

# THE SABPP™ **FACT SHEET**

MARCH 2022 · NUMBER 2022/02

## 4 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH 7 TIME AND ITS MANAGEMENT IN THE NEW NORMAL

# INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Fact Sheet, we explored the evolving narratives of the new normal and posed the question of what we mean by 'new' and 'normal'. In this Fact Sheet we will explore our *lived experience* of the new normal, focusing on our experience of time and its management as well as our relationship with these. And we will continue to question what is seen as 'new' and 'normal'. In this case it is our new normal of time that we need to examine, and this includes asking ourselves what is the new timer that sets and regulates the pace and rhythm of individuals, teams, and organisations.

The Fact Sheet explores the quantitative and qualitative changes in the experience of, and relationship with, working time as outlined in the figure below. The figure can serve as a framework to explore some of the implications of these changes and the management thereof. For example, the implications for work-life boundaries and balance and, consequently, wellbeing. This may prompt us, as HR practitioners, to reconsider and rethink boundaries, balance, and wellbeing. And critically evaluate how our various organisations are structuring, apportioning, and regulating time whether knowingly or not. Thus, one could consider that there are timers or clocks at the organisational, team, and individual levels akin to our bodies' biological clock that regulates our circadian rhythms. This then helps deliberate on the debate on a four-day work week, which has been proposed as a solution to address productivity, work-life balance, employee engagement, and burnout. The below figure can help examine this by first asking what is the organisational or people problem that we are addressing, how are we framing the problem, and does the four-day week address the problem as defined.



# A 'NEW NORMAL' CLOCK?

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During the pandemic the traditional working hours – of eight hours in a day and forty-hours in a week – seemed suspended as working time appears to have been extended. This has been observed across various organisations, from reports in conferences, webinars, and publications of how our working hours has been stretched or upended. An example of this quantitative change in working hours is the 2021 CIPD Fact Sheet. It quotes figures “published by the Office for National Statistics in February 2021 [that] show [the] average actual weekly hours worked in the UK increased by 1.8 hours to 30.2 paid hours per week from the quarters July/September 2020 and October/December 2020” (CIPD, 2021). This may suggest that perhaps we have, de facto, a ‘new normal’ clock evolving, one with changed and perhaps fuzzier working hours.



There are many other examples of this quantitative increase as well as the reconfiguration of working hours with remote working (Lufkin, 2021; Maurer, 2020). This may be due to increased business targets and work demands, tighter deadlines, flexible working times, and accommodation of different time preferences, requirements, and zones of dispersed team members and the business. These examples also point to the consequential digital and physical fatigue and the other effects on wellbeing from the change in working

hours (see the June 2021 Fact Sheet), which will be discussed in the next section. These effects drew global attention from the latter part of 2020 onwards as wellness concerns were increasingly raised. We should note though that the impact of remote working on working hours and wellbeing was already identified prior to the pandemic and the large-scale experiment in remote working globally (Eurofund and ILO, 2017).

"Nearly 70 percent of professionals who transitioned to remote work because of the pandemic say they now work on the weekends, and 45 percent say they regularly work more hours during the week than they did before, according to a survey of 2,800 workers by Los Angeles-based staffing firm Robert Half" (Maurer, 2020)

"South Africa's workforce is facing a mental health crisis as employees work longer and harder due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, says Dr Brenda Didi-Quvane, Chief Risk Officer at Momentum Multiply" (BusinessTech, 2021a)

We should note that Chapter 2 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA, 1997) sets out the regulation of working time for employees below a certain earnings threshold. It stipulates the maximum working hours. However, more "senior employees and those earning above the earnings threshold are in a different position as they are excluded from the BCEA provisions regulating maximum working hours and overtime. These categories of employees may be required to be available after hours, on weekends and public holidays, without any expectation of additional remuneration" (BusinessTech, 2021b). In certain countries, such as France, Italy, Spain, and Ireland, there are provisions for the 'right to disconnect' from work and related digital tools and to regulate the use of these tools.

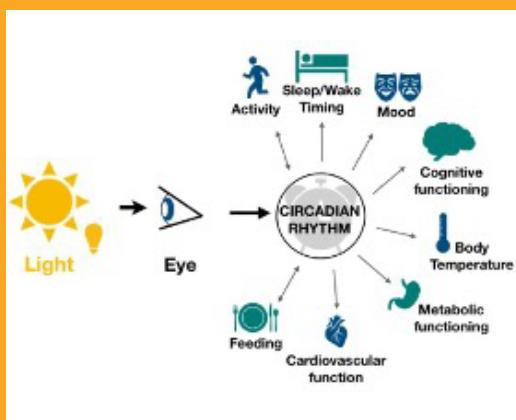


# BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS AND RHYTHMS

The extension and reconfiguration of working hours – of being available at all or variable hours or being always online for example – can disrupt or alter our daily rhythms of working and living. This includes our biological rhythms and breaks. And thereby our experience of, and relationship with, time and relatedly our wellbeing. These biological rhythms and breaks are regulated by our internal biological clocks, which includes regulating the necessary shifts between physical, mental, and behavioural states in a twenty-four hour day (such as focusing, processing, resting, and sleeping). Together these clocks and states form our circadian rhythms (see the textbox below).

## CIRCADIAN RHYTHM

For purposes of this Fact Sheet a simplified model of our circadian rhythm will be illustrated, including how our screen use and time can impact on it. The below image on the left provides a simplified model of the regulation of our circadian rhythms and its different facets from sleep/wake timing to cognitive, metabolic, and cardiovascular functioning. In the simplified model there is one master clock (suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) in the brain) that regulates the other internal organ or periphery clocks, which in turn regulate the different aspects of our brain-body functioning.



Source: *Blind Veterans* (n.d.), *Nystagmus Network* (2021); *Addison and Harris* (2021); *Maurer* (2020)

Light is one of the factors influencing our circadian rhythm as it sends a signal to the SCN that it is day, which in turn signals and coordinates the other periphery clocks. The image below on the upper right is a basic illustration of the impact of screen time (especially artificial blue light) as it also signals the SCN, which interprets it as day as well (thus the confusion illustrated in the image of whether it is 11pm or 11am). The bottom right image shows the reality of being always online and the disruption of the circadian rhythm which has negative impacts on our health, functioning, and performance.



The key question that emerges is how the changing working hours and patterns, including experienced increase in pace and increased screen time, will disrupt and alter our circadian rhythm or internal clocks as well as our experience of, and relationship with, time. This needs to be considered for the short, medium, and long term. The HR practitioner will need to then consider the subsequent impacts thereof. This could be the immediate impacts such as time management (in terms of prioritisation and effective use of time) and information management (as will be discussed below), and the more remote impacts on, for example, talent and its management, risk management, workforce planning, performance and its management, learning and development, wellbeing, and organisational citizenship behaviour in the short, medium, and long-term.

As HR practitioners we need to ask how these quantitative changes, as well as the qualitative changes that will be discussed in the next section, could challenge the notion of work-life boundaries and balance, and reconfigure it. We

need to consider how working and personal/social times are evolving and the possible impacts on wellbeing. However, we should note that some people may reframe it as an opportunity for the integration of work and life, or the mutual enhancement of work and family. This warns us against quick generalisations across individuals, worker segments, and demographics for example.

*"The COVID-19 pandemic forced many workers, especially parents, to **integrate** work with personal responsibilities. While some lamented the absence of boundaries, others enjoyed the benefits"* (bold and italics added, Akanbi, 2021)

The question of work-life balance and habits, including individual lifestyles, has been explored previously by HR practitioners, prior to the pandemic and the new normal (see the SABPP National HR Standard Element, Employee Wellness).

# ORGANISATIONAL CLOCKS AND RHYTHMS

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The extension and reconfiguration of working hours and its impacts is also explored in an anonymised survey by Microsoft of its employees globally. The survey shows an increase in working hours. More importantly, the Head of People Analytics at Microsoft pointed out that it showed that there are shifts in how our extended and reconfigured working time is being partitioned and used/consumed by various work and organisational activities (Klinghoffer, 2021). And this means there is, relatedly, a shift in our relationship with time and its management as well as how we relate to tasks and others (colleagues, subordinates, and supervisors). This poses a question of whether there is, de facto, an evolving 'new normal' clock of working, relating, living, and recuperating or regenerating (whether through breaks, dedicated focus times, or sleep). A new normal clock that is shaped by the push and pull of our biological and organisational clocks.

The survey found that there is an increase in *collaboration* time as measured by the number of meetings, emails, and chats. However, there was a related decrease in time available and taken for *dedicated focus, breaks, time-off, and vacations*. These blurred the time and spatial boundaries between our working and personal/social lives, which one could suggest undoes the notion of work-life balance and the boundaries between these. And they led to a decrease in *wellbeing*.

"As collaboration time increased, well-being decreased."

"As people set aside more focused time, well-being improved."

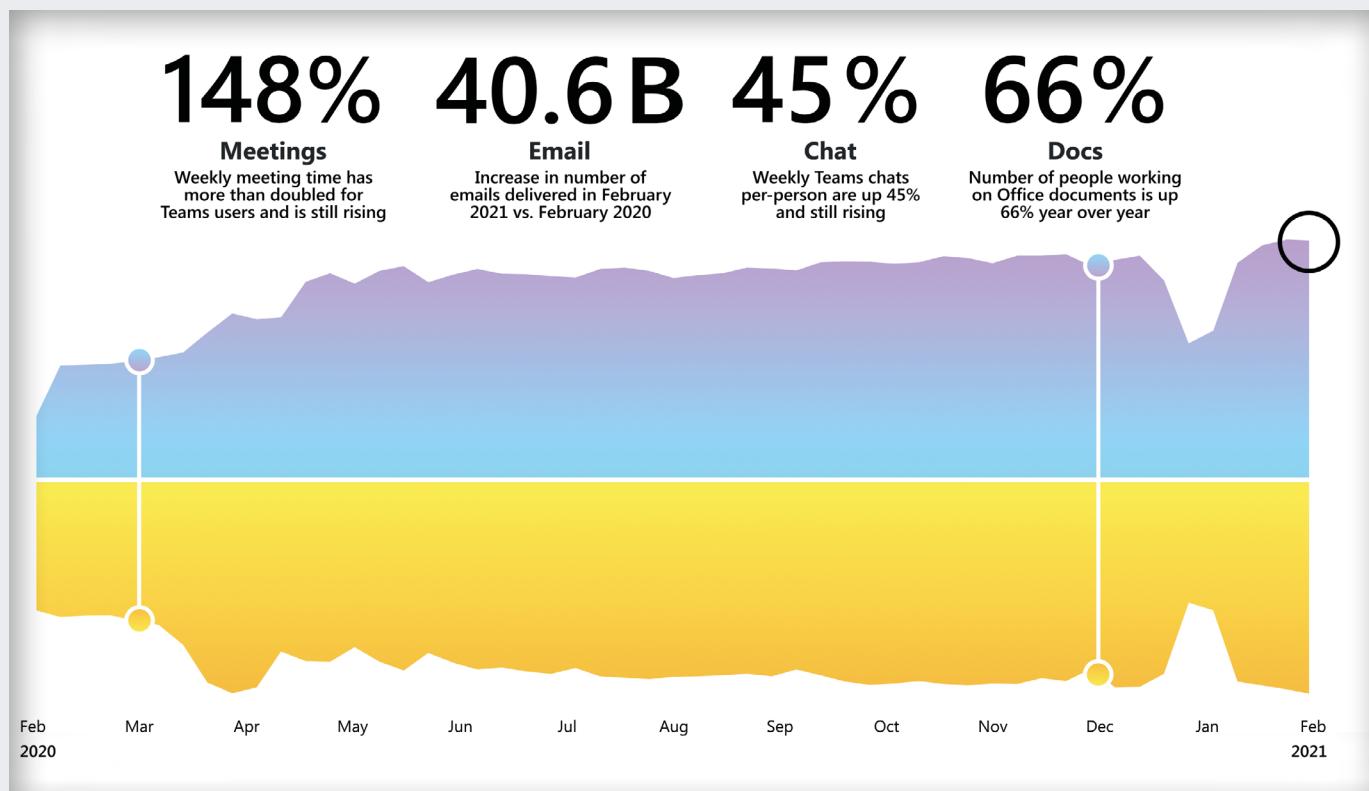
"Overall, we discovered that over-collaborating, lack of uninterrupted focus, and skipping time off were major drivers of the decreased work-life balance we were investigating" (Head of Microsoft People Analytics, Klinghoffer, 2021)

It is not only the quantity of increased time consumed by the different work and organisational activities and how it is partitioned by these activities. The Microsoft survey also suggests an increase in the intensity of these activities. That is, the increased resource and energy demands in the times consumed by the various activities. Together with the experienced increase pace, this means increased demands *for* our time and *of* our time. Given the survey was with Microsoft employees it focused on digital intensity.

"The digital intensity of workers' days has increased substantially, with the average number of meetings and chats steadily increasing since last year. Specifically, when we compare collaboration trends in Microsoft 365 between February 2020 and February 2021:

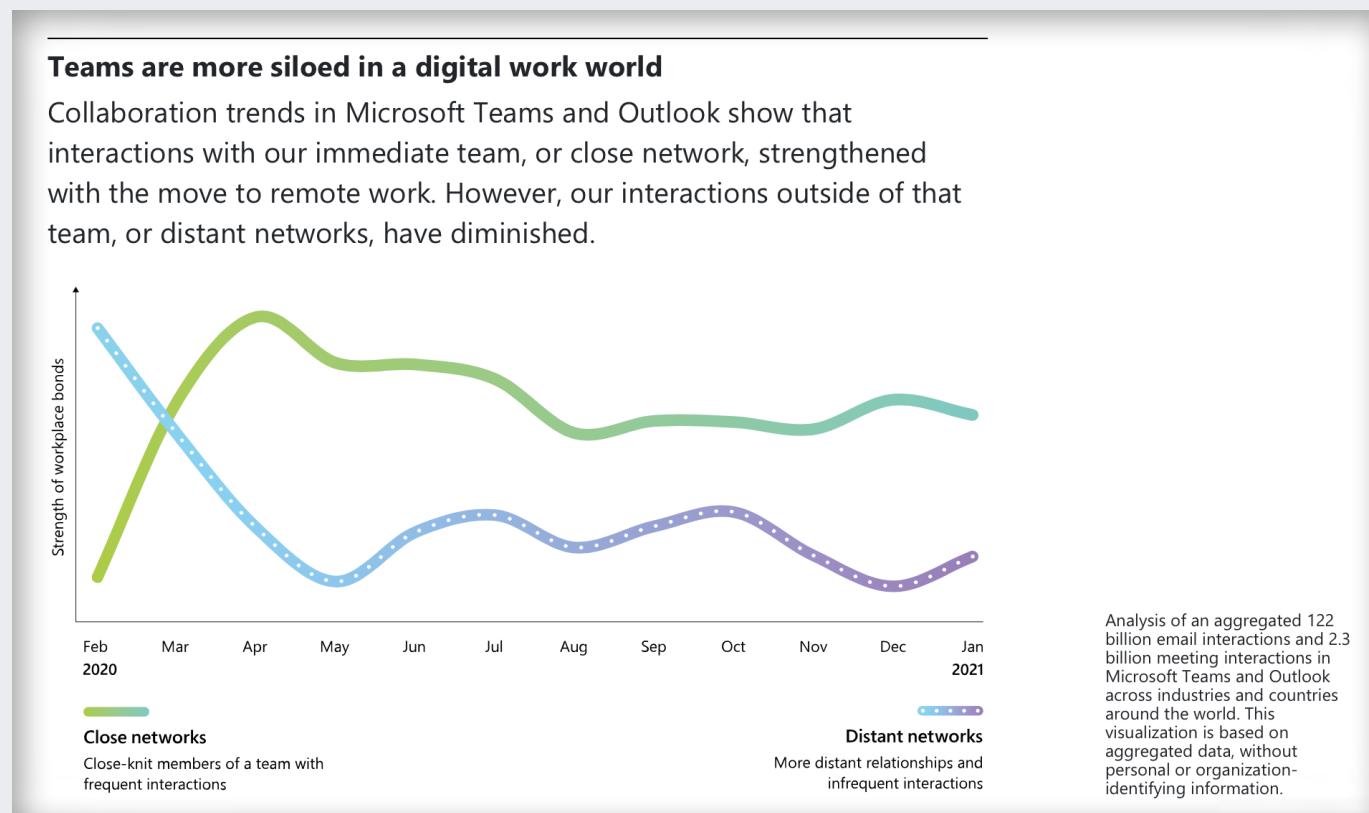
- Time spent in Microsoft Teams meetings has more than doubled (2.5X) globally and, aside from a holiday dip in December, continues to climb.
- The average meeting is 10 minutes longer, increasing from 35 to 45 minutes.
- The average Teams user is sending 45 percent more chats per week and 42 percent more chats per person after hours, with chats per week still on the rise.
- The number of emails delivered to commercial and education customers in February, when compared to the same month last year, is up by 40.6 billion.
- And we've seen a 66 percent increase in the number of people working on documents."

Source: Microsoft (2021)



Source: Microsoft (2021, blue illustrates the increase in meeting minutes per person and orange the increase in chats per person)

The increase in digital intensity and collaboration time, however, needs to be critically examined in terms of the different networks within the organisation (see the November 2021 Fact Sheet). The below graph illustrates the contrasting findings of the Microsoft survey between immediate/close networks and distant networks. The survey found that the immediate/close networks strengthened while the distant networks diminished, and this led to silos in the digital workspace. As posed earlier, we need to consider the question of whether there is, de facto, an evolving 'new normal' clock of working, relating, living, and recuperating or regenerating. And we need to also consider the question of how our working, relating, living, and recuperating or regenerating is taking form or shape in the short, medium, and long-term. That is, what these now mean and will mean in the future. This means both the quantitative and qualitative changes in how we work, relate, live, and engage in our wellbeing.



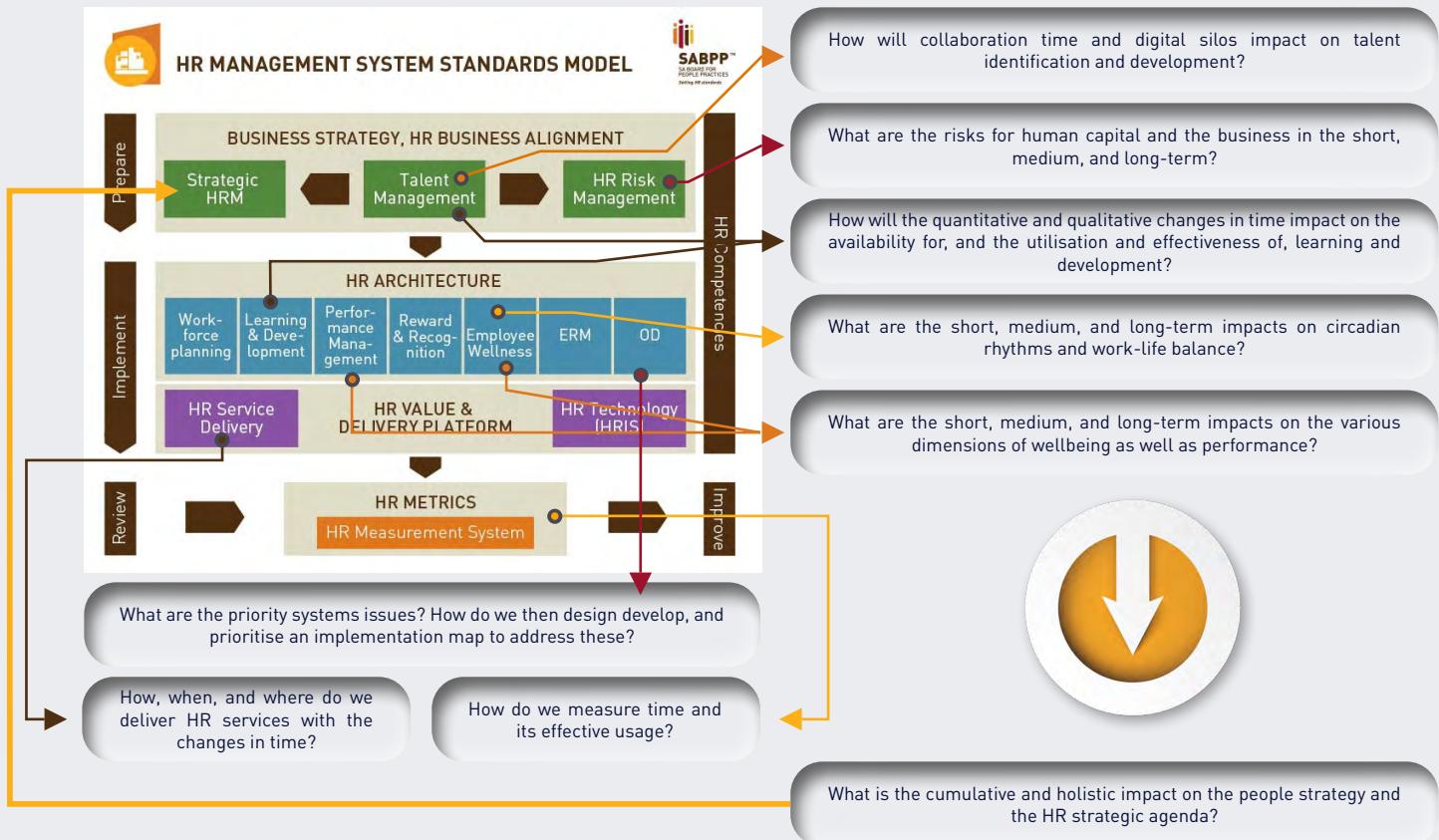
Source: Microsoft (2021)

# IMPLICATIONS FOR HR

Immediately, the HR practitioner can work with line management and teams to develop more effective management of time, information, collaboration, and work; and, given the 'new normal' clock, she/he can (re)evaluate the organisation's active management of wellbeing. The HR practitioner could explore the use of digital tools to aid this. For example, Microsoft Outlook and Teams can provide individual employees and the organisation with statistics on their collaboration and focus times as well as their breaks or dedicated times for mindfulness for example. However, the HR practitioner needs to critically evaluate how these tools define collaboration, focus, and break or mindfulness times; and that there are no unintended consequences of the dashboards the tools provide. For example, we need to be cautious that we do not scapegoat individual employees for systemic issues and that employees do not feel that this is part of corporate surveillance (see the November 2021 Fact Sheet). We need to consider what are the resource and energy demands on individual employees with the quantitative and qualitative changes in their time; and, relatedly, the potential for burnout and presenteeism (Lufkin, 2021).

The HR practitioner could also work through in a systematic manner the implications of the changes in the experience, relationship, and management of time. For example, working through the HR Standards System Model, illustrated below, the HR practitioner can examine how the experience of, and relationship with, time and its management will impact employees and supervisors per Standard in the short, medium, and long-term. The textboxes in the illustration suggest some of the possible questions that can be posed by the HR practitioner. As discussed in the previous section, one could consider that there is an organisational 'new normal' clock or rhythm, with the possibilities of different internal clocks within the different functions/teams/silos of the organisation. As HR practitioners we need explore how we could measure, monitor, and manage the organisational clocks and rhythms.





## DEBATE ON FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK

There appears to be resurgent interest in the four-day work week (Aggovino, 2020; BBC, 2021; Cassidy, 2021). It seems to be suggested as a solution to the increased work and time demands and the consequences thereof on productivity and wellbeing. And citations of examples from developed countries are being used to provide evidence for its efficacy.

"While the five-day, 40-hour workweek is ingrained in our social consciousness, the debate on shortening it has re-emerged after the COVID-19 quarantine."

"Employees are now looking for more flexible work hours and a better work-life balance. Companies trying to survive the "Great Resignation" may be considering a switch to attract new staff" (Cassidy, 2021, see the August 2021 Fact Sheet for a discussion on the 'Great Resignation').

"Trials of a four-day week in Iceland were an "overwhelming success" and led to many workers moving to shorter hours" (BBC, 2021)

First, though, the HR practitioner needs to lead and support line management to analyse their specific organisation and context and the people and time management issues therein. Then, they need to critically evaluate how the proponents of the four-day week are framing the organisational or people problem to be addressed and, thereafter, whether the four-day week solution will address their specific people and time management problems as they have defined it.

The figure presented in the introduction of the Fact Sheet can serve as a framework to help identify the experience of, and relationship with, time within organisations and for the line managers, teams, and individual employees therein. As HR practitioners we can analyse the quantitative and qualitative changes in time as well as stakeholders' experience of, and relationship with, the changed times. We could ask how the four-day work week will address some of the quantitative and qualitative changes in time as outlined above in the Fact Sheet. How will it help with managing workload and demands more effectively? How will it help with time and work management as well as wellbeing of different segments of the workforce? How will it assist line managers, teams, and individual employees to have a more proactive approach to the changes in time and manage their experience of, and relationship with, time? Will the four-day week lead to more extended working hours in the four days to cram a five-day work week in a four-day work week (as asked in the textbox below)?

### **Will you have employees work four 10-hour days or four eight-hour days?**

Fans of the eight-hour day say the alternative exhausts employees and they'll spend their day off recovering from the week. Those in the 10-hour camp worry that productivity will slip in a curtailed workweek.

**Source:** Aggovino (2020)

See the article by Aggovino, for example, on some key questions to consider when exploring the four-day work week in your specific context, industry, and organisation. For instance, consider the various production lines and shift work in certain industries. Can the production line and the work entailed, including shift work, be organised on a four-day week basis? Is this applicable in industries that have a seven-day week production line running? Does this suggest that perhaps certain segments of the workforce are privileged or can be afforded a four-day week? A power utility such as Eskom can be an illustrative case to ponder the above questions. It has, for example, dedicated production units for power generation, that operate on a seven-day week production, and non-production support functions at the Head Office that operate on a five-day work week.

# CONCLUSION

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The quantitative and qualitative changes in our experience of, and relationship with, time and its management need a systematic and sustained examination. The HR practitioner, line manager, and organisation needs to consider the short, medium, and long-term impacts and ramifications. We need to actively deliberate on and set the organisational and team clocks and rhythms. This is for both efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation as well as inclusion, equity, and wellbeing in the short, medium, and long-term.

**Earn 1 CPD point by completing the Fact Sheet quiz. Click on the below link to log in and then access the quiz on the “My CPD” tab:**

**EARN 1 CPD POINT**

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# PREVIOUS EDITIONS OF THE FACT SHEET

# 2021



# 2022

