collecting data, we discussed what we learned and made adjustments as needed. To evaluate our progress, we made sure to ask questions that gave us insight into our experiment's core benefits and limitations. We made any necessary changes and repeated the prototyping process until we could make an informed decision on a permanent iteration of four-day work weeks that best suited our organizational processes, practices and workflows.

# Continuing Our Experiment & (Un)learning

As we explained in the first (un)learning brief, our initial round of testing showed us a need for continued assessments and discussions, as well as some changes and considerations to move forward with. Notably, those initial reflections helped guide our thoughts on the importance of a work culture that prioritizes wellness and a balanced approach to work, rest, and leisure. We carry those reflections in our ongoing (un)learning.

## The Adjustments We Made

- We 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 the second round of testing, we encouraged staff to fully embrace Focus Fridays. This involved 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.

We also looked at how best to assess and measure the experiment. We scheduled recurring monthly meetings with the Operations Team to have guided conversations regarding Flowing Fridays. We asked questions that included:

- 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?
- How are factors such as job satisfaction, mood, and motivation impacted by Free Fridays and Focus Fridays respectively?

### A Moment of Reflection...

At this point in our explorations, we had garnered insights and engaged in discussions that further enriched our (un)learning journey. This phase of our experimentation revealed profound reflections on productivity, urgency, the importance of rest, and the cultivation of a caring workplace culture. Even now that we have fully implemented Flowing Fridays, we are eager to delve deeper into these reflections, recognizing that this exploration is still an ongoing journey for us.

# Evaluative Curiosities

As we conducted our experiment, we wanted to evaluate what was happening. Some of the questions that guided us included:

What impacts will we see regarding key variables such as stress, motivation, experiences of well-being, work capacity, and work completion?

What might be some unforeseen, or unintended benefits and disadvantages of implementing four-day workweeks?

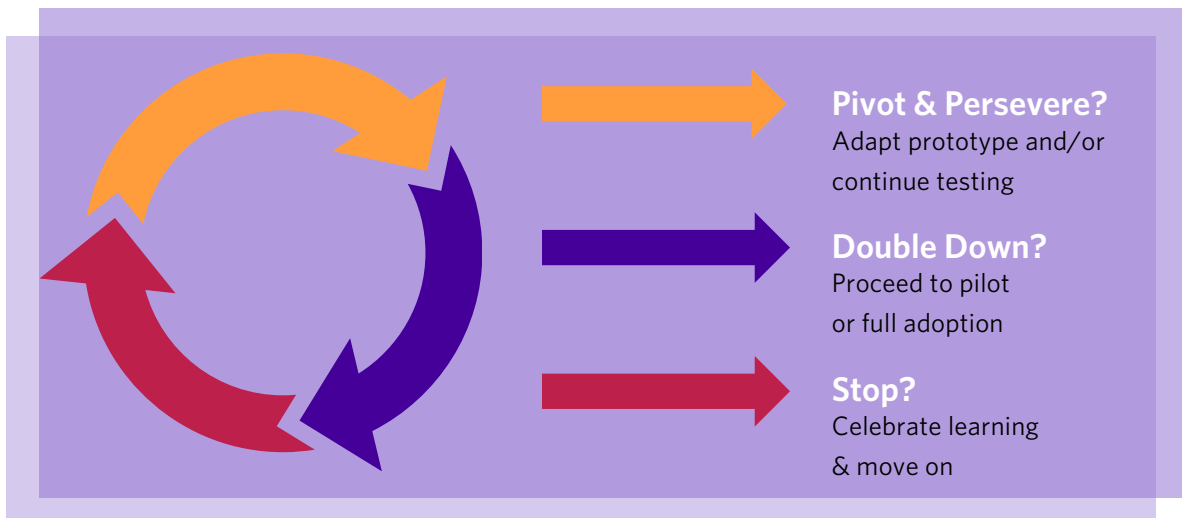
What mechanisms can we set in place to be adaptive and responsive to possible changes?

What are some underlying principles in our iteration of four-day work weeks?

- In what specific ways will Volunteer Alberta's staff be impacted by this experiment?
- What benefits and disadvantages are there to implementing four-day work weeks at Volunteer Alberta?
- How do we ensure that the experimentation process provides us with the necessary information to make effective decisions?
- In what ways might implementing four-day work weeks align with our broader objectives of nourishing workplace wellbeing?

# From Evaluation to Implementation

Effective evaluation ultimately determines whether a prototype successfully passes testing and careful deliberation. Referenced below is a model developed by [Social Innovation Canada](#) (2022) that outlines the cycle for assessing the feasibility of a prototype and determining its potential adoption to a more permanent intervention.



After the first unlearning brief was published in March 2023, we continued with further testing and found ourselves in the Pivot & Persevere stage. After assessing our final findings, we doubled down in May 2023, and fully adopted Flowing Fridays.



# Final Analysis and Deliberations

We conducted the last phase of our evaluations in May 2023 and started finalizing our analysis in June. We distributed one final staff survey that assessed Flowing Fridays for its overall impact, and similar to our previous evaluative surveys, the questionnaire comprised of quantitative and qualitative components.

To supplement broader questions about the experiment in general, we chose to ask questions that were respectively directed to the two components of **Flowing Fridays: Free Fridays (no work days)** and **Focus Fridays (no meeting days that also allowed folks to flex their time)**.

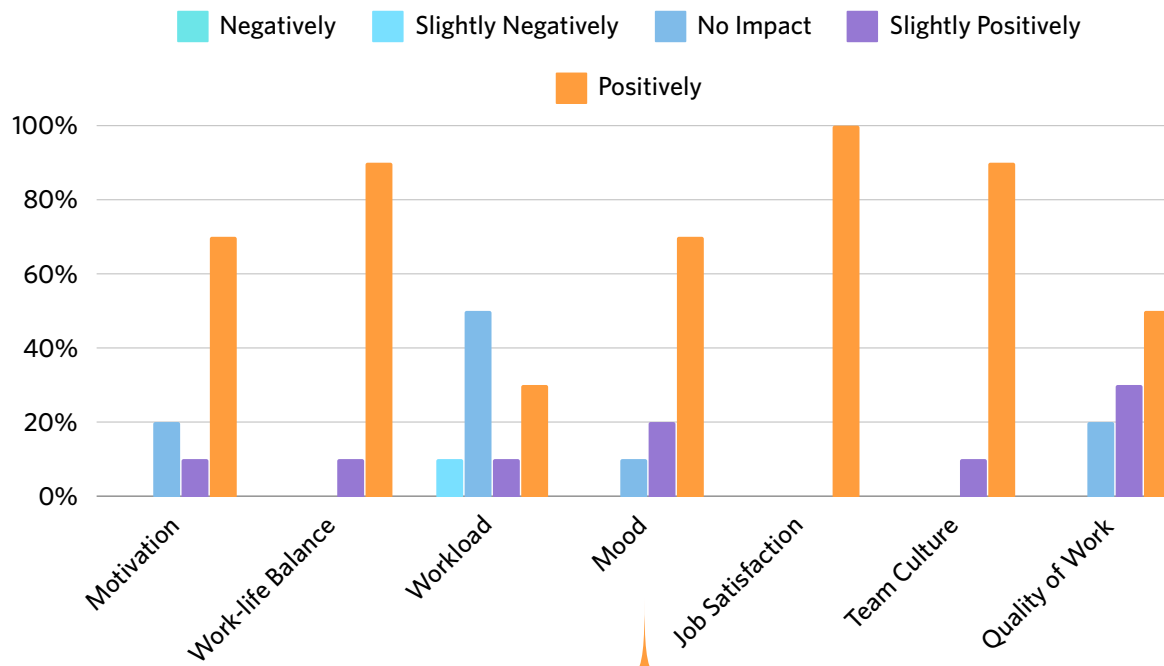
# Key Takeaways: Free Fridays

We wanted to know how Free Fridays (no work days) impacted our team based on various dimensions as shown by the graph below. Overall, Free Fridays had a positive influence on the team’s sense of motivation, work-life balance, and mood. The experiment also contributed to increased job satisfaction among all respondents, with 90% further reporting that Flowing Fridays had positive effects on team culture.

Notably, impacts on workload and quality of work were varied, possibly indicating that how Flowing Fridays affected people’s work depended on their respective workflows and timelines. This suggests that continued efforts are still needed to monitor and more deeply understand the various ways that Flowing Fridays impacts VA’s work.

## Free Fridays (Days-Off) impact my...

N=10



A unanimous 100% of staff reported a positive impact on job satisfaction resulting from the experiment.

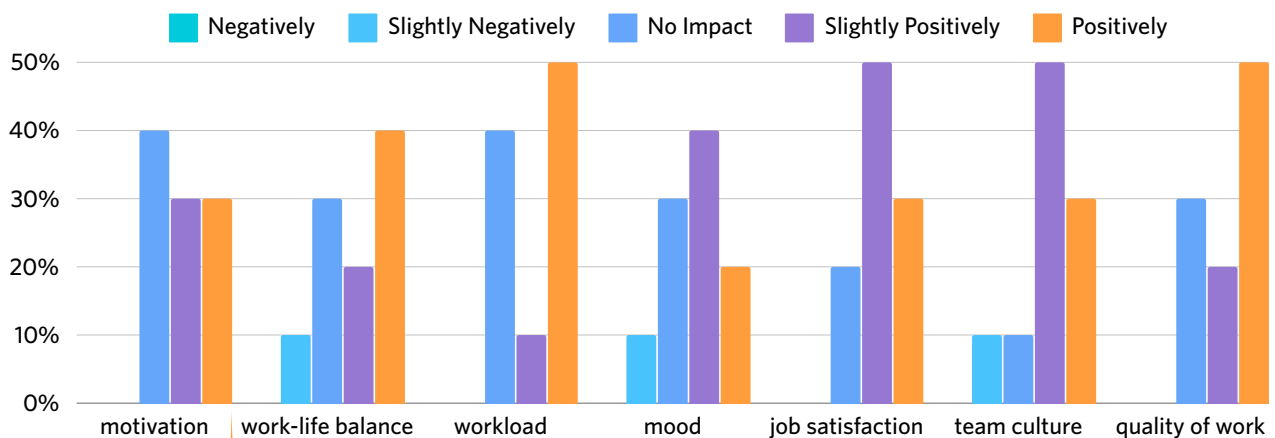
# Key Takeaways: Focus Fridays

Our findings showed that compared to Free Fridays, Focus Fridays had more variation in how it impacted the team. Overall, respondents self-reported a positive or slightly positive impact across most indicators, but these varied responses did beg further questions. For instance, what did it mean exactly for people to experience 'no impact' from Focus Fridays across the various dimensions? What were some of the connections that people were making between Focus Fridays and variables such as team culture and work-life balance?

It is also important to note that the ability to flex our time and pace our work was a big adjustment we made for Focus Fridays (we initially had no meeting days with regular hours). How we use Focus Fridays has continued to evolve, which suggests further need for continued evaluations.

## Focus Fridays (No Meeting Days) impact my...

The majority of respondents reported positive or slightly positive results for job satisfaction and quality of work due to Focus Fridays. A few participants did not notice any impact.



N=10

70% of participants noted a positive or slightly positive impact on work-life balance, 30% found no impact, indicating varied perceptions among respondents.

# Exploring The Qualitative Data

With the qualitative information we gathered through the surveys, we were able to gain closer insight into how people were perceiving the different ways that Flowing Fridays impacted them. Notably, a consistent trend that permeated across the responses was the impact Flowing Fridays had on people's work-life balance, and their ability to make time for themselves and their relationships. Another notable insight, however, was that there were a few team members who did indicate some strain on their workloads, although many others reported that having more time to themselves gave them more energy to feel productive.

## "What impact has Flowing Fridays had on you?"

Most of the staff expressed that Flowing Fridays significantly contributed to their work-life balance, allowing dedicated time for personal tasks, hobbies, and enhancing focus and efficiency at work. One participant highlighted that during busy periods or extended days off, having fewer workdays might increase stress.

## "Would you like any changes to Flowing Fridays?"

Half of the participants preferred no changes to Flowing Fridays. One individual showed interest in a four-day workweek every week, while another believed making this shift could make work excessively challenging. Additionally, a respondent mentioned reservations about implementing Flowing Fridays in February due to its short duration and hectic nature.

## "Has Flowing Fridays led to new activities in your life?"

All respondents reported that Flowing Fridays provided opportunities for rest, completing tasks and appointments, spending more time with friends and family, engaging in travel, and participating in volunteer activities.

## "Do you support making Flowing Fridays permanent at VA?"

All respondents are in favor of making Flowing Fridays a permanent fixture at VA. They believe they have adapted well to it, have demonstrated its effectiveness, and consider it an integral and lasting aspect of the organization.

# What Our Team Said

"I LOVE Flowing Fridays. It's a point of pride for me when talking about the organization. I thought it might feel like there isn't enough time in the week, but in reality, I just have more energy to work efficiently."

It's great during low deadline seasons, but during Q1 it's virtually impossible to only work 2-3 days a week depending on long weekend stat holidays, especially, with February being such a short month.

At first I was afraid that it would be the case where cramming a 5 day work expectation week into 4 days would just create more stress - but it's been the opposite. Having that one extra day every two weeks to rest, and then every other week have time to dig in to my work has been super beneficial to my work life."

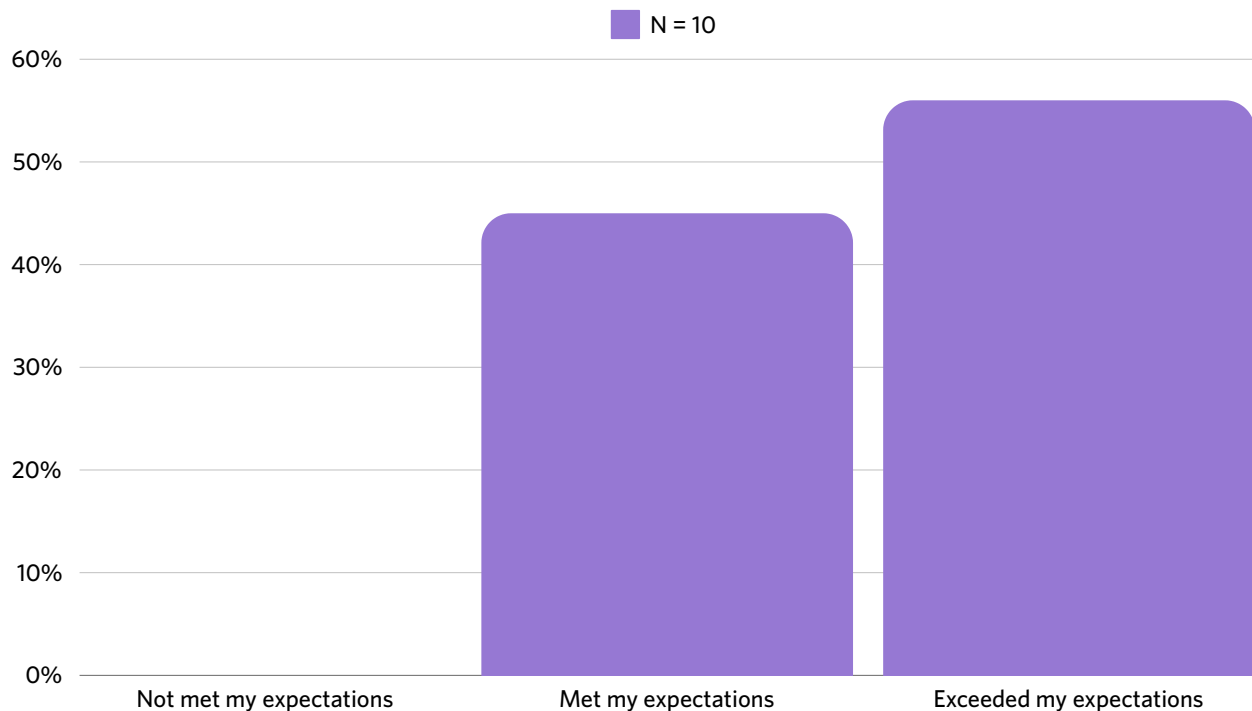
"I loved having the space to rest and recharge. Flowing Fridays allowed me to work on my mental and physical health as well as help my family."

# Meeting Expectations

We also asked the operational team about the extent to which this initiative met their expectations. This gave us some insight into how people's perceptions may have changed or stayed the same from the start of the experiment. 55% of staff indicated that the Flowing Fridays experiment exceeded their expectations, with 45% reporting that their expectations were met.

Respondents were then asked why they answered the way they did, and several respondents admitted that they initially approached the experiment with apprehension, as they were concerned about their ability to manage their workload. However, many discovered increased efficiency and observed effective teamwork due to Flowing Fridays. Some foresaw the positive benefits and recognized the workplace as a space to foster care for both colleagues and oneself right from the beginning.

## The Flowing Fridays Experiment has...



# Summary & Future Actions

**Interest in a Permanent Shift:** All respondents expressed readiness for a permanent shift to Free Fridays and Focus Fridays, indicating that they were well adjusted to it and considered it a beneficial and permanent fixture for the organization.

**Concerns During Experimentation:** Some participants had concerns about managing workload, especially during more hectic periods of the year, highlighting the importance of effective workload management.

**Ethical Considerations for Experimentation:** Participants struggled with uncertainty during experimentation, emphasizing the need for clear communication and ethical considerations when conducting future research on workplace conditions.

**Continued Evaluations:** Although we have developed a model of four-day workweeks that works for us, ongoing work is still needed to continue monitoring any changes or unforeseen developments that might help us further improve our practices.

**Interest in Further Research:** Respondents expressed interest in further exploring other workplace initiatives such as extended vacation time, and researching other diverse factors that influence workplace conditions, and continuing to review and improve upon even our existing processes with how we gather, collaborate, and make decisions together.

# The Implementation

In making the decision regarding what to do with the results of the Flowing Fridays experiment, Volunteer Alberta's leadership team prioritized the input and preferences of the operations staff. The operations team expressed a strong desire for this change, and in response, Volunteer Alberta decided to move forward with the implementation of Flowing Fridays.

Upon careful consideration, leadership identified that the benefits of Flowing Fridays were evident, and there were no significant downsides reported by the staff. The positive outcomes observed during the experiment further solidified our decision to continue with this much valued change.

# Permanently Implementing Flowing Fridays

To offer transparency and reveal the leadership team's thinking behind their decision, here is an excerpt of our Executive Director's email to the staff regarding Flowing Fridays.

Hi everyone,

I'm excited to share on this Focus Friday that based on the data Darryl and Vanee {the research and evaluations team} collected and analyzed from the second round of experimentation of Flowing Fridays experiment, the Leadership Team has determined that Flowing Fridays will become an ongoing way of working at VA.

The presentation Darryl shared with the Leadership Team this week... informed our conversation and decision-making process. The primary factor that guided us to this decision was this piece of data from the presentation: "Do you think we are ready to shift the Flowing Fridays experiment to become a permanent thing at VA? Why?"

All of the respondents said they are ready for a permanent shift to Flowing Fridays, noting that they are well adjusted to it, have proven it works, and already feel it is a permanent fixture for the organization.

As for the recommendations in the presentation:

- The Leadership Team have made a prompt and transparent decision. This email is intended to provide you with information about that decision
- We are continuing with Flowing Fridays. We will continue to centre and enhance workplace wellbeing and we warmly welcome suggestions from the team for what we might want to experiment with next
- We will continue to collect and monitor data related to Flowing Fridays, and workplace wellbeing and experience as a whole.

As we did after the first round of experimentation, we will create an (un)learning brief to share out with our network, so that other organizations that are curious about experimenting with a four-day work week can see the road map we used.

We will also undertake work to update any relevant policies, documents, and HR procedures to reflect this change. Thanks to everyone for embarking on this experiment with us! When we started this experiment a year ago(!) I had hoped that it would help improve wellbeing on our team -- which it certainly has. However, what I didn't anticipate, was the impact it would have on our team culture, and the pride folks have for working at VA. These have been wonderful unintended consequences of Flowing Fridays.

Thanks again for your openness to experimentation -- can't wait to see what we decide to test out next! As always, if you have any questions, any of us on the Leadership team are happy to chat.

# Key Considerations

## Minimal Systemic Pushback

As we navigated the implementation of Flowing Fridays, we were fortunate to experience minimal systemic pushback. The changes introduced were small enough to not prompt resistance or rejection from our funders and existing work structures, but significant enough to have a meaningful impact on our team dynamics and well-being. For example, we realized that the way our experiment was designed with having a free day every two weeks avoided triggering the system's auto-immune response as a free day every week might have done so. Our experiment, although impactful, was small enough to avoid the typical resistance that often accompanies significant alterations in work structures.

We were open with our funders about our experiment, and they expressed genuine interest in what we were doing and discovering. Surprisingly, we encountered no inquiries or challenges from our funders regarding the changes in work dynamics introduced by the Flowing Fridays experiment. This lack of questioning was a signal to us that our sponsors and funders did not perceive the experiment as having a negative impact on the fundamental aspects of our organization's functioning. In fact, it was through the support of one of our funders – Suncor Energy Foundation – that we were able to conduct this experiment in the first place.

Importantly, we must also honour the role of Volunteer Alberta's Board of Directors within this experiment. The board extended remarkable trust to the Executive Director and understood that she was working in the best interest of the organization. As a governance board, they understood and embraced their role, asking good questions, while enabling the staff team to have the time and space to experiment with new ways of working.

## **(Re)acknowledging Our Privilege**

As we noted in our first (un)learning brief, we want to reiterate that 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 currently.

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.

## **Embracing an Experimental Mindset**

Despite not fully knowing where it would take us, embarking upon this process with an experimental mindset allowed us to navigate such a consequential shift in our organizational practices with curiosity and openness. Embracing this initiative as an opportunity for (un)learning helped us focus on exploring and cultivating the conditions for what **could be**, rather than becoming too bogged down with 'getting everything right' or the things that might stop us from making such an important shift.

Indeed, rather than finding out that this was something we could not do, we ultimately adopted a model that was well-suited to our organizational structures and collective needs as a team and as people. More importantly, perhaps, our explorations afforded us invaluable moments to reflect on the important role that rest plays in fostering our well-being. This process encouraged us to be inquisitive and to welcome what we may not have initially realized was actually possible.

# Moving Forward

## Continued internal work

Our journey does not end with the decision to permanently implement Flowing Fridays; we will continue in our evaluations and conversations to ensure that the implemented changes align with our organizational goals and contribute positively to the well-being of our team so that we are better equipped to do good work with and alongside the people, organizations, and communities we serve.

Looking ahead, our commitment to internal work also involves delving deeper into the (un)learning questions posed throughout this document. This entails exploring, discussing, and ultimately experimenting with other initiatives that will further our ongoing pursuit of fostering a culture of care at Volunteer Alberta that centers wellness, self and community care, and the needs of our team members.

We hope to further broaden and deepen our own understanding and (un)learning of what it means to build and nourish a workplace environment that makes time and space for joy and rest, while maintaining workplace standards that promote collective flourishing and enable us to achieve our mission.

## Continued external work

We are also committed to maintaining open communication and sharing our learnings with others. We hope our experience can serve as a valuable resource for other organizations looking to design their own experiments and initiatives related to work culture and well-being. By sharing our insights, we hope to contribute to a broader conversation about fostering positive work environments and promoting the importance of challenging and shifting work structures that may hinder workplace wellness.

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.



# Conclusion

People who work within the social impact, nonprofit and voluntary sector are exceptional at taking care of other people. Unfortunately, this care for others can often come at the expense of their own well-being.

Volunteer Alberta's commitment to centering care in the workplace is nurtured by our recognition that supporting others requires us to first attend to our own wellbeing. We believe that if we as workers in the sector are well-cared for by the organizations we work for, then we will be better equipped to care for the people and communities we serve. This commitment is guided by the essential questions we have posed, and continue to reflect on, that challenge traditional notions of productivity and emphasize the importance of rest, mutual care, and worker wellbeing.

Through our own exploration and experience with four-day work weeks, we hope to inspire others in the sector to embark on similar journeys within their organizations. By sharing our learnings and insights, we aim to encourage more organizations to prioritize the well-being of their employees and foster environments that center care and mutual support.

# Volunteer Alberta



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