

The 4-Day Work Week: A Case Study for Working Smarter, Not Harder



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Announcer:

Welcome to THRIVE, a Paychex business podcast where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

Gene Marks:

All right, everybody. Welcome back to Thrive. My name is Gene Marks, again, and I am talking with Jennifer Christie, who is the Chief People Officer at Bolt, Bolt.com. Jennifer, thank you so much for joining me.

Jennifer Christie:

Thanks for having me.

Gene Marks:

It used to be HR director, I don't know. My grandmother, like 1,000 years ago, was in charge of HR at a cigar company, true story, in Philadelphia, but she was the payroll manager. I guess they had no human relations back then or whatever. Chief People Officer means that you're in charge of everything about the employees at Bolt. Is that a fair statement to make?

Jennifer Christie:

Yes, I would say about the employees and the employee experience. It's your typical HR which has grown since her role. It's not just paying and hiring people, but it's the broader experience, learning and development, all those things. It's also real estate and workplace, the experience people have coming into the office or working from home and how we support that, as well as Conscious.org, which is our organization that is really focused on not just making culture great at Bolt, but also trying to change the industry about how we think about company culture.

Gene Marks:

All right. That's great. By the way, in defense of my grandmother, she had to do all this manually, okay? I want you to know, paychecks, and everything. Jennifer, first of all, tell us a little bit about Bolt. What does the company do for our listeners?

Jennifer Christie:

We're a San Francisco-based tech company that is really powering one click checkout on the internet, so really about democratizing commerce and the whole checkout experience.

Gene Marks:

Great. And approximately how many people do you have in the company?

Jennifer Christie:

Around 600, and growing.

Gene Marks:

All right. That is amazing. Tell us a little bit about yourself. How long have you been with the company and what did you do in a prior life?

Jennifer Christie:

So, I officially joined Bolt in January, beginning of January, but I started talking to them and working with them, and thinking about this opportunity in October, and actually was able to attend their company offsite back in November. I've been with them a little longer than January.

Jennifer Christie:

Prior to that I was at Twitter from 2017 until I joined, and then prior to that Amex, and then before that government and consulting.

Gene Marks:

Got it. All pretty much in the HR area, is that right?

Jennifer Christie:

For the most part, yes. Earlier in my career was a little bit more around organizational development and program management, but yeah, most of my career in HR.

Gene Marks:

Did I hear you guys had an offsite in November of 2021? Oh, that's Omicron time. I don't know. Did you guys all show up in Hazmat suits and make sure that you're completely safe?

Jennifer Christie:

No Hazmat suits. We did the, we had vax requirements and masks and all of that good stuff. We were in Arizona, so most of it was outside, which was great.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. Right. That's good. All right.

Gene Marks:

First of all, let's talk a little bit about your workforce as well, and what's going on with the pandemic. So every company is struggling with bringing our employees back, are they in the office or not? You're in San Francisco, are your offices open? What are you telling your employees, and how did you come to this conclusion for what to tell your employees?

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. So I would say over the course of the last couple years, like many companies, we've been fully remote with people working from home. As we're starting to come out of this — knock on wood — we're going into a model where we know we're going to be in a hybrid. We're going to reopen a San Francisco office and reopen some WeWork spaces across different areas where we have a concentration of employees, and looking to open some other offices as well as we go into the latter half of this year and in to next year. Our position really is, people get to work where they want to work. I mean, we work in an industry that really has a lot of flexibility and affords a lot of flexibility, so if someone wants to work from home full time, fine. If they want to come into the office full time, we're going to try to make that work for them. If they want to split their time, that's fine, too.

Gene Marks:

What are your thoughts though on working from home? I know that you just said you're leaving it up to the employees, but from a company's perspective, should people be working from home all the time? Should they be coming into the office all the time? What do you think is best for the company?

Jennifer Christie:

I think what's best for the company is what's best for the employee. I do think we have to think about how are they most productive?

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jennifer Christie:

Everyone has a different circumstance. Our work is able to be done in a very distributed fashion and very virtual fashion, so that's fine. What we are thinking about and what we have put into place is, your day to day work, you can do wherever you want to do it, and frankly, when you want to do it. We have flexibility on time as well. We are really going to be doubling down on in-person interactions on certain intervals for certain things. Being very intentional about how we bring people together, like I talked about that November offsite. We want teams to have in-person interactions. Again, if there's people who opt out of that, that's fine as well, but we do think in-person interactions periodically is important to continue to drive those relationships and get to know each other on a deeper level than you can sometimes do over Zoom.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. I think you're absolutely right. It's funny, I was at this meeting, there's a bunch of credit union CEOs down south in Louisiana, Alabama, and they're also struggling with the whole hybrid thing, like everybody is. There were two people at the meeting, I remember, they were adamant: No work from home. Everybody's got to come in the office because that is the culture of our company, and we believe that people should be there face-to-face. I just, I don't think that's a realistic policy in 2022.

Jennifer Christie:

No. I don't think so either. A lot of times, when we moved to remote work in the beginning of COVID, me and a lot of other of my colleagues who head up HR in different companies were talking about culture. That was a big topic. Some companies are saying, "Oh, our company's going to ... our culture's going to go out the window because people aren't together." What I would always say to them is, if you know what your culture is and you're intentionally driving it, it shouldn't depend on people colliding into each other or just by being people in an office. If you completely depend on your culture being developed because people

come together and it just happens organically, then yeah, you're going to be in trouble if people aren't in the office together because that's what you're relying on. I don't know. I don't think culture is about people being in an office or not being in an office. It's what you intentionally drive, the behaviors you support, the values that you share.

Gene Marks:

It's great. Yeah. I think a lot of companies are coming around to that as well. I mean, I've joked about this before, even on this podcast that, Jennifer, the millennials were right. They were telling us, "We should be working from home" — this is before the pandemic — "the cloud works." We're all ignoring them, "Shut up, come in to work." Then the pandemic hits and what do you know? They were right.

Jennifer Christie:

Exactly. It's a forcing function and it's amazing what people found themselves able to do.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. Okay. Bolt has made some news recently about your four-day work week policies. Tell us about what you guys... How you're approaching this four-day work week trend. Tell us how you define it. Tell us how you're offering this to your employees.

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. It came about, really to focus on two things that I think a lot of companies and a lot of employees have struggled with a bit, and it's about productivity and burnout.

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jennifer Christie:

People find themselves on Zoom calls all day and all that. Ryan Breslow, our former CEO and now Executive Director on the board, read an article and he had been trying to figure this issue out and said, "Maybe a four-day work week is one of those forcing functions to get us to work more effectively." The whole goal, it wasn't about trying to cram five days into four, I mean, because that wouldn't affect positively productivity or burnout. What it really was about, how do we work smarter so we can have more impactful work on those four days so we can really take a step away and have some more meaningful time off?

Jennifer Christie:

We launched a pilot from September to December of last year, so we could really learn and see what works, what doesn't. We had a hypothesis about it, but weren't quite sure how it really would play out. We said, "Before we start this, we've got to do two things. One is everyone's got to clean up their calendars. We gave permission to everyone to say, slash and burn across your calendar. If there's a meeting that you go to every week or every so often that you think is useless, or if there's a meeting you think could be done with a Slack update versus going around the table, just whatever it is, call it out. Everyone, just let's clean up our calendars and stop attending meetings that don't matter.

Jennifer Christie:

Second, talk to your manager and make sure you're focused on the most important things. Tell them everything you're working on and have them honestly assess, is this impactful or not, so we can make sure that in those four days, you're focused on things that really matter and they're going to be most important, and you're only attending meetings and you're spending your time in ways that matter the most.

Gene Marks:

Let me drill down a little bit more into this. Say I'm working for Bolt, say I'm in the HR department or I'm in the accounting department or I'm a developer, whatever, can I participate now in this four-day work week plan? If so, does that literally mean I'm still getting paid what I was paid before, but I'm only required to work four days?

Jennifer Christie:

That's correct. Yes. Again, it's open to every single person at the company and we want to make it a company-wide thing. We made the pilot a company wide effort and we rolled it out company wide, but yes, everyone's pay stays the same, but you aren't required to have meetings or work on Fridays.

Gene Marks:

That was going to be my next question. There is a specific day that people ... so in other words, is the company closed on Fridays? Is that what you're saying? How does that work?

Jennifer Christie:

No, we're not closed on Fridays. What I would say is that we really ... Because if someone needs to work on a Friday, if they need to get something done, they're trying to wrap something up for the week or get ahead of the game for the next week, it's not like they're not allowed to. Just like in a five-day work week, some people might do that on a weekend. That's fine, that's their choice. What we say is try not to make choices that are going to impact others. Don't hold meetings, don't fire off a lot of emails or Slack messages that people have to respond to. Try to do something that, if you're going to choose to work, that is totally up to you, but try not to infringe on other people's right to try to take that day if they can.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. That makes sense. Okay. Now I understand. Okay. Obviously if you want to work independently, work, go at it whenever you want, that's fine, but don't involve other ... There's no involvement of other employees and anything on Friday because that is another day off for everybody.

Gene Marks:

What about, at Bolt, you guys have tech support issues, you've got customer service like any other company. How do you deal with that? If I'm a Bolt customer and I call you guys on a Friday, am I going to hear, "Sorry, we're closed today. Call us back on Monday."

Jennifer Christie:

Absolutely not.

Gene Marks:

I didn't think so.

Jennifer Christie:

I'm glad you raised it because that was one of the things that we learned during the pilot. People who had customer-facing roles struggled more with adjusting to this. Because we weren't going to say, "Hey, we're not here for you." I mean, we're a growing business. We've got a lot of things we want to achieve. We're always here for our customers. People in roles that really couldn't manage their schedule the same way as someone who's more internally focused, what we said was, "Listen, if you end up working your Friday, working with a customer or doing what you need to do, take the Monday off. Shift your day a different way." We had an honest conversation with them to say, "Listen, you're in a role that probably is going to require a little more flexibility. We want you to have the option to, and an ability to have that meaningful downtime, but maybe not be on a Friday."

Jennifer Christie:

The reason that worked, honestly, is because their roles aren't as tied to the company schedule anyway. They could flex. Everyone else, we wanted it to be the same day so no one felt like they were missing out on a meeting, but people who are customer facing aren't as tied to those company meetings and calendars anyway, so they can flex a little bit and maybe a Wednesday they take off or maybe a Thursday they take off. It's a little bit of what they know going into it, the kind of role they have.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. Yeah. You're talking about the role. I'm thinking right now, some of my clients that have customer service teams, and rather than saying that they deal in a general capacity with any customer questions that come in, if they... if you take another look at it and you assign them certain customers that you're dealing with or certain clients, so, okay, "Listen, if those clients have an issue and it's a Friday, that's what you've got to do." You know what I mean? "If not, then you're off that day." Do you know what I mean?

Jennifer Christie:

Exactly.

Gene Marks:

At least you can make it a little bit more ... I mean, I guess it comes down to really taking another look at people's roles in the company and what they're doing during the day and say, "Is there any way we can move this around?"

Gene Marks:

Has this work week itself impacted PTO or your paid time off policies, now that you're giving people a four-day week and you're paying them as if they have a five-day week as well? Are you going back to your employees saying, "Listen, we're going to cut back a little bit on vacation time because enough is enough." Or have you left that alone?

Jennifer Christie:

No, I'm actually glad you raised that. In fact, the opposite. One of my bigger concerns with this was that people wouldn't take time off. I mean, this is a mindset shift. This is a muscle that we're still building, because we've done a five day work a long time.

Gene Marks:

Yes we have.

Jennifer Christie:

For those of us who've been in the workplace for a long time, we've done it for a really long time.

Gene Marks:

Yes we have.

Jennifer Christie:

We knew this was going to be a way of people just changing their behaviors. I was concerned that people would feel guilty taking actual vacation because they're like, "Oh, the company gives me every Friday off, I'm going to look like I'm super greedy or lazy if I try to take leave on top of that." We've actually been pretty intentional about making sure we say this is not replacing PTO any more than weekends replace PTO. This is like a weekend. Think about it that way. You still need time to meaningfully take off for a week here or a week there and do that thing that you can't do over the course of a weekend, that we all know that any of us, any time we take vacation, it's usually about that fourth day that we actually start to really check out.

Gene Marks:

That is actually really true. It's funny that you say that about vacation. Some people might be listening to this and saying, "Oh my God, you give people vacation, they're going to take it," but there have been numerous studies that have found that companies that offer unlimited paid time off, people tend to take less time off because they feel-

Jennifer Christie:

Exactly right.

Gene Marks:

... FOMO or guilt or whatever. That's not good for their mental health. I think that's important.

Gene Marks:

Now, does the four day ... I'm just fascinated by this four-day work week concept, because does it apply to all, even managers? Jennifer, are you working a four-day work week or because of your... you're senior management at this company, do you still find yourself putting in the same amount of hours that you were putting in before?

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. I would say I've definitely been able to take advantage of it. There have been times, of course, that I've had to take a meeting amongst senior leadership because there's something that's going on that we're working on that is urgent, there's a board issue, there's something going on and I'm not going to be like, "Ah, sorry, I've got the four-day work week." It's certainly something that we recognize, but I will say it definitely opens up my day because I know that I've got, I'm not going to have, for the most part, meetings on that day. If I have a chance to catch up here and there on stuff. I try to role model for my team that this is something that we want to embrace across the organization. Just like before, the five-day work week, there are weekends that I had to work.

Gene Marks:

Sure.

Jennifer Christie:

This just comes with a role. People issues don't stop for holidays, or four-day work weeks, or weekends. There's always something going on, but it definitely, I think just gives us, gives me more time and more freedom to feel like I can do those things that I want to do that are really totally selfish.

Gene Marks:

The reason why I ask that as well is because you're a senior manager, you're equivalent to a person running a business, you're running your own group, your organization. Again, our audience are business owners. A business owner is not going to work a four-day work week. It's just not going to happen. They're working seven-day work weeks. To try to sell this concept ... I am going to a client tomorrow morning, Jennifer, that there's three brothers that run this company. They're my age, in their 50s. They've been running this company for 30 years. They've got 125 employees. This would be a very tough sell to them, to say, wait a second. My employees are going to come in four days? We're working seven days. How do you persuade a business owner, based on your experience, that this is a good thing?

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. A couple things I would say. It's interesting you talked about remote work earlier because I keep coming back to this. There is a lot of companies that started moving to remote work before COVID. Those companies that were moving in that direction, some other companies would look at them, who were very

office centric and be like, "That could never be my company. My employees could never do that. The work that we do could never be remote." All that stuff. "Not our industry." Fast forward, you have COVID, and people figured it out.

Gene Marks:

Yeah.

Jennifer Christie:

I like in the four-day work week, very much too, that remote working. I think frankly, remote working was a harder adjustment than a four-day workweek. When you think about it, it shouldn't be about hours, it should be about output and it should be about what outcomes that people are giving.

Jennifer Christie:

Ryan talks about the theater of work. We've gotten such a habit of, because we see each other at work, who's in office first and who leaves latest. It's like this thing about that gives you status, versus, what are they doing? Are they adding value? Are they having an impact? If you start to think about work in terms of what your people can do and the output they can have, and not so much focused on hours, and think about a meaningful investment in their ability to rest and recharge, I don't think it's an insurmountable hill for any industry, for any organization.

Jennifer Christie:

When people come to me, "Oh, we have this kind of workforce or that," I say, "Listen, even if you can't operate a fully four-day work week, why don't you try at least cutting down on meetings and seeing if you do goal setting a different way, so people are focused on the most impactful thing." I think there's elements of this you could still ... I mean, who cannot do better about meetings, and other things that you do? I don't know. I think it's a forcing function to do that, and I think companies would find this easier to take on than remote working in many ways.

Gene Marks:

You mentioned trying to do this. Now, first of all, how long have you guys been doing this four-day work week?

Jennifer Christie:

Well, technically since September. We piloted it from September to December. We got feedback through a survey, if people wanted to continue to do it, how was it going. Then we launched it full on January 1st.

Gene Marks:

Okay. That's what I wanted to get from you because with anything in HR, any benefit that you provide, any compensation that you provide, once you provide it to somebody, you can't walk it back, particularly in HR. That you positioned this as a pilot, and did you position this ... Was this a pilot for the entire company? Or did you just pick a specific department to try it out with? Then how did you communicate that to the group? In other words, "Guys, this might not be a permanent thing." Tell us how you ran that pilot, because that could be helpful for somebody who wants to think about this.

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. I definitely recommend pilots for a lot of reasons. A, it helps you really understand how things really work. You can sit in a room all day and try to plan out all kind of scenarios, but until it actually... You start running water through the pipes, you really don't know how it flows. How we did it was we did the whole company, because we thought-

Gene Marks:

The whole company?

Jennifer Christie:

... We're not going to know unless we have everyone. Yeah, the whole company. We said, "Everyone's going to do this." We did the cleanup of meetings and priorities up front. We said, "Flip the switch, everyone's going to do this." What we said was, "Listen, we think this is a good approach to addressing productivity and burnout, but we don't know, so we truly are piloting this. We truly are going to see, is does this work, is it effective? What do you think?" One of our questions on our survey that we sent out in December after it was over—and we had 80% of our employees participate, which is actually pretty good for an employee survey—94% of the employees said, "Yes, let's keep it going," and 91% of our managers—because we thought that was also an important cohort—91% said, "Yeah, absolutely, let's keep this going."

Jennifer Christie:

We drilled down into things like productivity, and work-life balance, and meeting efficiency, and all of that. The numbers were resoundingly positive, in the 80s and above, in terms of people feeling like this had the impact that we wanted it to have. Yeah, we positioned like that. If the numbers had been different and if people were like, no way, then we wouldn't have done it. We would have said we could find another solution to the problem.

Gene Marks:

Were you prepared that even, I mean, first of all, who's not going to like a four-day work week? I mean, I would expect your employees to be like, "Hey, this is great." I mean, but what if the numbers weren't good from a management perspective? What if you were finding that the productivity wasn't there or customers were not getting the answers they needed in time and you had to walk it back? Even if the surveys are coming back, "We want this," were you guys prepared to do that?

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah, absolutely. At the end of the day we are a business and the Conscious.org. that I mentioned before, it talks about blending humanity with execution, and both are important. We're a growing company, we think we have big things to do in this world, and it would not do for us to not be able to hit our numbers and to hit the commitments that we have. Anything like this that we do that employees would love, but be bad for the business is a nonstarter. If that's what we had found, we would've said no, or we would've adjusted maybe some of the ways we do it and test it again, but that's not what we found.

Jennifer Christie:

I'll tell you, you know, we don't want people even to be attracted to Bolt who think, "Ooh, Bolt's a cushy place to work. You only have to work four days. Maybe I can go over there and put my feet up on the desk," kind of thing. That's not who we are. We bring people in here who have a drive to win, who are great at what they do, who are willing to go the extra mile and are in it. In return, we give them this flexibility. We trust them, we give them autonomy, we let them manage their time, and we invest back in them that they can have this kind of flexibility and focus on their own mental health or whatever it is personal that they want to do. It's a contract that we have with them, but it's not meant to be a vacation company.

Gene Marks:

Did you have any issues with any employees violating the policy? Managers saying, "I don't care about this four-day work week. I need an answer to this question today," or "You're meeting with me, it's a Friday and we've got to get this." Did you have any of those incidents occur or anything like that? If so, how did you deal with them? What advice would you have?

Jennifer Christie:

Listen, so far, again, I'm not going to whip the second half. We have not had anyone who said, "I'm not doing this. We're having our team meeting on Friday," any of that stuff. Everyone was very bought in and it's a tone from the top that I think really resonates across the board. Now it's not a violation of a rule if something is urgent and has to get done and a manager says, "Hey, I need you." I've done it myself, so if that's breaking a rule, then you can blame me for it as well. Sometimes those things happen. What we try to say is, "Listen, if there's something that you... Is there a fire you have to put out? If there's something you've got to deal with, deal with it, and then step away."

Jennifer Christie:

It's so easy sometimes if you're on your computer and you're working on something, you're like, "Ah, I'm just going to finish these emails. Maybe I'll just do this." Then next thing you know, like, five hours has passed and you've been working the whole time. What we try to say is, "Listen, if you've got to dive in and you've got to do something on a Friday for the good of the business and for something to support your team, do it, of course, but try not to let it take over your whole day, try to keep with the spirit of what we're trying to do and then take care of that and step away and try to recharge and then come back Monday and be ready to kill it."

Gene Marks:

Couple other questions on the four-day work week, and then we'll finish. I know we're running out of time, but it's such a great topic. You mentioned emails as well. The way I work, again, I have a 10-person company, so I don't really have a schedule. I email on Saturdays and Sundays. I don't expect my employees to respond to me when I send an email on a Sunday morning. I get it. They can respond 30 minutes later, that's fine. No, I'm just kidding, obviously they can wait until the work week. When you have this four-day work week policy, did you find employees still independently working on Friday, but sending emails? Were you getting emails from employee on that Friday or even over the weekend and was that okay? Or did you feel like no, that's violating our four-day work week policy?

Jennifer Christie:

Yeah. Listen, what we said was, "If you want to write out some emails, because you want to catch up on something for the week and get ahead of something, try to do a schedule send, or try to do something where you put it in a draft and send it on Monday."

Gene Marks:

Okay.

Jennifer Christie:

You can still get ahead of the game, but if it's not an urgent thing that someone has to answer because you need to answer right now, don't make it urgent. Because if everything's urgent, nothing's urgent. We try to really make sure that people were just using that time and using those emergencies for real emergencies, that's fine. Again, it was really meant to try to respect each other's time and try to build this muscle.

Jennifer Christie:

It's funny because every time someone asks me a question about an edge case or something, I say, "What would you do in a five-day work week?"

Gene Marks:

Right.

Jennifer Christie:

It really truly is, we are just shifting the paradigm, a four-day work week, we are just looking at it as the new norm. It's a weekend day. If you have a situation, for example, if there's an employee that is consistently working every single Friday, can't step away, is slammed, can't... What we say is, "We need to look at the resources on your team. You need to look at, are you working as effectively as you need to do or maybe look at your priorities or the work that you have assigned to you. Does it make sense?" Just like we would do if someone was working every Saturday. It's the same mentality. Every now and then this stuff creeps forward. A growing company like ours that has a lot to do, it doesn't always fit into the four walls of a workday. Again, we try to maintain the spirit of what we're trying to achieve.

Gene Marks:

Final question, Jennifer, is just about demographics. I mean, I don't know the demographic makeup of your employees at Bolt, but do you feel that this four-day workweek would be more successful at a company that has a younger workforce, as opposed to people that are used to 9:00 to 5:00, five days a week? Did you have a harder time or an easier time getting employees that were older to buy into this or not?

Jennifer Christie:

Actually, no. I think it really resonates across the board with people who've got caregiver responsibilities or other things. The older you get, sometimes the more responsibilities you have outside of work. This gives people some meaningful time to focus on those things without feeling that they're taking time off, or it's just another day of their weekend that they can take care of those things. It's been pretty much across the board. I do think younger employees, people who haven't been working as long adapt faster to it just because they don't have decades long of guilt associated with not working on a workday, that's typically been a workday. Other than that, I think people... It really resonates with people across the board.

Gene Marks:

Jennifer Christie is the Chief People Officer at Bolt, that's Bolt.com. Jennifer, fascinating conversation about the four-day work week. We interviewed also another guy recently who was part of a nonprofit that goes around to companies that helps them implement four-day work weeks, and I've been writing about it as well. I think you're right on top of the trend. I really do. I mean, I really do think this will be something that will be long lasting and I'm sure you would agree that flexibility is probably one of the hottest and most requested workplace benefits that employees are asking for.

Jennifer Christie:

Absolutely. Flexibility, and I would say personalization. Being able to customize and think about, what do I need as an employee and how can my company meet my needs? I think we've always had this mentality of these are the benefits we offer and we push them out and they go out to all versus offering more of that personalization and choice. I think that, combined with flexibility, is the way of the future.

Gene Marks:

All right, Jennifer, thank you very much. Appreciate you joining and I'm sure we'll be back to you to hear more. I wanted to talk to you about, where you guys find employees, some of the other hottest benefits you guys are offering. Got lots more questions for you, but we'll save that for another time. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Gene Marks:

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