

Flexible personnel policies

Workplace realities

In today's changing society, new roles at home and the workplace are making it more difficult for men and women to balance personal and professional responsibilities.

Employers who are willing to face and address this reality head on, and work towards a balance between work and life, establish a workplace culture of trust and empowerment.

Respect and trust leads to commitment and teamwork.

Work/life benefits can:

- improve employee morale and loyalty;
- reduce workplace disruptions due to dependent care difficulties;
- increase productivity;
- decrease tardiness and absenteeism;
- raise the rate of employee retention;
- attract quality employees; and
- improve employee focus.

From all perspectives – personal, social, economic, business, *and the bottom line* – flexibility is a key to meeting the demands of the changing workplace. Flexibility is the number one work/life benefit requested by employees. Though many organizations claim to offer flexibility, many times their policy really means, "if it is okay with your manager, it's okay to be flexible." Flexible work arrangements, such as flextime, telecommuting, compressed workweek, reduced hours, and job sharing, create a healthy work/life balance.

In order for a flexible schedule to be successful, there must be a top-down commitment to flexibility as a workplace strategy. In addition, program policies and quality training regarding policy implementation must be clearly communicated to both managers and employees.

Options for "flexible" policies are as varied as employee needs. Alternative work schedules can benefit a wide range of employees, including those with dependent care needs, those wishing to return to school, as well as partners wishing to share work and home responsibilities. Flexible personnel policies accommodate for such everyday activities as medical and dental appointments, school activities, as well as attention to personal interests and responsibilities.

Flexible scheduling/flextime/alternative work arrangements

Built around the concept of "core hours" and "flex hours" this program allows employees to decide how to structure their workday. During core hours all employees are at work at the same time. There is usually a one- to two-hour window of opportunity that allows for flexibility for starting and ending workdays. Some organizations also offer flexibility during lunchtime. Flex hours can be fixed or floating

Benefits:

- Allows for balancing work/life responsibilities
- Allows for dependent care emergencies
- Can extend hours of service for the organization/business
- Reduces tardiness and absenteeism
- Reduces commuting during peak hours

Considerations:

- Depends on support and awareness by the manager who will implement them – training is the key
- Requires coordination between supervisors and staff to provide adequate supervision and meeting time
- May require additional record keeping
- May not be suitable for all positions

Compressed work hours

There are a variety of forms that a compressed work schedule can take. The most common variation on the five-day, 40-hour workweek is four, 10-hour days, giving employees three days off and extending the weekend. Changes in the Fair Labor Standard Act made it possible for employees to voluntarily schedule longer days. As long as the total hours worked in a given week does not exceed the maximum hours prescribed by law; there is no additional overtime cost to the employer.

Benefits:

- Allows for concentrated time off from work
- Improves commuting by reducing number of workdays and traffic
- Can extend organization's hours of service
- Provides a low cost benefit
- Improves employee morale
- Enhances recruitment
- Improves efficiency in utilization of equipment

Considerations:

- May not be suitable for all positions
- Employees may experience fatigue due to longer workday
- Need for extended dependent care arrangements

Telework/telecommuting or home-based work

This flexible program allows employees to work from home or any other off-site location for all or part of their scheduled hours. Employees are linked to the office via telephones, computers, fax machines, and e-mail. Many types of employers are successfully using telework programs to boost productivity, reduce operating cost, and help employees balance work and home life. Because telecommuting cuts down on energy use and traffic congestion, a tax advisor can advise a company of eligibility for tax credits.

Benefits:

- Often results in better work performance, improved morale, and job satisfaction
- Provides access to workers with special needs, certain dependent care issues, and part-time arrangement
- Saves on office space and overhead expenses
- Demonstrates the employer's concern for the community and environment
- Enhances employees' sense of autonomy
- Saves on commuting time and expense
- Measures performance based on results not presence

Considerations:

- Can create a sense of isolation for the employee
- Requires a high degree of organization and planning

Reduced hours

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines a part-time worker as a person who works less than 35 hours a week. As the workplace changes, the number of employees choosing to work less than full time steadily increases, despite the loss of pay and other benefits. This is particularly true for those employees who are faced with dependent care issues whether for children, aging adults, or special needs care.

Part time options for employees are a good way to retain valuable employees who choose to have more time to devote to their family responsibilities, further their education, or pursue other interests.

Benefits:

- Can result in retention of experienced employees who might otherwise leave
- Provides for gradual return to work following family/medical leave
- Anecdotal evidence indicates that part-time employees are more loyal and productive
- Can reduce turnover and absenteeism rates
- Cost of implementation is much lower than replacing experienced employees
- Reduces overtime pay

Considerations:

- May require additional paperwork and supervision
- Benefits offered need to be pro-rated

Job sharing

Job sharing is a form of part-time work in which two employees voluntarily share the same position. Salary and benefits are prorated and days are alternated or split. Employees who are job sharing can either perform all the elements of the position or divide the task depending on the skills and talents of the job partners.

Benefits:

- Allows part-time scheduling for employees with full-time coverage for employer.
- Offers employers two sets of skills and experience for the price of one.
- Reduces absenteeism and vacation coverage.

Considerations:

- Requires excellent communication skills between management and the job partners.
- Requires clear expectations of division of responsibilities.

Paid and unpaid leave

Whether paid or unpaid, paternal leave, family sick leave and personal leave are all examples of ways in which employers can support employees in meeting their work/life obligations.

In 1993, Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act(FMLA). This law guarantees that people who work for companies with 50 or more employees can take up to 12 weeks' unpaid leave a year to care for a newborn or newly-adopted child, certain seriously ill family members, and/or to recover from their own serious health conditions, including pregnancy.

Not everyone is covered by the FMLA. For more information contact the Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division at 1-800-959-FMLA. There are generally three conditions:

- there must be 50 or more employees on the payroll;
- the 50 or more employees must work within 75 miles of the main work site; and
- the employee must have worked for the employer for at least 12 months and for at least 1,250 hours during the last year.

Some state laws require more stringent policies regarding leave for employees than the federal law, resulting in more liberal leave benefits. In order to be responsive to employee needs and market conditions, some employers are expanding their family and medical leave benefits to include significant others not related by blood and or marriage. Employers are also authorizing time off for personal business, which may include visiting a child's school event or medical appointments. An estimated 13 percent of the employers in the U.S. have policies that allow employees to use their sick leave for the illness of family members. Personal Leave Time (PTO) is a program where employees have a bank of time which can be used for any and all purposes.

Once again, empowering employees to take responsibility for their scheduling and their job performance can enhance commitment and productivity.

Temporary phase in/out programs

With the "graying" of the workforce and additional demands of families, flexibility in scheduling can take many forms.

Phased Retirement

Employees eligible for retirement gradually reduce their full time work status either by cutting back days or hours, or by taking longer vacations.

Gradual Return to Work

Employees who have been on leave, return to work by gradually increasing their hours over a specific amount of time.

Summer Hours

This option is a variation of the compressed workweek, whereby an employee works four longer days in order to have a shorter Friday.

Variable Time Program

Full-time employees work part-time for a temporary period (usually 2-3 months) while retaining their benefits. This is particularly beneficial for employees who have dependent care needs.

