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The Elegant Solution

Flexibility is kind to workers--and the bottom line

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ONE QUESTION SURVEY

Which best describes your company? (Choose one)

- Offers flexibility and employees use it.
- Offers flexibility but employees don't use it.
- Flexibility is an option only on case-by-case basis, arranged with manager.
- Offers virtually no flexibility.

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While many of his co-workers are settling down at their desks for the day, Curtis Sawyer, a program manager with McLean, VA-based Booz Allen Hamilton, is making bottles, dressing his daughter, and gathering the diapers she'll need for the day at daycare. At about 9:00, when his wife does the daycare run on her way to work at the United Nations, Sawyer makes the short trek down the hall to his home office.

Depending on his wife's schedule, he might cut out of work at 4:00 to pick up his daughter. If he does, he'll simply put in the missed time the next day, or maybe after the baby goes to bed that night.

Sawyer flexes his work schedule like this regularly. And while his "flex within a flex" arrangement (he also telecommutes from his New York City home) might not be typical, 66% of Booz Allen Hamilton employees use some form of flexible scheduling, according to George Farrar, senior manager of media relations there.

Yearning for more

Workers at many other companies don't have that option. A 2005 Families and Work Institute national study of employers shows 79 percent of all employees would like more flexibility at work, regardless of gender, age, job type, nationality, and even whether or not they are parents. Given that soon it will be a seller's market (the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2015 there will be 10 million fewer workers than jobs), workers may finally be poised to get it.

In the past, employers have expected that employees will put work first. And if employees didn't put work first. . .well, they were simply replaced with ones who did. But--whether because of 9/11 or because they were raised by parents who

did put work first, only to regret it later--younger workers now entering the job market have a life outside of work, in the form of family, hobbies, and community service, and they aren't willing to sacrifice those for work. Older workers, too, are rethinking the "work comes first" mentality.

"Organizations can no longer get around this issue by finding individuals who don't deal with the realities of life outside of work, because there are fewer and fewer of those people," says Jessica Foster, an assistant professor at Purdue University who studies the importance of work-life balance to workers.

Work no longer *the* thing

The Zeitgeist has definitely shifted. "If you make your employees choose between work and home, work will always lose," says Scott Cahill, president of Modern Think, a research firm that, among other things, designates which companies are the "best places to work" for many states. "The work world changed dramatically after 9/11. People started saying "There are other things more important to me in my life than work."

According to Cahill, co-author of *Destination Profit: Creating People-Profit Opportunities in your Organization*, 85 percent of the best companies on the "best places to work" list (researched by Modern Think) offer flexible work schedules.

At Perkins Coie, an international law firm, attorneys can choose how many hours they want to work. Those who work fewer hours can still make partner; it will simply take longer. The rotating flexibility serves everyone well. The lawyers are happy because they know they can ramp their hours up or down, and happy lawyers make for happy clients. "Flexibility gets you a healthy dose of discretionary effort from your people," says Cahill.

That's not all it gets. A 2005 Alfred P. Sloan Foundation-sponsored study of 29 American firms found that offering flexibility to workers (exempt and nonexempt alike) helped the companies' bottom lines, "whether measured by cycle time, revenue per person, client service, productivity, sales, retention rate, employee engagement, job satisfaction, or reduced stress levels." (The full report is also available online.)

If employees want it and employers benefit from it, why aren't all companies offering it? "The belief that flexibility in scheduling somehow equals not getting work done," explains Cahill. He's puzzled by the misperception. "Don't [employers] want employees to work when they are at their best?" he asks. "And isn't it possible that employers can create a way to do that and satisfy the customer?"

The dark side of norms

Even when companies offer flexible scheduling, employees don't always take advantage of them. A World at Work survey found that although most responding companies allowed formal or informal flexible scheduling, a third of participants said their corporate culture--those powerful unwritten rules about "the way we do things around here"--doesn't support it.

"People are scared that using flexibility will come back to haunt them during review time," says Cahill. "The difference between a good place to work and a great place to work is that a good place to work gives you all these benefits, including flexibility. In a great place to work, they actually let you use them."

If you're wondering which you work for, watch management. Managers who openly take time for family or community responsibilities likely aren't worried about being penalized for it and you probably don't need to be, either.

Surprises in flexibility

While larger companies have the reputation of providing better benefits, it's actually better to work for a smaller company if work-life balance is what you're after. According to the 2005 National [Study of Employers](#), more small companies (50 to 99 employees) offered everything from flextime and compressed workweek to phase in/out options (e.g., from maternity leave or to retirement) than large companies did. Unlike large companies with multiple layers of management, managers at small companies can more easily see how work-life initiatives like flextime are good for the worker and the company.

And if your organization is in the throes of downsizing, for once it might actually work to your advantage: Change is the strongest predictor of corporate family friendliness, because the company sees work-life balance initiatives as a way to retain valued workers.

What you can do

If you think your company's culture would support some flexibility, Cahill has a few suggestions for how to go about getting it.

First, check the employee handbook or ask HR if there are existing flexibility policies. If not, you'll have to build your own business case. Make a list of your manager's possible objections, e.g., lost productivity or increased costs. Counter the objections with facts supporting ways in which flexibility will benefit you, the department, and the company. The [links to research](#) mentioned throughout this article and these [tips](#) are a good starting point.

When you are ready to approach your manager, "lead with the need--not the solution," cautions Cahill. "Try 'I am trying to figure out how to take advantage of my most creative working time'" and ask your supervisor to help you think through possible solutions, including flexibility. If your manager raises concerns, share what you learned through your research, citing your sources and offering to get him or her copies.

Ultimately, regardless of company policy, it all comes down to your manager's style and the degree of trust he has that you'll get your work done.

"I always, always, always made sure my boss's needs were met if I had to leave early," says Margie Myers, a former Talbots executive who flexed her hours in order to attend her kids' school-related events.

"I let him know in advance when I needed to be gone and I let him know when he could expect whatever he was waiting for from me. Then, no matter what, whatever it took, I always delivered on time and at the quality level he expected. He was confident that I would never let him down, and that bought me the flexibility that I needed for my family."

Christine MacLean, Jugglezine editor and [fiction writer](#), spends much of her time taking aim at that always-moving target--work/life balance.

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Reactions to "The Elegant Solution"

I'm lucky to work for a company that does intend to offer flexibility--and a number of people in my department take advantage of it. Am I wrong in thinking that flexibility is harder for full-time workers than part-time? As my kids have gotten older, it's not so much the scheduled school activities as the hours-in-the-day issue that I'm struggling with. Is that the next issue: to pare back to something at *least* like a 40-hour week, if not 35 or 30?

Edith Pierce