

How do other countries approach the working week?



Where we work has an impact on how we work and how we perceive working life. Everyone has thought about working abroad at some point, and each country has business practices that provide food for thought for firms looking to evolve and develop too.

For example, in China the staff are encouraged to take longer lunches to keep their energy levels up, while in Denmark workers make sure they have at least six hours of leisure time worked into their daily routine.

Emily Douglas of Business Grapevine looked into how five different countries approach work and the working week, to see if anything can be learned from the comparisons.

1. France

The laissez faire approach to working life, France has always led the way in terms of holidays and work-life balance. According to a report by Pareto Law, in France lunch vouchers are mandatory if there is no on-site canteen – meaning around 3.5million employees benefit from this perk.

A new French law has recently been enacted which give workers the right to disconnect from emails after work. The law says that any business with more than 50 employees should establish hours when staff cannot send or receive emails.

2. The Netherlands

A staple of the working week in the Netherlands is flexibility. Many employees tend to work away from offices, remotely or from their own homes – meaning they can better manage their hours and their work-life balance.

Ann Pickering, HRD at O2, commented on the benefits of flexible working: “Flexible working is so much more than arriving at 10am and leaving at 6pm. It’s about trust. Engender trust in the organisation and say ‘I know you’re going to do your job, and I’m not too worried about where you do it’.”

3. Japan

Admired for their tenacious and dedicated approach to work, Japanese employees are some of the most respectful and loyal workers in the world – however, this can lead to some people overdoing it. Yuu Wakebe, a Health Ministry Official, summed up the issue, saying: “It is a worker’s right to take paid vacations. But working in Japan involves quite a lot of a volunteer spirit.”

Just over half of Japanese firms are reviewing rules on working hours, with many looking to cut down on overtime; a Reuter’s poll has shown.

A government campaign for more employee-friendly labour practices has gained traction, following an employee from advertising agency Denstu committing suicide – allegedly from working 105 hours of overtime in one month.

The suicide, later ruled by the government as karoshi, 'death by overwork' has led to an uproar of public grievances on social media as well as raids on Dentsu by the labour ministry – The Japan Times reports.

4. China

In China, staff are actively encouraged to take longer lunch breaks so to increase their productivity – Pareto Law reports.

They have a phrase which shows how much onus they put on a lunchtime feed: "早餐吃得好，中餐吃得饱，晚餐吃得少" – which translates as "At breakfast eat well, at lunch eat until full, and at dinner eat just a little."

The two-hour lunch break reportedly originates from an Emperor who claimed he didn't have enough time to eat and sleep at lunch – believing that the rest of his subjects felt the same, he decreed that all China should observe the two-hour lunch.

5. Sweden

Employees here can take up to six weeks' vacation in the summer months, which means that some restaurants and shops shut down during this period. There was also talk of rolling out a nationwide six-hour day.

Despite fewer sick days and improved productivity, a two-year experiment for Sweden's six-hour working day, trialed in Gothenburg, has failed – Bloomberg reports.

68 nurses in the employ of a care home all received a reduction in their working hours, from eight hours a-day to six, but not in pay. As a result, 17 extra employees were needed at a cost of over £1million. Participants said they felt healthier – sickness absence decreased – and patient care improved. However, the scheme won't be made permanent.