

# An Impact Assessment for Implementing a Compressed Working Week for Office-based Workers in the Maltese Public Service

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*Compressed Working Week*

*Productivity*

*Management*

*Impact Assessment*

*Work-Life Balance*

## **Introduction**

The rationale behind this research project was rooted in exploring the implementation of a compressed working week (CWW) in the Public Service by examining measures of productivity and stakeholders involved to derive an impact assessment (IA) on the most feasible policy options.

The concept of a CWW adopted was of working the requisite number of hours for less than the traditional 5-day week. This research focused on office-based workers as they are more consistently linked to the typical 5-day week work pattern.

Within the Public Service, officers typically work 43.75 hours during the winter schedule to benefit from a shorter 30-hour working week during summer (Public Service Management Code, Office of the Principal Permanent Secretary, 2020). This is a long-held tradition dating back to when Malta was still under British rule (Office of the Prime Minister, 1974) but reflects an established openness to the idea of a compressed working schedule.



### Research Objectives

The research question explored was: Could a more widely implemented CWW in the Public Service be adopted without detriment to service delivery? The answer was presented in the form of a policy IA.

IAs are rooted in evidence-based policy-making. Their aim is to bring a rational and scientific approach to the complexities of issues and the various relationships of stakeholders. The IA reveals “who is affected, the magnitude and the cause of effects” (Großmann et al., 2016, p. 11).

### Literature Review

If the CWW is not perceived in a positive light beforehand, it will be deemed unsuccessful post-implementation (Arbon et al., 2012). Input from employees is always essential for this measure to succeed (Arbon et al., 2012). Acceptance of the CWW depends on the person’s preferences, inclinations, and capabilities (Golden, 2011). For service users, implementation is negatively perceived if services are deterred or if they esteem it as another perk of working within the Public Service (Arbon et al., 2012).

The only truly comparable case study of a CWW carried out within the public administration for which detailed follow-up research was found is an experiment conducted within the state of Utah, United

States, between 2009 and 2011, where a 40-hour work week was maintained over four days. 17,000 state employees worked from Monday to Thursday (07:00 – 18:00). A report presented by the Office of the Legislative Auditor General State of Utah (2012) found that results were not overwhelmingly positive. However, regularised performance measures were not in place to act as objective standards. Some employees reported increased employee morale, less interruptions during the working day, and better management of their personal business by transferring personal errands to Friday. Clientele reported that they benefitted from the extended opening hours while others opined that government services were not available on a Friday. Certain departments were not found to be well-suited to a CWW, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Community and Culture, as both departments cater to activities which are not naturally office-based and would very much require an element of adaptability to cater to client needs.

Wadsworth and Facer (2016) conducted a post-implementation survey with Utah public employees and found the results to be predominantly positive. Employees reported higher levels of work-life balance. However, employees with children reported a greater negative reaction, with unplanned family needs causing the most stress for parents.



Benefits	Drawbacks
Increased performance ratings on behalf of employees (Baltes et al., 1999)	Greater difficulty in scheduling meetings and interaction (Wadsworth and Facer, 2016)
More efficient customer service provided (Wadsworth and Facer, 2016)	Increased levels of fatigue in employees (Hyatt and Coslor, 2018)
Greater levels of job satisfaction reported by employees (Baltes et al., 1999)	
Employers reporting a demonstrated better sense of autonomy in employees and responsibility from employees (Arbon et al., 2012)	
A decrease in absenteeism (Ronen and Primps, 1981; Deery et al., 2017)	
Reduction in commuting costs (Ho and Stewart, 1992)	
Less emotional exhaustion, stress and anxiety (Deery et al., 2017)	
Improvements in work-life balance (Hyatt and Coslor, 2018)	
More leisure time (Pullinger, 2014)	

Table 1 displays the benefits and drawbacks found in literature pertaining to the implementation of the CWW. While the benefits seem to significantly outweigh the drawbacks in the table above, it is important to note the methodological limitations of these studies, most notably that research on the CWW is carried out within wider studies on flexitime or alternative working schedules as if they are all interchangeable.

**Table 1:** Benefits and drawbacks of the CWW found in academic research





### Method

Structured interviews were carried out with key stakeholders who are crucial in implementing such a measure in the Public Service, as well as private stakeholders who would have a vested interest. Thirteen elite interviews were carried out.

The topics covered in the interviews included the likely reaction of office-based workers to the implementation of a

CWW, the benefits to employee wellbeing, gender-related issues, productivity, and the practical implementation, especially in light of the Public Service practice of ‘banking of hours’ for the summer months.

Subsequently, a survey was issued to 95 employees within the People & Standards Division. The aim of the survey was only to provide indicative employee feedback—it did not aim to represent all issues for office-based workers within the Public Service.

The data and issues elicited from these interviews and survey underwent a thematic analysis as

proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and, finally, presented as a policy IA in order to identify the most feasible option. Six policy options were identified. A weighted decision matrix was used to choose the best policy option. Of the six policy options, the majority were proposals for a new system of work and would be applied across the board to all departments/directorates who adopt the system. The sixth was a proposal for the CWW to be adopted as a work-life balance measure and, therefore, to be taken up by singular employees.

## Results

### Thematic Analysis of Interviews

The above thematic map presents the principle themes and sub-themes found within the thematic analysis. While the majority believed that such a measure would be welcomed, certain issues were identified which may lead to resistance, including the increase in daily hours and the possible decrease in overtime. In terms of productivity and service delivery, it was repeatedly mentioned that a paradigm shift towards a task-oriented culture would be necessary. Managerial flexibility was frequently mentioned as pivotal for success, including clear communication on expected outcomes; means of addressing circumstances when targets are not met and; standard operating procedures for continuity and handovers on ‘days off’. Digitalisation and job shadowing would also play an essential role.

Significant emphasis was placed on the effects on mental health and

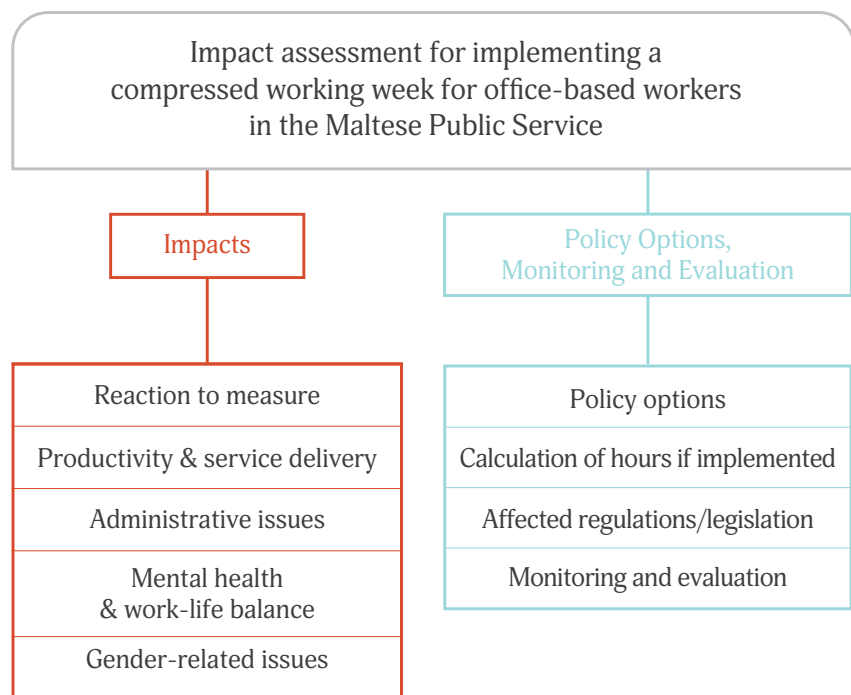


Figure 1: Thematic map

work-life balance. For employees, a significant positive impact of the CWW would be less travelling time. Conversely, negative outcomes could include a decrease in the availability to carry out part-time work. This is potentially countered with greater flexibility due to the aggregated time off to carry out extracurriculars. However, for employees to truly be able to enjoy this, the right to disconnect from work would need to be safeguarded.

Many agreed that this measure would help incentivise women to increase their working hours, as it offers yet another flexible option. However, the CWW would significantly disrupt valuable after-school hours. Nevertheless, this measure could help to challenge stereotypes and encourage men to take on more family-related roles, given the increased free time at the weekend.





### Survey Responses

Qualitative answers within the survey supported the issues which were discussed during the interviews. No further major issues were raised. The reactions in the survey were predominantly positive. Almost 40% believed that the CWW would improve employee morale and work-life balance. Of particular note were the considerations that a CWW could further encourage adherence to deadlines; that the extra 'day off' would act as an incentive, especially since working after normal hours is often necessary, and that the longer hours would result in better time management.

When asked to list the potential negative impacts, the majority listed daunting long hours, fatigue, and having to carry out a week's worth of work in four days. Some mentioned that this measure would leave less time to care for children or elderly parents in the evening.

When it was emphasised that a CWW would likely mean working standard hours in winter and summer but having a shorter working week throughout, the majority (61.9%) still claimed they would consider adopting a CWW.

### Policy Options Matrix

A policy options matrix with weighted criteria was drawn up and awarded. Each policy option was ranked from 1-5 on a scale of Low, Fair, Medium, High, Excellent. Below is a summary of the ranking and justifications for each policy option when compared to the status quo.

The existing literature focuses on post-implementation effects, whereas this research study acts a pre-implementation scoping exercise. The existing literature unfortunately rarely hones in on the specific nuances of the CWW. The strength of this research project is doing so through highly effective but rarely used methodologies such as thematic analysis and impact assessment. The impacts which have been discussed both by high-level professionals as well as employees and the identification of stakeholders all contribute to a detailed rundown of this measure.

Ranking	Policy Option	Total Points Awarded
1	<b>Adopting a CWW only during the Summer Schedule</b>	<b>95</b>
Minimal changes required except the adoption of a roster system. Wide acceptability and increased employee motivation make this the most acceptable option. In terms of efficiency and effectiveness, it motivates employees by means of a further reward during the summer schedule with minimal disruption to service delivery.		
2	<b>The 'day off' is not worked at the office but from home.</b>	<b>87</b>
This policy option takes the lessons learnt from the recent COVID-19 remote working circumstances and applies them to the idea of the CWW. Its challenge lies in the effectiveness of establishing a new norm.		
3	<b>The CWW is introduced as a work-life balance measure.</b>	<b>65</b>
While this measure would benefit singular employees, resistance from management and other employees may be exercised.		
4	<b>A CWW is implemented on the basis of a 40-hour week all year round.</b>	<b>62</b>
Increasing the hours so significantly in summer marks the downfall of this policy option which would meet too much resistance to succeed.		
5	<b>A CWW is implemented with the day off potentially being used to accumulate any overdue hours if necessary</b>	<b>55</b>
Though slightly more beneficial than the worst ranked option, this measure is still too complex to implement.		
6	<b>A CWW is implemented while maintaining the system of working longer hours in winter and shorter hours in summer</b>	<b>51</b>
The high levels of fatigue and the low levels of acceptability outweigh the benefits reaped from this option.		

**Table 2:** Policy Option Matrix

## Recommendations

The first step for implementation would be to present and discuss the results with internal stakeholders and unions. While one policy option was more favoured, the others should not be completely discarded. For example, incorporating remote working has its merits. A working committee should be charged with regularly analysing the results, providing progress updates, and re-assessing the way forward.

Wider pre-implementation surveys with managers and employees should be conducted, as well as a scoping survey with service users. Sections which are already carrying out this measure during the summer schedule should particularly be consulted. Future research would need to consider attitudes; personal relationships especially with dependents; unplanned demands; any age/ sex differences; differences in sections or grades; and most significantly visible impacts on service delivery and productivity. Such surveys should be conducted on a larger scale and over different periods of time, during both winter and





summer schedules, to be able to compare and contrast findings.

Concurrently, lengthy discussions and drafting of strategic plans will need to be carried out on the mechanisms which will be adopted for monitoring and evaluations. This should not be restricted to managerial levels. Such plans will need continuous revision depending on the findings at each stage.

Following the review of responses, pilot studies are to be initiated in identified departments which do not yet implement the CWW. Such studies will especially need to focus on attitudes of employees/management and the monitoring/evaluation mechanisms adopted.

## Conclusion

The motivation behind this research project was the ever-growing emphasis on emerging work trends which can better address dynamics in work-life balance. This research culminates in a weighted policy option matrix which gathered impacts and options in order to identify the most feasible option to implement the CWW as a new work system and not as a work-life balance measure.

It bears noting that the bulk of the research was carried out during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Subjects were demonstrably open to new systems of work and, within the context of this study, this served for especially constructive dialogue.

This research challenges the concepts of productivity and moves away from the idea that the measure of output is 'hours clocked'. It is a preliminary stepping stone into a paradigm shift and a necessary reconsideration of the future of work.





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