



General Audit Chamber

Algemene Rekenkamer



MINI AUDIT SURVEY:

THE 36-HOUR WORK WEEK OPTION FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

DECEMBER 2020

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Mini audit survey: *the 36-hour work week option for civil servants*

Mini audit enquête: de 36-urige werkweek optie voor ambtenaren



This document is an English translation of the original Dutch language report entitled: *Mini audit enquête: de 36-urige werkweek optie voor ambtenaren* In the event of textual contradictions or any other differences, the original Dutch text will prevail.

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1. CONTEXT

1.1 Prologue

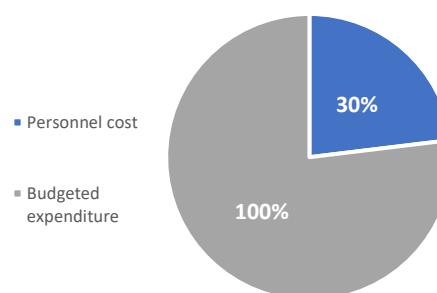
This mini audit is based on a survey conducted by the General Audit Chamber. This survey does not use a statistically representative sample. The mini audit report presents the responses received from the civil servants about their level of interest to voluntarily adopt a shorter workweek; 32 or 36 hours instead of 40 hours a week. In total, 290 responses were acquired. Our results are indicative, and we invite ministers to take steps to evaluate the matter in a more in-depth way and consider starting a dialogue with civil servants on the option of a shorter work week.

We report on the possible financial impact a reduction of work hours would have on civil servants, including the income group most likely to consider the option and the amount this would contribute to savings. A survey on the topic of free time was distributed to civil servants of all ministries and the High Councils of State.

1.2 Background

The economic condition of Sint Maarten has been severely impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Government of Sint Maarten requested financial assistance from the Dutch government in April. This support included business and income support for the private sector, in addition to liquidity support for Government's operations. During the Kingdom Council of Ministers held on May 15, 2020, the Dutch Government approved the first tranche of liquidity support.¹ Conditions for continued liquidity support included a reduction of 12.5% of the total employment package of all employees in the (semi) public sector. At the time this report, negotiations to meet the condition are close to being finalized.

The national budget 2020 reveals total personnel costs of NAf 180,4 million.² In total, approximately 30% of the total expenditure is accounted for by personnel costs. The 2020 national budget reveals a deficit of NAf 263 million with income budgeted at NAf 347 million and expenses NAf 610 million. A 12.5% reduction in personnel costs could result in a NAf 22,5 million savings, subsequently reducing the deficit gap.



1.3 Research

Many countries worldwide have instituted initiatives that promote a better work-life balance, which include reducing the number of working hours per week. According to the OECD [Better Life Index](#), the amount of time a person spends at work is an important aspect of work-life balance and can have an effect on a person's overall well-being, physically and mentally.³ The Netherlands rate high on this scale with the standard full-time work week of 38 hours and the majority of fulltime jobs ranging between 36-40 hour a week.⁴

As for Sint Maarten, deviating from working 40 hours per week is allowed based on the National Ordinance, laying down rules regarding working hours and overtime. Article 8 of the legislation restricts working more than 40 hour per week and exceeding 10 hours per day when calculated over a four-week period.⁵ The findings of the survey do not minimize the adverse financial impact work hour reductions can have on an employee.

A majority of respondents indicate that a reduction in weekly working hours would negatively affect their financial situation. Despite this, the benefits for both Government and the civil servants may be difficult to ignore. These are universal trends that could be adapted to our local landscape.

¹ Letter from the Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties "Resultaten Rijksministerraad 15 mei betreffende financiële ondersteuning Curaçao en Sint Maarten in verband met Covid19".

² In accordance with National Budget 2020 Staat H.

³ <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/>

⁴ <https://minimumloon.nl/fulltime-werken/>

⁵ Arbeidsregeling.

2. THE AUDIT

2.1 Basis

This research is conducted on the basis of article 39 of the National Ordinance General Audit Chamber, which provides grounds to issue notifications and to advise the relevant minister(s) on important matters in relation to the revenues and expenditures as well as for the improvement or simplification of the financial management of the Country.

2.2 The questions

The questions are designed to be presented as a benefit to the civil service and not as a cost-saving for government at the expense of civil servants' salary. After all, direct questions solely targeted on salary reduction, without any context, could deter the civil servant.

The following questions and statements were posed:

1. Do you value your free time?
2. Are you able to handle all of your affairs and household duties during your free time?
3. Would you like more free time as a civil servant?
4. In what form would you like more free time?
5. In exchange for free time, would you consider changing your hours from a 40-hour work week to a 36-hour work week?
6. Would you consider a 32-hour work week if the option was provided?
7. What is your income (in NAF)?
8. Reducing my work week hours would negatively affect my financial situation.
9. Reducing my work week hours would benefit my life.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Overview

A series of questions were posed to determine the level of interest surrounding more free time as a civil servant. As the OECD better life index suggests, overall well-being of persons is strongly tied to the amount and quality of leisure time they have.

Certain factors were not captured in the survey, such as the number of dependents per household or 2-person/single person household income, which play a significant role in determining the likelihood that persons would choose to voluntarily reduce their weekly working hours. However, the results of the survey could spark a discussion which could result in structural reductions of personnel costs.

3.2 Forms of additional free time

Most respondents answered positively when asked if they wanted more free time.

We then asked respondents in what form they would prefer additional free time. Table 1 shows the results of our survey and the distribution of responses of the total 290 respondents. 234 respondents indicated they would like more free time. The preference of 1 day off weekly proved to be the most popular, followed by a preference for afternoons/mornings off every week.

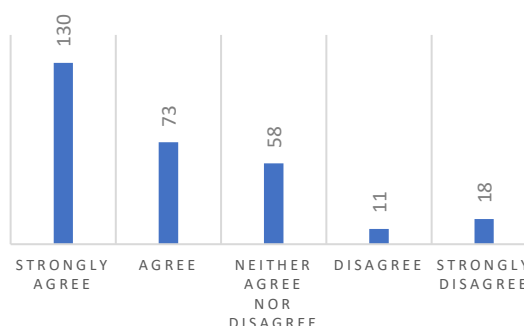
Table 1: Options for free time of 234 respondents

IN WHAT FORM WOULD YOU LIKE MORE FREE TIME?	
1 day off weekly	112 (48%)
afternoons/mornings off weekly	35 (15%)
accumulate more vacation days	79 (34%)
None of the above	8 (3)%
Total	234 (100%)

3.3 Effects on the financial situation

The degree to which one is willing to sacrifice a portion of their salary often depends on the degree of financial stability of the persons concerned. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused worldwide financial uncertainty. It is interesting to highlight if one would still give up their work hours in return for more free time despite a negative financial effect.

Table 2: Reducing my work week hours would negatively affect my financial situation



We asked respondents to rate their level of agreement or disagreement to the statement "Reducing my work week hours would negatively affect my financial situation". Table 2 shows our findings.

We extracted the respondents (87) who were indifferent or disagreed that reducing their work hours would negatively affect their financial situation.⁶ They represent 30% of the total number of respondents (290).

This number of respondents represent a potential savings of between Naf 472,000⁷ to Naf 1 Million⁸ for government. We found that 45 out of the 87 respondents (52%), fall in the income group of Naf 3000- 6000 gross per month. Assuming that the level of response (87 respondents, equaling 30%)⁹ was present in the entire population of the civil service (+/- 1.900), a (hypothetical) cost saving of Naf 3 million could be achieved, which would be a material part of the required cost saving of Naf 22.5 million.

This report serves to highlight a potential (additional) solution that can achieve the Naf 22.5 million cost savings in personnel expenditure (12,5%) that Government could explore. We invite each Minister to further pursue the possibilities of reducing work hours per ministry where possible.

⁶ (respondents: 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'). We determined which income group these respondents fell in and used the lower threshold of each income group to estimate the potential savings.

⁷ Reduction of work hours to 36 hours per week.

⁸ Reduction of work hours to 32 hours per week.

⁹ 87 of 290 respondents reflect 30%.



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