

RESEARCH NOTES

Subject: Schedule Flexibility in the Workplace

Requested by Dr. Julie Janssen, Superintendent, Pinellas County School Board

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Schedule Flexibility in the Workplace

The makeup of families has rapidly changed over the past several decades, and over the next decade a projected 85% of the workforce will include working parents. In addition, many of these working parents are in the so-called “sandwich generation” of caring for both children and aging parents (Institute of Management and Administration, 2009). Research regarding organizational response to employee work and family needs that challenge long standing workplace norms has grown during the past decade in an effort to address the changing workforce (Jennifer Swanberg, 2005).

According to a recent survey from benefits consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide, lack of work/life balance is among the top five reasons employees of all ages would consider leaving their current employer. Many companies realize that unless they offer a menu of flexible work options to employees, they aren't going to have the talent they need to compete (Marquez, 2008). As a result, flexible work is now endemic in modern economies, and there exists literature that praises work flexibility for accommodating employees' needs. Several researchers and policy advocates outlined flexible workplace policies that they said reflect the realities of today's workforce and better address workers' needs for work-life balance than most current practices (Institute of Management and Administration, 2009).

Although flexible workplace policies may include arrangements regarding voluntary decreases in work hours, telecommuting, and flexible working hours, for the purposes of this paper, schedule flexibility refers to fixed (non-traditional fixed beginning and ending time), variable (vary by week), and occasional (appointments, etc.) formal flexible scheduling of working hours (Joseph Grzywacz, 2008). Schedule flexibility is about measuring human resource results, not hours, recognizing diversity, work styles, and priorities (Hollander, 2009).

Some previous studies have found certain facets of job flexibility, such as flexible work hours, to be positively associated with some aspect of family life (Deckman, 1996), to decrease absenteeism and turnover (Johnson, 1998), and to increase job satisfaction (E.J. Hill, 2001). Several studies assert that the reason for the positive outcomes is that workers participating in formal flexible scheduling report less stress (Jang, 2009), which in turn leads to improved performance and better health (Joseph Grzywacz, 2008).

Another study cited access to quiet working conditions during non-traditional hours and the ability to extend customer hours as added benefits of flexible scheduling (Jennifer Swanberg, 2005). These results support the notion that expanding worker access to formal flexible schedule arrangements is a viable strategy for promoting good health and positive organizational performance (Joseph Grzywacz, 2008).

Although the majority of studies have identified various positive effects of schedule flexibility, there are roadblocks to establishing formal flexible scheduling policies in the workplace (Hollander, 2009). One of the first challenges facing formal flexible scheduling is an industrial time clock mentality that measures performance by hours in the office, and skeptical

managers; if I can't see you then you must not be working, yet these managers are most often responsible for approving formal flexible scheduling policies (Hollander, 2009).

Several studies discovered that flexible schedule options were not equally accessible to all employees (Jennifer Swanberg, 2005). Black workers and workers with limited authority had more rigid schedules (McCrate, 2005) and lower wage earners had less flexible schedule options than higher wage earners (Jennifer Swanberg, 2005). These inequities can create a perception of unfairness within an organization regarding the processes and procedures used to make decisions regarding formal flexible scheduling. Even though flexible scheduling may be perceived as positive, a new set of negative outcomes could occur if the procedures are perceived as unfair to workers (Jennifer Swanberg, 2005).

Another barrier to successful implementation of formal flexible scheduling is that currently it is offered ad hoc and not presented consistently within an organization (Hollander, 2009). Companies need to establish a culture surrounding these programs, which should entail training and making sure performance management programs consider employees' work arrangements (Marquez, 2008).

Currently, discussions concerning formal flexible scheduling are gaining momentum on Capitol Hill, with the introduction of the "Working Families Flexibility Act" this past March (Sumner, 2009). While the U. S. is behind the majority of developed nations when it comes to statutes allowing for flexible work arrangements, several bills have been drafted supporting legislation allowing flexible work hours (Marquez, Flexible Work gains attention of lawmakers, 2008). If the bill is passed, employers would have to establish formal procedures for discussing

employees' needs and how to address them, but wouldn't be required to grant employees their requests (Sumner, 2009).

In order for any initiative regarding formal flexible scheduling to be successful, strategies need to be developed that link flexible scheduling to organizational goals, enlist managers, and include eligibility and employee expectations (Hollander, 2009). Of course, the ultimate challenge to employers is providing exceptional service to clients while accommodating a variety of employee schedules that reflect our changing workforce.

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