

# COLORBEL - Evaluating Collective Working-Time Reductions in Belgian Companies

Contract - B2/234/COLORBEL

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## SUMMARY

### CONTEXT

In recent years, collective reductions in working time (RWT) – especially management-led initiatives – have returned to the policy agenda across Europe and beyond. Triggered in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of organizations in countries such as the UK, US, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Germany have tested or adopted RWT arrangements like the four-day workweek, often without public support. Organizations that took part in these trials frequently reported positive outcomes in terms of productivity and employee wellbeing. These international trends have prompted renewed attention to the feasibility and relevance of such measures in Belgium, where adoption has remained limited.

This low adoption is particularly notable given the existence of a federal financial incentive in Belgium since 2004. The “target group reduction” (*doelgroepvermindering* or *réduction groupe-cible*) provides temporary reductions in employer social security contributions to encourage voluntary collective RWT, provided that specific eligibility criteria are met. In the 2021 Employment Conference, the evaluation of this measure was included in the resulting action plan. To support this evaluation, the Council of Ministers asked the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) to launch a targeted research call. The call aimed to provide scientifically grounded insights into the effects of collective RWT on employment, productivity, wellbeing, and the environment, and to assess the adequacy of existing support measures with a view to informing future policy.

### OBJECTIVES

The COLORBEL project was selected to implement this research. It was coordinated by Ghent University in collaboration with the FPB and carried out between December 2023 and June 2025. The project addressed two main objectives.

The first research objective was to assess both the feasibility and potential impacts of collective RWT in Belgium. This was pursued through the organization of a six-month pilot trial, offering organizations the opportunity to voluntarily test such arrangements. The trial aimed to capture not only actual interest among Belgian employers but also to produce empirical insights into how collective RWT might affect employee wellbeing, productivity, employment outcomes, and environmental impact.

The second objective – developed in anticipation of potential challenges in setting up a trial with broad participation – was to build a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that drive or hinder employer interest in collective RWT, with a particular focus on perceptions of the federal financial incentive and the added value of pilot-based support mechanisms. The framework served to generate policy-relevant insights on how to better support voluntary uptake.

## METHODOLOGY

The pilot trial was open to organizations that met specific participation conditions: a minimum reduction of two hours per week, full wage retention during the trial, and collective application either to the entire workforce or to a group selected based on objective criteria. In return, participating organizations received scientific support free of charge, optional paid guidance from an external expert partner, and the possibility of applying for the federal target group reduction.

To promote participation, an extensive recruitment campaign was conducted, including a dedicated website, two general webinars for the wider public, and two targeted sessions for interested organizations. These efforts were supported through media outreach and partner networks. Data collection among participant organizations was planned at multiple time points (before, during, and after the trial), targeting both employees and employers, and combining quantitative (survey and administrative) and qualitative (interview) methods. Depending on the final number and composition of participating organizations, two analytical approaches were foreseen. A quasi-experimental design (difference-in-differences) was planned in the event that suitable comparison groups and sufficient uptake could be established. In the absence of these conditions, a descriptive pre-post analysis was applied to track changes over time for key metrics within participating organizations.

In parallel with the trial, a mixed-methods approach was used to investigate the drivers and barriers shaping employer decisions about RWT. This included two complementary components. First, a systematic literature review synthesized international findings on organizational-level factors shaping interest in RWT. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of organizations: adopters (those participating in the pilot trial or conducting in-house RWT trials outside of the pilot), drop-outs (those initially interested in the trial but ultimately not participating), and non-adopters (a stratified sample of organizations with no prior engagement in the trial and no implementation of RWT, selected on the basis of an international adopter typology). Interviewees included organizational decision-makers across roles, primarily founders, executives, and HR managers. The interviews were analyzed thematically, using a collaborative approach to ensure consistency and depth. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution due to several methodological limitations, including limited representativeness, potential self-selection bias, and the fact that interviews could in some cases reflect personal rather than organizational perspectives.

## RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite an extensive recruitment campaign, only one organization participated in the project's pilot trial. This highlights that, for now, organizational interest in collective working-time reduction remains limited in Belgium. Nonetheless, approximately 25 organizations expressed sincere interest in the initiative over the course of the project, and three of them proceeded to implement their own in-house RWT trials independently of the official pilot. This modest uptake underscores that substantial barriers still exist for the wider adoption of collective RWT among Belgian employers. Additionally, the limited uptake and absence of a comparison group precluded robust causal analysis of RWT's effects and limited the evaluation of the financial incentive's effectiveness.

With respect to drivers and barriers, findings point to a complex and layered set of factors shaping organizational engagement with collective RWT. Eight core thematic areas were identified. *Competitiveness* relates to concerns around maintaining productivity and managing costs. *Job quality*

covers both employee wellbeing and challenges in recruitment and retention. *Work culture* refers to the prevailing values, norms, and practices within an organization, often shaped by broader societal and sectoral expectations. *Work organization* includes practical considerations such as team dynamics and workforce scheduling. *Support* encompasses both internal alignment (e.g., leadership backing, staff consensus) and external assistance (e.g. government incentives, help from social secretariats). *Spillover effects* refer to pressures arising within or beyond the organization, such as harmonization needs across branches, internal dynamics related to mergers and acquisitions, or reputational signals shaped by media coverage and peer examples. *Macro-level trends* includes shifting workforce expectations and wider economic pressures, amongst others. Lastly, *alternative organizational needs* capture situations where RWT is simply not perceived as relevant or urgent, given other pressing priorities.

These factors were often found to function in diverging ways: the same element can act as either a driver or a barrier depending on the organization's characteristics and circumstances. Moreover, the findings suggest that multiple enabling conditions must align before adoption becomes viable. These include one or multiple clear perceived benefit(s) from RWT (e.g. improved wellbeing or employer branding), confidence in operational and financial feasibility, and a supportive broader context – including legal clarity, political signaling, and favorable timing. When even one of these elements is missing, implementation is frequently postponed or abandoned. This cumulative “and-and-and” logic helps explain both the limited trial participation and the broader slow uptake of collective RWT in Belgium.

Based on the findings, the project formulates five policy recommendations to support the voluntary uptake of collective RWT – in line with the research call's objective to assess the advantages, limitations, and adequacy of existing support measures. First, general awareness should be strengthened – both about the existence and meaning of collective RWT, how it differs from related concepts, and about the incentives currently available. Second, continued financial and practical support remains important, including access to incentives (especially for certain organizations), expert guidance, and opportunities to experiment through pilot initiatives. Third, legal uncertainties – such as the perceived conflict between the RWT incentive and wage norm legislation – should be clarified. Fourth, information should be clearer and easier to access, for example via a central online portal, a dedicated helpdesk, or better-informed intermediaries such as social secretariats. Fifth, the financial incentive scheme may require revision, as its current design excludes temporary trials and is often used for additional leave rather than for structural weekly reductions in working time.

Finally, several more general reflections follow from the project's findings. First, policy support for RWT is only effective if organizations already perceive reducing working time as potentially relevant. Second, RWT adoption required a combination of favorable circumstances. Therefore, standalone measures are unlikely to trigger widespread adoption. Third, RWT should be considered in relation to existing work-life measures and not viewed in isolation. And fourth, RWT can be implemented at various levels, from individual employers to sectoral agreements and national legal reforms. This study focused specifically on employer-driven RWT. Several of the barriers identified in employer-led approaches may be less prominent under sector-wide or national frameworks.

## **KEYWORDS**

Collective working-time reduction, four-day workweek, pilot trial, target group reduction, labour market policy