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Beyond Working Hours: Employee and Managerial Adaptation to Reduced Working Time Arrangements (research concept)

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Introduction and research aim

- Research on reduced working time and four-day workweek initiatives has predominantly focused on employee well-being, work-life balance, and organizational performance. While existing evidence suggests positive outcomes for both employees and organizations, considerably less attention has been paid to the adaptation processes that follow the implementation of reduced working time.
- From the perspectives of **Social Exchange Theory** and **Psychological Contract Theory**, reduced working time may be perceived by employees as a valuable organizational investment, potentially triggering reciprocal attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, employees may respond in diverse ways, ranging from higher engagement and commitment to pursuing personal interests, additional employment, or alternative career activities.
- The aim of this study is to explore how employees and managers adapt to reduced working time arrangements and to identify the consequences of these adaptation processes for employee behavior and organizational functioning.

Research methods

This study will adopt a **mixed-methods research design** consisting of two complementary stages.

- **Stage 1: Qualitative Research** – semi-structured interviews will be conducted with: employees working under reduced working time arrangements, line managers and HR professionals involved in their implementation. The qualitative phase aims to identify: employees' interpretations of reduced working time, patterns of utilizing newly available time, perceived benefits and challenges, managerial practices supporting or hindering successful implementation. Interview data will be analyzed using thematic analysis.
- **Stage 2: Quantitative Research** – a large-scale survey will be conducted among employees from organizations that have implemented reduced working time arrangements and, where possible, among employees from comparable organizations operating under traditional schedules. The survey will include measures of: perceived organizational support, psychological contract, work engagement, organizational commitment, work intensification, turnover intentions, use of non-working time.

Results and discussion

- **Expected results** – the study is expected to identify distinct patterns of employee adaptation to reduced working time.
- Potential adaptation profiles may include:
  - ✓ **Reciprocal adapters** – employees who perceive reduced working time as organizational support and respond with higher engagement, commitment, and discretionary effort.
  - ✓ **Entitlement-oriented employees** – employees who regard reduced working time as a standard employment benefit rather than a resource requiring reciprocity.
  - ✓ **Development-oriented employees** – employees who use the gained time for learning, health improvement, family responsibilities, or personal development.
  - ✓ **Economic maximizers** – employees who use the additional time for secondary employment, freelancing, or entrepreneurial activities.
- The findings are also expected to reveal that the outcomes of reduced working time arrangements depend not only on the reduction of working hours itself but also on: employees' interpretations of the change, the quality of employee-organization relationships, managerial approaches to implementation, the extent of work intensification.
- This perspective shifts the discussion from the question:

Does reduced working time work?

to:

Under what conditions and through which mechanisms does reduced working time produce different outcomes?

Conclusions

- **Reduced Working Time (RWT)** should be understood not only as a change in working hours but also as a change in the employee-organization relationship. Employee responses to RWT may vary depending on how the change is perceived and how it is managed within the organization. Examining adaptation processes may help explain why the outcomes of RWT differ across employees and organizations.
- **Original contribution** – the study contributes to the growing literature on reduced working time by moving beyond the traditional focus on well-being and productivity. Instead, it examines the mechanisms of employee and managerial adaptation, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how reduced working time reshapes employee-organization relationships.

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