

Labour Flexibility in the Tourist Accommodation Sector: Perceptions of the Effects of Working-Hour Reduction in Chile

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000144>

Received: 21 August 2026; Accepted: 26 August 2026; Published: 10 September 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of key managerial personnel in the tourist accommodation sector of the Los Ríos Region, Chile, regarding the effects of the working-hour reduction enacted by Law 21.561, which gradually lowers the standard workweek to 40 hours. Because the accommodation industry is characterized by strong seasonality, limited flexibility, demanding on-site service requirements, and high personnel turnover, the implementation of this reform raises significant concerns about its impact on organizational productivity and operational flexibility. An exploratory-descriptive, quantitative methodology was used, employing a structured Likert-scale questionnaire (1-5) administered to 34 participants occupying owner, manager, administrator, and representative positions in hotels, hostels, cabins, and apart-hotels in the Los Ríos Region of Chile. The results show that 52.9% of establishments perceive negative effects on productivity, with cabins and hostels reporting the greatest impact. Labor flexibility is perceived more positively than productivity, with means above the neutral point for hotels, cabins, and apart-hotels. A moderate correlation is observed between organizational climate and productivity ($r = .417$), whereas the relationship between organizational climate and customer satisfaction is weak ($r = .301$). The principal adjustment strategies adopted are process redesign and cross-training for polyvalence. The findings suggest that operational flexibility acts as a key mediating factor that attenuates the reform's effects, particularly in establishments with more formal managerial structures.

Keywords: labor flexibility; working-hour reduction; productivity; tourist accommodation; labor reform.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a growing number of countries have advanced labor reforms aimed at reducing the standard workweek, with the goals of improving worker well-being, promoting the reconciliation of personal and professional life, and, simultaneously, enhancing productivity. In Chile, the enactment of Law 21.561 establishes the gradual reduction of the workweek from 45 to 40 hours, generating an extensive debate about its effects across different sectors of the economy.

The tourist accommodation sector, a fundamental pillar of the tourism industry, operates under distinctive conditions that set it apart from other industries. High seasonality, the need for scheduling flexibility, and elevated personnel turnover are structural characteristics that generate uncertainty among industry managers as they face specific challenges in reorganizing shifts and maintaining service quality.

Although the national debate surrounding the labor reform has been intense, empirical evidence within the Chilean tourist accommodation sector remains scarce, limiting a deeper understanding of the perceptions and adjustment strategies adopted by industry actors. In this context, the need emerges to examine how tourist accommodation managers in the Los Ríos Region perceive the potential effects of the working-hour reduction on two critical dimensions: productivity and operational flexibility.

It is equally relevant to investigate whether these perceptions vary according to firm size or type of establishment, given that management conditions and the resources available often differ substantially between these segments. The overall objective of this study is to analyze the perceptions of tourist accommodation managers in the Los Ríos Region regarding the potential effects of the working-hour reduction established by

Law 21.561, with attention to its impact on productivity and flexibility, in order to provide evidence that informs managerial practice and the formulation of public policies in the tourism sector.

The specific objectives of this study are threefold: first, to explore the perceptions of tourist accommodation managers at the regional level regarding the potential effects of working-hour reduction on productivity and flexibility; second, to compare differences in these variables across accommodation typologies; and third, to derive evidence-based recommendations from the findings.

Theoretical Framework

The Labor Market and Its Transformations in the Tourism Sector

The global tourism sector is undergoing structural transformations in its labor market, driven by regulatory, technological, and demographic changes. The accommodation industry, as a central component of the tourism system, faces particular challenges stemming from its labor-intensive nature, demand seasonality, and the need for continuous operation (Jones, 2000). In this context, labor reforms modifying the workweek generate differentiated impacts depending on the type of establishment, its size, and its operational adaptability.

The National Productivity Commission (Comisión Nacional de Productividad, 2020) indicates that sectors with high labor intensity and small-firm structures tend to perceive greater difficulty in reorganizing processes in response to working-hour reductions. This phenomenon is particularly salient in tourism, where service delivery requires physical presence and personalized customer attention (Powers & Barrows, 1999).

The Hospitality Industry: Labor Challenges in Hotel Management

Human resource management in the hotel industry displays distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other productive sectors. Chiavenato (2000) identifies role-flexibility, employee polyvalence, and the capacity to adapt to variable demand as central competencies for efficient operations. Vallen and Vallen (2009) complement this perspective by noting that coordination among operational areas—front desk, housekeeping, and food and beverage—requires sophisticated shift arrangements that may be disrupted by labor reforms. In the Chilean context, the Federation of Tourism Companies (Federación de Empresas de Turismo de Chile [FEDETUR], 2022) has emphasized that small and medium-sized enterprises face significant barriers to adapting to regulatory changes, particularly in territories with limited availability of qualified personnel and low operational standardization.

Working-Hour Reduction: International Evidence

International experience with working-hour reduction offers relevant lessons. In Spain, the Spanish Confederation of Hotels and Tourist Accommodations (Confederación Española de Hoteles y Alojamientos Turísticos [CEHAT] & Hostelería de España, 2025) documented that the hotel sector faces labor cost increases of 15–20% in response to working-hour reductions without compensatory mechanisms. Alemayehu and Tveteraas (2019) demonstrated that labor flexibility not only facilitates operational adaptation but also directly affects long-term productivity, since establishments with greater adjustment capacity make more efficient use of their workforce. Luu (2021) observes that flexibility in human resources—encompassing role reassignment, functional adaptability, and dynamic shift organization—is a central element in sustaining operations in contexts of high demand variability. Patra et al. (2025) complement this perspective by demonstrating that reforms reducing labor market flexibility may produce unintended adverse effects on employment and productivity.

Critical Issues of the Chilean Reform

Law 21.561, which gradually reduces the workweek in Chile from 45 to 40 hours, presents specific challenges for the tourism sector. Tampier (2023) identifies three critical dimensions: the impact on labor costs, the complexity of reorganizing shifts, and the need to hire additional personnel. Romano and Guevara (2023) document that, in service-sector firms, working-hour reductions without compensatory flexibility mechanisms generate significant pressures on productivity. The tourist accommodation sector additionally faces the

challenge of service outsourcing as an adjustment strategy. The literature suggests that, although this practice can relieve immediate operational pressures, it creates dependencies that may compromise service quality over the medium term (Gallo & Gonzales, 2024).

Problem Statement and Objectives of the Study

Problem Statement

The implementation of Law 21.561 in Chile poses a significant challenge for the tourist accommodation sector in the Los Ríos Region. This region, characterized by its nature-based tourism offerings and high dependence on seasonality, concentrates 34 registered accommodation establishments distributed across hotels, hostels, cabins, and apart-hotels, as recorded by the National Tourism Service (Servicio Nacional de Turismo [SERNATUR]). The reduction of the workweek to 40 hours raises questions about the capacity of these establishments to maintain adequate levels of productivity and service quality. The central problem lies in the fact that the accommodation sector requires continuous operation, personalized service, and scheduling flexibility, conditions that may be compromised by shorter working hours. In addition, the entrepreneurial structure of the sector is dominated by micro- and small enterprises with limited resources to implement costly adjustment strategies.

General Objective

To analyze the perceptions of key managerial personnel in tourist accommodation services of the Los Ríos Region regarding the potential effects of working-hour reduction on the productivity and operational flexibility of their establishments.

METHODOLOGY

Study Approach

This investigation adopts a quantitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive scope, in accordance with the criteria of Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández, and Baptista (2014). This approach is consistent with the study of a recent and scarcely examined phenomenon in the Chilean context, where the working-hour reduction is a gradually implemented reform. The methodology enables the identification of general patterns in participant perceptions and the establishment of relationships among key variables.

Research Design

A non-experimental, cross-sectional design was used, given that data were collected at a single point in time. The study is correlational in nature, as it seeks to establish relationships among the variables of productivity, labor flexibility, customer satisfaction, and organizational climate (Babbie, 2012; De Vaus, 2002).

Population and Sample

The target population comprised tourist accommodation establishments registered in the SERNATUR Tourist Services Search Engine for the Los Ríos Region. The sample was census-based, with one key management representative participating from each establishment ($n = 34$), distributed as follows: hotels (8), hostels (15), cabins (10), and apart-hotels (1). Participants held the positions of administrator (50%), owner (23.5%), manager (20.6%), and representative (5.9%).

Instrument and Measurement Scale

The data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire organized into seven sections: respondent profile, establishment profile, productivity, labor flexibility, adjustment measures, impact on customer satisfaction, and impact on organizational climate. The principal variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The instrument design considered the dimensions proposed in the specialized literature (Fowler, 2014; Malhotra, 2010).

Table 1. Variables and Indicators of the Study

Variable	Code	Measurement
Productivity	PRDL	6 items, Likert 1–5
Labor Flexibility	FLXL	11 items, Likert 1–5
Adjustment Measures	CDNI	10 items, Likert 1–5
Customer Satisfaction	CALS	5 items, Likert 1–5
Organizational Climate	CLMO	4 items, Likert 1–5

Source: Prepared by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Productivity Analysis by Establishment Type

The results show that the perception of productivity impact varies significantly by type of establishment. Cabins present the highest mean perceived impact ($M = 3.07$), followed by hostels ($M = 2.88$), hotels ($M = 2.40$), and apart-hotels ($M = 2.00$). This pattern suggests that smaller establishments with more informal structures perceive greater vulnerability to the reform.

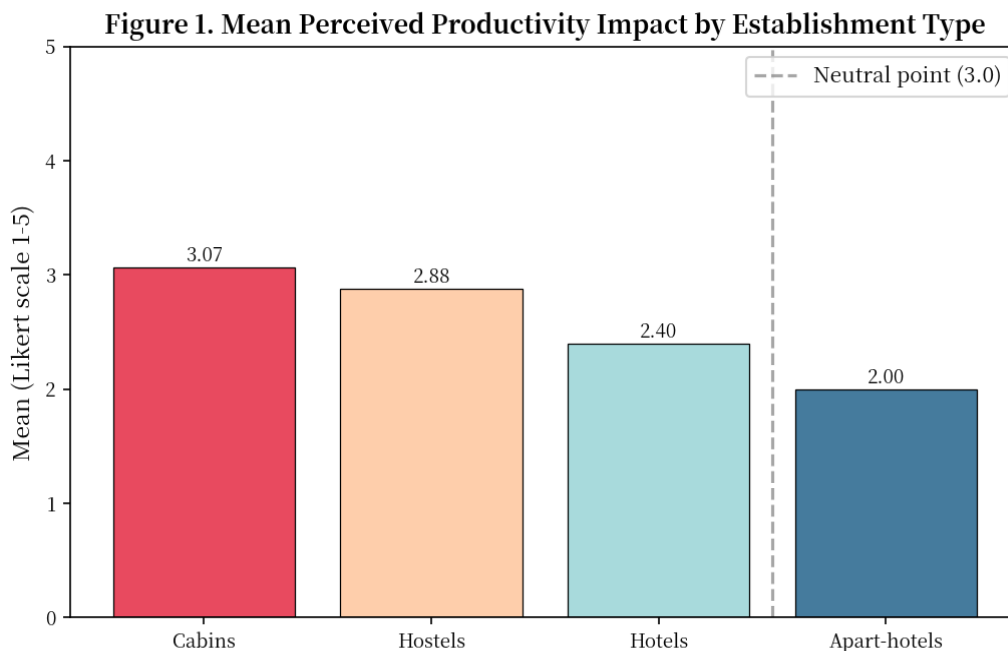


Figure 1. Mean Perceived Productivity Impact by Establishment Type

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data ($n = 34$).

These findings confirm that the working-hour reduction is perceived by the majority of respondents as a factor likely to decrease productivity, although not uniformly across accommodation typologies. The polarization observed in cabins and hostels coincides with the position of FEDETUR (2022), which highlights that smaller firms perceive greater barriers to implementing regulatory changes.

Labor Flexibility by Establishment Type

Labor flexibility is perceived more positively than productivity, with means above the neutral point (3.0) for hotels ($M = 3.28$), apart-hotels ($M = 3.27$), and cabins ($M = 3.27$). Hostels present the lowest mean ($M = 2.96$), indicating significant difficulties in adapting to the change. This result is consistent with the findings of Alemayehu and Tveteraas (2019), who demonstrate that labor flexibility directly affects long-term productivity.

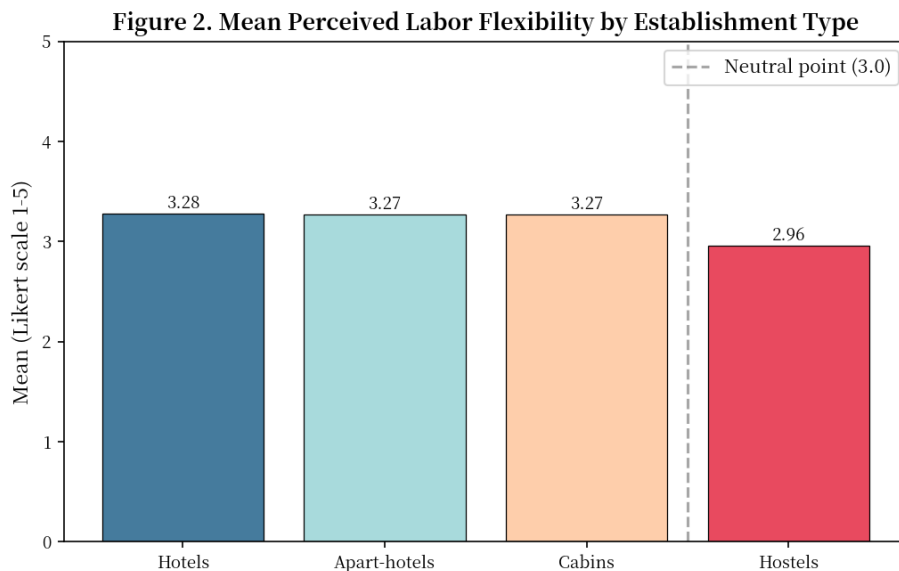


Figure 2. Mean Perceived Labor Flexibility by Establishment Type

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data (n = 34).

Adjustment Strategies in Response to Working-Hour Reduction

The principal adjustment strategies identified include process redesign (M = 3.32), cross-training for polyvalence (M = 3.14), and outsourcing of services (M = 2.94). Additional hiring and technology investment receive moderate scores, while business alliances and reduction of customer benefits are the least considered strategies.

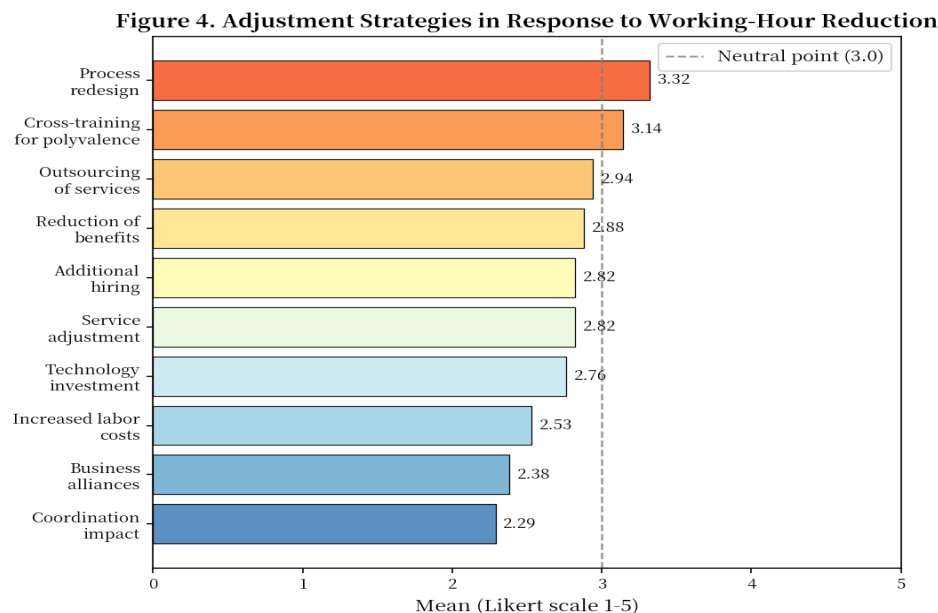


Figure 4. Adjustment Strategies in Response to Working-Hour Reduction

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data (n = 34).

The prevalence of process redesign and cross-training suggests that establishments prioritize internal optimization over the hiring of additional personnel, a pattern consistent with the financial constraints of the sector. Outsourcing of services, particularly in cabins and small establishments, emerges as a viable strategy despite the risks associated with the loss of direct control over service quality (Gallo & Gonzales, 2024).

Relationship Between Organizational Climate and Customer Satisfaction

A noteworthy result is the weak correlation between organizational climate (CLMO) and customer satisfaction (CALS), with $r = .301$. Although organizational climate presents moderate-to-high scores, this does not directly translate into higher levels of customer satisfaction. This finding contrasts with the position of Kock (2015), who argues that improvements in internal climate should enhance service quality and, consequently, guest satisfaction.

Figure 5. Relationship Between Organizational Climate and Customer Satisfaction

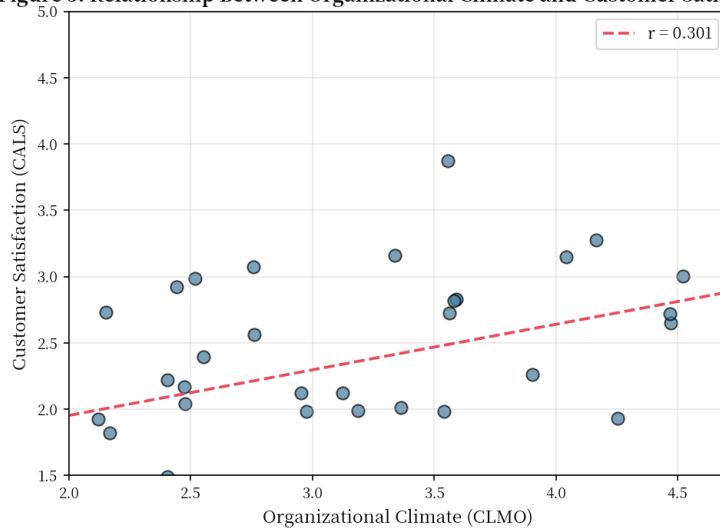


Figure 5. Relationship Between Organizational Climate and Customer Satisfaction

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data (n = 34).

This result suggests that, although the reform may produce positive internal effects on organizational climate, these are not automatically reflected in the guest experience, at least in the short term. Customer satisfaction appears to be mediated by other factors, such as infrastructure, location, and perceived value for money.

Cross-Analysis: Productivity vs. Flexibility

The cross-analysis of productivity and labor flexibility reveals a revealing pattern: while productivity is perceived as negatively affected (means below 3.0 for most establishment types), labor flexibility is perceived as a positive response capacity (means at or above 3.0). This dichotomy suggests that operational flexibility acts as a mediating factor capable of attenuating the reform's negative effects.

Figure 7. Productivity vs. Labor Flexibility by Establishment Type

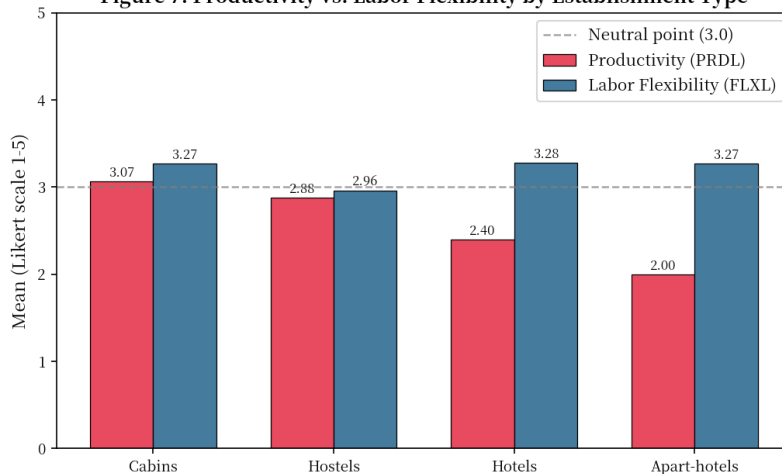


Figure 7. Productivity vs. Labor Flexibility by Establishment Type

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data (n = 34).

Table 2. Correlation Matrix Among Study Variables

	PRDL	FLXL	CDNI	CALS	CLMO
PRDL	1.000	0.253	0.249	0.202	0.417
FLXL	0.253	1.000	0.199	-0.342	0.035
CDNI	0.249	0.199	1.000	0.024	0.239
CALS	0.202	-0.342	0.024	1.000	0.301
CLMO	0.417	0.035	0.239	0.301	1.000

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the survey data (n = 34).

The correlation matrix reveals that the strongest relationship is between productivity and organizational climate ($r = .417$), followed by the negative correlation between flexibility and customer satisfaction ($r = -.342$). The positive correlation between productivity and organizational climate suggests that establishments perceiving greater productivity impact also experience deterioration in organizational climate, whereas the negative correlation between flexibility and customer satisfaction suggests that increases in operational flexibility may be accompanied by short-term declines in perceived service quality.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis supports the following main conclusions: 52.9% of the tourist accommodation establishments in the Los Ríos Region perceive negative effects on productivity derived from the working-hour reduction. This perception is most intense in cabins and hostels, whose informal structure and limited financial capacity constrain adjustment options. Hotels, with more formal structures, display a moderate perception, but with specific challenges in shift coordination.

Labor flexibility emerges as the most relevant mediating factor in attenuating the reform's effects. Establishments reporting greater operational adaptability (process redesign, employee polyvalence, dynamic shift adjustment) perceive lower negative impacts on productivity. This finding is consistent with the international literature (Alemayehu & Tvetraas, 2019; Luu, 2021).

The correlation between organizational climate and customer satisfaction is weak ($r = .301$), suggesting that the reform's positive effects on employee well-being do not automatically translate into improvements in the customer experience. This result contrasts with prior studies (Kokt, 2015) and opens a research line on the mediating mechanisms between organizational climate and perceived service quality.

The most widely used adjustment strategies are process redesign and cross-training for polyvalence, whereas additional hiring and technology investment are less frequent. Outsourcing of services emerges as a relevant alternative, particularly in small establishments, although with potential risks to quality of service.

Public authorities are recommended to consider the particularities of the tourist accommodation sector in designing mechanisms for the reform's implementation, including differentiated transition periods according to firm size, incentives for training and process redesign, and technical support mechanisms for shift planning in contexts of high seasonality.

Limitations and Future Research

As a study limitation, the reduced sample size (n = 34) and the geographic concentration in the Los Ríos Region restrict the generalizability of the results. Future research is encouraged to extend the analysis to other tourist regions of Chile and to develop longitudinal analyses of the reform's effects as its gradual implementation progresses.

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