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Workplace flexibility — a low cost benefit with high returns

Nearly 60 percent of workers would like an off-site work option

By Kathleen Quinn Votaw

Flexible work options like telecommuting increase loyalty, boost morale, enhance productivity, and minimize turnover — often with very little investment. More companies need to see the light.

Most of today's workers are looking for flexibility and better work/life balance. The best 21st Century companies are focusing on the needs of individual employees – and adding creative work alternatives that translate into big wins for everyone involved.

In addition to work/life challenges like child care and elder care issues that employees deal with all the time, these days challenges may include a spouse who loses a job, lost savings or other economy-related issues. It's hard for anyone to totally put weighty problems like these out of their mind. People don't live their work life and then switch to their home life. They live life.

Engaged employees bring both their heads and hearts to work. Good companies wouldn't want it any other way. They recognize that employees can't be expected to check their lives at the door and that there are numerous ways to offer the flexibility employees need to balance their lives.

How much does flexibility pay?

Almost 60 percent of U.S. workers say they would like to have remote work options, but only 18 percent of them currently do, according to HR guru John Sullivan. In my experience, the reason is that old-style thinking gets in the way: employers simply don't trust that employees will really work if they are out of sight. The facts tell a different story.

In his June 2008 workforce.com article, "Time to Telecommute," Dr. Sullivan provides evidence that telecommuting and remote workplaces are proving very successful. For example:

- Telecommuters are often more productive than office-bound employees doing the same work. Cisco Systems, for one, estimates a 25 percent increase in work productivity among telecommuters.
- Best Buy corporate office employees can choose when and where they work (as long as they achieve negotiated results). Early outcomes from this new program show increases in productivity as high as 35 percent.

- Cisco Systems, Sun Microsystems and IBM report saving millions of dollars on real estate costs (because they don't have to supply office space to telecommuters).
- Deloitte estimates a \$40 million savings in reduced employee turnover costs.
- Google finds that it can hire higher-quality talent by taking the work to the talent.

Franklin Becker, director of International Workplace Studies at Cornell University, finds that “virtual office workers are 10 to 20 percent more productive than they would be in permanent offices.” Numerous studies support Mr. Becker's numbers.

Finally, consider this: Fortune reports that 84 of the “100 Best Companies to Work For” allow employees to telecommute or work from home at least 20 percent of the time, and many offer a number of other work/life balance programs such as job sharing and compressed workweeks. Offering flexible options positively impacts attraction and retention, which continue to be top priorities of organizations of every size — and they are rarely issues at the 100 best companies.

Match flex strategies to your culture

Forget about the most exotic flexible work options — like fully-paid sabbaticals and earth-tone furnished meditation rooms....There are numerous, economical flex strategies to choose from and no end to your own innovation in creating new ones. Begin with a business problem that a flex-option solution can logically resolve. Then choose or develop programs that fit within your company culture and the specific needs of your employees.

For example, if your employees have long commutes it can impact morale and productivity, which is a business problem – and an issue for employees. Telecommuting can save on gas and gain precious time for employees to spend with family and friends or pursue personal interests. Working from home or at remote offices close to home can increase productivity and morale. Everyone wins.

Another example is B2E, “business-2-employee,” portals described in the December, 2007 Fast Company article, “Portals for the People.” B2E not only allows employees to spend time on their personal business at work, companies like Motorola provide Intranet portals that enable them to do it. Employees get their stock quotes, make their travel plans, buy from amazon.com or do whatever they need to do quickly and efficiently. Employees can then be more productive at work as they focus on their jobs. On the premise that employees do spend work time on personal business, allowing them to get it done out in the open, without fear, can be a solution.

Here are other common, and less common, strategies for flexibility:

- Four-by-ten hour weeks
- Job sharing
- Flex-scheduling to accommodate doctors appointments, school visits and other personal business
- Family and emergency leave
- Part-time work during certain times of the year (e.g., summers when school is out)
- Free on-campus lunches (to save time)
- On-site childcare
- On-site wellness and fitness programs
- Massage
- Dry cleaning and grocery delivery or postal services
- Carpooling arrangements
- Increased vacation and holiday time

Tips for successful implementation

There are a number of things you can do to ensure successful introduction of flexible work options into your business. There are obvious considerations, like the fact that certain positions aren't suitable for alternative work arrangements because they would disturb work or customer relationships. And, some personalities aren't suited for them either. By defining sensible criteria for both positions and people, you can distinguish those that are good matches for flexible options. Here are additional tips:

- To win over skeptics, shift thinking and measurements from "being here" to "what was done." Look for deliverables based on things like goals that are met.
- Invest in technologies that support collaboration independent of where a worker is located: laptops, cell phones, PDAs, conference phone lines, wikis, online forums, and other Web-based meeting platforms that connect people.
- Make sure managers understand what an employee's underlying hopes are for a flexible plan: Increase productivity? More family time? Time to pursue passions outside of work? Reduce commute time? Reduce overall stress? If it doesn't work out for the employee, there should be the option to go back to the way it was before, with no judgment.
- Set expectations about accountability, objectives, when employees need to be reachable, and other factors that will help measure success.
- Make a strong commitment to communication. Regular communication between flex-employees and their managers is critical; and communication with teams and customers should be easy and seamless. It

is also important to get feedback on how things are going from both company and flex-employee perspectives, through regular satisfaction surveys and one-on-one conversations.

When employers show understanding and respect for their employees by meeting their needs for flexibility and work/life balance, they are rewarded with greater loyalty and productivity and a workforce that naturally tends to go the extra mile. And that's the way life should be.

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