

Today, half of Grant Thornton's tax department has other plans

BUSINESS

The firm has just begun a pioneering trial of nine-day fortnights that threatens to overturn the conventional work week.

By [Philip King](#) • 03 March 2023 • 6 minute read

Today, half the tax department at Grant Thornton will be cleaning the car, getting their hair cut, playing piano or doing something – anything – other than work.

Next Friday, it's the turn of the other half.

The accounting firm's six-month trial of shortened weeks, which began on Wednesday, is pioneering a different approach to work that threatens to overturn the conventional model for professional services firms. It made headlines when it was announced in December and many in the tax profession will be closely monitoring its fate.

National managing partner for tax Sandie Boswell said her 200-strong team was keen to test the nine-day fortnight but also a little anxious about whether it will fly.

"They're excited by the challenge, but are nervous of how we'll make it work," she said.

"I've spoken to many people in our business from our concierge to our CEO and all are going to do different things but everybody's going to have a go at the trial."

As a member of the firm's executive, Ms Boswell was involved in the decision and said it arose in the wake of COVID-19, which reset attitudes to work.

"Our focus is on finding a better way of working – we recognised that our people were exhausted," she said.

"We got to the end of 2022 and it was like we have to do something different here. We all know that work practices have evolved over time and we saw this through COVID, when all of a sudden we all had to work from home.

"So we knew that if we wanted to try something different then our people are up for that challenge."

“We want our people to work fewer hours to improve on their health, their wellbeing and also their overall work-life balance.”

If there’s a degree of staff trepidation it does not concern pay – it will be 100 per cent remuneration for 90 per cent of the time, Ms Boswell said, and the firm had done a lot of thinking about how to do more with less.

“We landed on a nine-day trial because we thought that it was doable for us to unlock 10 per cent of efficiencies.

“We’ve spoken to a lot of experts in this field – we’ve gone to people who have tried this already. Our teams are really smart, I think they will rise to the challenge and they will come up with those efficiencies.

“Things like having focused time is something we’re going to trial. We know that people are more productive in the mornings, generally speaking, so let’s get our work done in those times and have our internal team meetings at other times.”

“Cut down the non-essential team meetings that we have. So take away some of the administration. Implement new technologies, capture our time in a better way.”

A priority was ensuring that the client experience remained uncompromised. So picking up the phone and answering emails were part of the deal.

“We want to be open for business five days a week so it’s a recharge day, not a day off. It’s a day where we give our people time back for themselves, but to also be available for our clients if and when they need us, which will happen.

“It’s not urgent, I think that it’s fine that it will be dealt with the following Monday, or you can send it on to someone else in your team.”

Although it was early days, Ms Boswell was optimistic about the trial’s prospect for success.

“I think our people will be recharged and will produce better quality work as a result, they’ll give better service to our clients. And we’ll have a team that is feeling refreshed and happier.

“It is great from a talent retention point of view. We had someone recently that picked to come to GT ... and a big factor was this nine-day fortnight so it is working already. We know it is attracting talent, but also keeping our talent.”

The trial would be monitored throughout using feedback from staff and clients, with different models – such as 4.5-day week, with every Friday afternoon off – being tested by other departments at the firm. But Ms Boswell thought that if anything, the idea had potential to be taken further.

"There's articles in the paper from all around the world every day at the moment talking about the four-day working week, and we'd love to get to that if our trials are successful, it's certainly something that I will consider."

And how will Ms Boswell be spending her first Friday off next week?

"I'm really looking forward to a day back for me. It will give me some time back to me to be able to think. I want to go to the gym, I want to spend time with my family and pick up my daughter from school."

"But I'll check my emails!"