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Supervisors' Guide to Flexibility

By Dana E. Friedman

A convincing body of research and corporate experience finds that flexibility is a critical element of an effective workplace. When employees are exposed to a flexible, effective workplace, they are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, to plan to remain with their employer, and to have lower levels of stress. When employers and employees collaborate in finding flexible ways to work, both benefit.

Supervisors are the voice of the organization; they translate the culture of the organization to employees. They are also the gatekeepers to flexibility. Most company policies are left to the discretion of the supervisor. They have a responsibility to use that discretion wisely and fairly.

WHAT IS FLEXIBILITY?

Flexibility is a way to define how and when work gets done and how careers are organized. It is a critical ingredient to overall workplace effectiveness. Companies use it as a tool for improving recruitment and retention, for managing workload, and for responding to employee diversity. Research shows that flexibility can also improve employee engagement and job satisfaction and reduce stress.

Below are some of the key options in workplace flexibility:

Flex-Time

Traditional flextime allows employees to select their starting and quitting times within a range of hours surrounding core-operating hours.

Daily flextime allows employees to select their starting and quitting times within a range of hours, typically surrounding core-operating hours, on a daily basis.

A compressed work week enables employees to work their allotted hours over fewer days—such as 10 hours per day over 4 days, or 80 hours over 9 days, rather than 8 hours per day over 5 days. Some companies offer “summer hours” by adding an hour to workdays Monday through Thursday, and ending work at 1:00 pm on Fridays, or similar arrangements.

When Work Works is a project of Families and Work Institute sponsored by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in partnership with The Center for Workforce Preparation an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and The Center for Emerging Futures. For more information, go to www.whenworkworks.org.

Reduced Time

Part-time work means working part days, five days per week or working full days, but fewer than five days per week. Job sharing, where two employees share one full-time job with its pro-rated salary and benefits, is also a form of part-time work.

Part-year work means working reduced hours on an annual basis, rather than a daily or weekly basis—for example, working full-time during the school year and then taking a block of time off during the summer.

Flex-Leaves

Time off during the workday to address personal and family issues includes time off for anticipated issues (a parent-teacher conference) or unanticipated issues (waiting for a plumber to fix a broken pipe).

Time off for personal illness allows employees paid time off when they are ill.

Paid time off to care for children involves being allowed to take a few days off to care for a sick child without losing pay or without having to make up some other reason for one's absence.

Parental Leave is planned time off for mothers and fathers for the birth, adoption, or care of a foster child.

Flex-Careers

Flex-Careers include multiple points for *entry*, *exit*, and *re-entry* over the course of one career or working life, including formal leaves and sabbaticals, as well as taking time out of the paid labor market, with the ability to re-enter.

Flex-Place

Flex-Place is defined as working some or most of one's regularly scheduled hours at a location other than the main location of one's employer. It includes primary and occasional arrangements.

BARRIERS TO FLEXIBILITY

Although flexibility can be beneficial to the organization, supervisor and employee, flexible work arrangements can also pose a series of challenges.

- **Resisting change.** Whether it's the labor shortage, or labor mismatch, the brain drain, the traffic, the new demographics, or technology, there are many profound and reasonable reasons to change the way we work. Being proactive in the face of change is much better than being reactive in this fast-paced business environment.
- **Concerns about equity.** Supervisors worry about being fair to employees when they know everyone can't have flexibility. The key is making sure that the *process* is the same—that every employee's request is fairly considered, even though the outcome may vary.

- **Fears of abuse.** There are some employees who may take advantage of their work situation, no matter what the policy. As one supervisor put it, "There are always a few bad apples. They have to be dealt with. It's much better to manage for the good apples." If employees are well managed, abuses will be kept to a minimum whether the employee works on a flexible arrangement or not.
- **Skeletons in the closet.** Just because flexibility was tried with one employee in the past and didn't work doesn't mean that the same outcome is inevitable if it is tried again—especially if the individual is well matched with the flexible arrangement. Mistakes can be used as important tools in making improvements.
- **It takes more time to manage.** Interviews with managers at JPMorganChase who supervise employees using some flexible work arrangement reveal far fewer problems than managers anticipated: 95 percent of managers say it does not require more time to manage people on flexible arrangements; 88 percent of managers who are managing employees on flexible work arrangements report no negative impact on their ability to supervise; and 66 percent say managing flexible work arrangements enhanced their management skills.

Employees are concerned a flexible work arrangement may have a negative impact on their careers. They worry about:

- **Being treated like second-class citizens.** Many who work part-time feel they are not seen as committed as others.
- **Missed opportunities.** People on flexible work arrangements worry that they may be passed over for challenging assignments or a promotion.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR?

Your role as supervisor is to empower your staff to excel, reward performance and coach to success. All of these skills are also critical in the management of successful flexible work arrangements. A flexible work arrangement will require a supervisor's support and approval. It is important to:

- **Be knowledgeable about company policies and guidelines.** Be familiar with company handbooks and consult Personnel or Human Resources staff when there are questions.
- **Promote flexibility and work with employees to customize solutions.** When used as management tools, rather than favors given to specific employees, there are many more options available to employees and supervisors for getting the job done.
- **Use discretion wisely.** The natural by-product of flexibility is discretion. Discretion involves examining each situation individually, while keeping in mind the needs of the employee and the organization. For most work-life issues there is no one "right answer." Often a variety of solutions are viable. Supervisors must use discretion to select the appropriate approach.
- **Try to be accepting and fair.** Supervisors need to put aside any biases they may have so they fully understand and consider the needs of individuals whose attitudes or lifestyles may differ from their own. Supervisors need to review employees' work/life issues in a consistent, objective manner and make decisions based on what is best for the company, the work unit and the employee.

- **Be proactive.** Approach your work group to discuss whether flexible work arrangements could improve work in your area and improve the quality of life for employees. Employees, supervisors, work groups and customers can work together to develop and implement alternative work arrangements that benefit all. Open discussions about flexibility may lead to more efficient ways to organize work by reducing work that is of low value or a waste of time.
- **Be open to a variety of reasons why someone might need flexibility.** Aside from those reasons protected by law, e.g. Family and Medical Leave, no reason given by any employee for requesting a flexible work arrangement should be dismissed. Supervisors will need to set priorities, but as long as the work can get done, the reason for a request should not affect whether the request is granted.
- **Be willing to say “no.”** Despite the employee’s need, there may be job demands, customer’s needs or work group considerations that make flexible work arrangements less viable. In some situations, an employee may not be suited to certain types of flexible work arrangements due to attendance or performance concerns. Or, the timing may be wrong or a particular job does not lend itself to a flexible schedule.
- **Be flexible.** Even with proper planning, unforeseen events can occur and the needs of the business or the individual may change and the arrangement may need to be re-evaluated. It is also important to recommend that arrangements be tried on a pilot basis for a limited time to see how they work. Build in a process of review and for making changes if necessary.
- **Evaluate solutions.** After creating a plan with an employee or work group, make sure to agree to the work deliverables. Monitor and modify the arrangement as needed.

From design to evaluation, supervisors play a critical role in the success of a flexible work arrangement.

COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

When developing a flexible work arrangement, it's important to determine when, where and how an employee will be available to the supervisor, co-workers and customers (internal and external). If part-time schedules, a job share arrangement or compressed workweek is being discussed, it is also important to decide on how accessible the employee must be when they are not in the office. Clearly, there are personal issues, as well as the business to consider. The following questions will help employees determine how co-workers, customers or other parties can have different access to employees on days when they are not in the office. A communication plan can emerge from the answers.

How and When to Be Reached

- When the employee is not in the office, how will he/she be accessible?
- When will the employee be available for calls – which days, what hours?
Are there specific hours when he/she must be available?
- Has the employee informed others how and when they can be reached? (The employee might want to prepare a rolodex card or memo with all these numbers on it for the supervisor as well as for the work group.)
 - Office extension
 - E-mail address
 - Cell phone
 - Home phone
 - Fax
 - Pager

Customers (Internal or External)

What is the best way to communicate with customers (such as when, where and how the employee can be reached, who can be reached in their absence)?

If there are additional people with whom the customer will be working, would it be helpful to set up a meeting to make the introductions?

Messages

- Where can messages be left?
 - Voice mail number
 - Answering machine at home
 - Individual who can take messages for you
 - Back-up person when you are not there
- Think about limiting the number of places the employee will need to check for messages as well as the possible confusion caused from too many phone numbers.

Meetings

- Will the employee be available for meetings in person when necessary? What contingency plans are there in the event there is short notice for a meeting?
- Can the employee participate in a meeting by phone?
- Is there agreement about when staff meetings will be scheduled?

Information

- Has the employee informed people about where critical information is kept?
 - Filing system
 - Computer access
 - Keys to files, desks and office
 - Addresses and contact information/rolodex
 - The employee's calendar
- Are necessary computer files shared with others who might need to access them?
- If working out of the office, how will the employee access information he/she might need?

Receiving Feedback

- How will supervisors, co-workers, customers and others give feedback on how the employee's new work schedule is working for them?