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## Workplace Flexibility: A Guide for Employees

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Ever since the term “family-friendly workplaces” was coined, flexible work options (such as being able to take time off to address family matters, to work some regular hours at home, to change arrival and departure times at work, to move between part-time and full-time work, and so forth) have been thought of as “benefits” that employers may, or may not, choose to offer employees to help them manage their work as well as their personal or family lives.

Today, we have come to think about workplace flexibility differently. New research from Families and Work Institute (FWI) shows that when employers and employees partner in finding flexible ways to work, both benefit. In other words, working flexibly can not only help employees manage their work and personal responsibilities, it can enhance an employee’s effectiveness on the job, and benefit employers as much as employees. For instance, FWI’s research finds that employees with flexibility are:

- more engaged in their jobs and committed to helping their companies succeed;
- more likely to plan on staying with their employer; and
- more satisfied with their jobs.

In addition, working with flexibility reaps benefits for the employee: Employees who have greater access to flexible work options have significantly better mental health than other employees. Clearly, flexibility can be a “win-win.”

So why don’t more employees have the choice to work more flexibly? And what steps can you take if you want to increase the flexibility in your work life?

One reason that flexible work options such as flextime may meet with resistance is that they challenge some long-held assumptions about work such as “presence equals productivity”—an assumption that doesn’t hold up in an economy that is increasingly turning to results, not just time on the job, as a measure of productivity. Another assumption flexibility challenges, is “if you give employees an inch, they will take a mile.” But as Institute data reveal, the opposite is more likely to be true: If you give employees an inch (or more flexibility), they are more likely to go that extra mile for their employers.

So how can you partner with your employer to find flexible work options that help you meet your work and family or personal commitments?

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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](http://www.whenworkworks.org).

## ASSESSING YOUR SITUATION

- First, determine your needs for flexibility. Do you need or want traditional flextime, in which you select arrival and departure times and then stick with them? Or daily flextime, varying your arrival and departure times daily? Do you want to work at home occasionally or on a regular basis? Do you want to reduce your hours over the course of a week, or during certain times of the year? There are many types of workplace flexibility—for more information, go to [www.whenworkworks.org](http://www.whenworkworks.org).
- Find out what kinds of flexibility your organization offers by talking to the people responsible for personnel policies, reading the employee handbook, and/or talking with other employees. Just because your company may not offer the kind of flexibility you need and want, doesn't mean you can't be the first person to pioneer it.
- As you are considering the possibilities, think about your working style. If you are thinking of flextime, then make sure you can reliably stick to the schedule you select. If you are thinking of working from home, you should be a self-starter—able to take initiative, work independently, deal effectively with the distractions of home life, meet deadlines and produce well.
- If you are planning to work from home, make sure your home has a good space for working—where you can keep and store work materials and equipment. Consider whether you will need equipment, technology support or other resources from the company to make your arrangement work.
- You need to be realistic and think about the potential impact on you and your career. Could this arrangement affect your ability to advance in your career or be selected for specific work assignments? How will the flexible arrangement impact your income? How will it impact your eligibility in the short term for benefits such as health care coverage and in the long term for your retirement pension?

## CREATING SOLUTIONS

- Consider how the flexible work arrangement you want will affect your job responsibilities, your company, customers, supervisors, and coworkers.
- Talk with employees who have used flexible arrangements. Find out what's worked and what hasn't and how and when they involved their coworkers and supervisor. What advice would they give you? Use this information in shaping your own plan.
- Create several options for handling your job responsibilities that will work well for you AND for your company, customers, supervisors, and coworkers. Plan for everyday and emergency situations. For example, if you want a flextime schedule where you come to work early and leave early, figure out how problems that arise after your departure will be handled. Make sure that these are realistic solutions that others can handle. Your supervisor is much more likely to be open to your proposal if he or she sees that you've given thought to your work, as well as your personal needs and looked for win-win solutions.
- Most important to any arrangement is a communications plan, i.e., the need to determine when, where and how you will be available to your supervisor, co-workers and clients. If you work part-time, job share, or are on a compressed workweek, you also need to decide on your accessibility on those days when you are not in the office. [See Communication Checklist]

## MAKING THE CASE FOR YOUR PROPOSAL

- Talk with other employees who have successfully negotiated flexible arrangements. Find out how they presented their proposals and use this information as you get ready to make your case. Find out about the negative experiences as well. If you want to try something that hasn't worked well before, you will have a viable plan for how you will deal with the obstacles or problems that have arisen in the past.
- Find a flexibility "champion" or "champions" in your organization who will support you. At best, these are opinion-leaders who can either advise you behind the scenes in achieving your goal or who can take a more public stance in favor of your proposal.
- Make a "business case" for greater workplace flexibility. A business case is defined as an argument where the benefits are seen as outweighing the costs.
  - What is your argument? What business problem are you addressing with your request? In what ways do the benefits of your proposal outweigh any perceived problems? Why is it in your employer's self-interest to provide this flexibility?
  - What is the best way to approach your supervisor? Will he or she understand this issue from first-hand experience or not? Does your supervisor respond better to a written proposal using hard data about the benefits of flexible work options for employers and employees? If so, you may want to draw on FWI resources to help make your case. Or does your supervisor prefer to discuss issues more informally and in person? Use the approach that best suits your supervisor's style.
  - How can you best present the options for meeting your job responsibilities? Does your supervisor want to be in on the decision-making process or does he or she want you to come up with alternatives and then a recommended solution?
  - How and when will the success of this arrangement be evaluated? Suggest a trial period and agree on the criteria for evaluating whether the arrangement is working or not. If problems arise, you can make changes to the arrangement. Agree to a specific timeframe when the arrangement will be evaluated and build in a process for continuing to make improvements.
- If your employer does not agree to your initial proposal, would another type of flexibility work better? For instance, if your supervisor thinks using traditional flextime would leave too much work uncovered, would he or she agree to try a compressed workweek during your company's slow period or perhaps during the summer months?

Making the transition to working flexibly requires a partnership with your supervisor. Flexibility is never an entitlement and it requires patience on your part and the need to be flexible given the needs of the business. But it can pay real dividends for both you and your employer.

For more information on flexible work options, real-world business case studies, and flexibility as part of a new way of thinking about workplace effectiveness, go to [www.whenworkworks.org](http://www.whenworkworks.org).

## COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

*When developing flexible work arrangements, it's important to determine when, where and how you will be available to your supervisor, coworkers 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 you need to be when you are at work. Clearly, there are personal issues, as well as business ones, to consider. You should think about the questions below and whether you want coworkers, customers or other parties to have different access to you on days when you are not at work. You should review your answers with your supervisor to develop a communication plan.*

*Clearly, not all of the questions below apply to every work situation. Address the ones that are most applicable to your job responsibilities.*

### How and When to Reach You

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

### Customers (Internal or External)

Before agreeing on a flexible work arrangement, you and your supervisor should consider the effects the new schedule will have on your customers. Before you implement the flexible work arrangement, it may be a good idea to discuss the new arrangement with your customer(s). Here are some points to consider:

- What is the best way to communicate with your customers (such as when, where and how you can be reached, who can be reached in your 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 you will need to check for messages as well as the possible confusion caused from too many phone numbers.

## Meetings

- On days when you are not working, will you be available for meetings in person when necessary? What contingency plans do you have in the event there is short notice for a meeting?
- Are you set up to participate in meetings by phone?
- Have you and your supervisor agreed on when staff meetings will be scheduled?

## Information

- Have you informed people about where critical information is kept?
  - Filing system
  - Computer access
  - Keys to files, desks and office
  - Addresses and contact information/rolodex
  - Your calendar
- Are necessary computer files shared with others who might need to access them?
- If you're working away from your work site, how will you access information you might need?

## Receiving Feedback

- Have you encouraged your supervisor, coworkers, customers and other to give you feedback on how the new work schedule is working for them?