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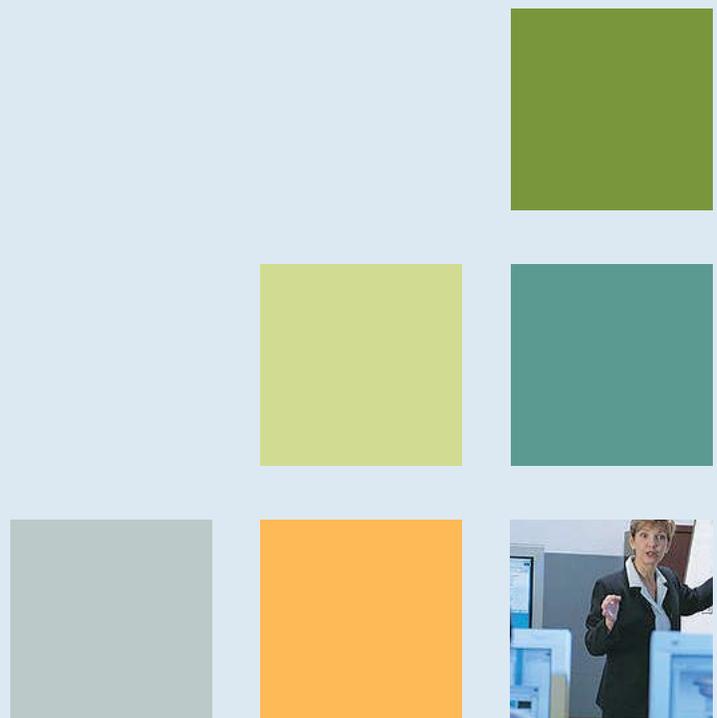
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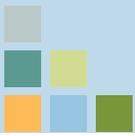
Creating a Flexible Workplace

Lori K. Long, Ph.D., SPHR

Instructor's Manual

EMPLOYEE AND
LABOR RELATIONS

OVERVIEW

Flexible work initiatives can improve recruitment and retention efforts, increase worker productivity, improve organizational diversity efforts, encourage ethical behavior, and help the organization's efforts to be socially responsible. Flexible work options give employees the ability to decide when and where work is completed. This learning module defines flexible work; discusses the benefits to organizations offering flexible work options; and provides methods to implement a flexible work program.

The module is designed for a target audience of undergraduate students and is intended to be taught across three 50-minute class periods. Information on recommended readings, resources, class activities, optional independent assignments, sample exam questions and references are included in this instructor's manual.
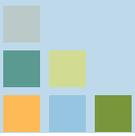
Recommended Reading

Corporate Voices for Working Families. (2005). Business impacts of flexibility: An imperative for expansion. Available at: http://www.corporatevoices.org/.

Demby, E.R. (2004). Do your family friendly programs make cents? *HR Magazine*. Vol. 49, No. 1. 75-79.

Harris, P. (April, 2007). Flexible work policies mean business. *T & D*. 32-36.

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Jossi, F. (June, 2007). Clocking out. *HR Magazine*. 46-50.

Pomeroy, A. (September, 2007). The future is now. *HR Magazine*. Vol. 52, No. 9, p. 47-51.

Recommended Resources

Catalyst

http://www.catalyst.org. Catalyst is a research and advisory group that works with organizations and professional associations to support the career advancement of women.

Center for Work-Life Policy

http://www.worklifepolicy.org. This organization works with employers to design, promote and implement workplace policies that increase productivity and enhance personal and family well-being.

Families and Work Institute

http://www.familiesandwork.org. This institute researches the effects of flexible work and other family-friendly benefits in the workforce.

Sloan Work and Family Research Network

http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/ . This organization promotes informed decision-making about work and family issues.

Society for Human Resource Management

http://www.shrm.org. SHRM's resources include sample policies and toolkits about how employers can create their own policies and workplace tools to manage flexible work arrangements.

Work and Family Connection

http://www.workfamily.com. The WFC Resources web site is a rich source of news, information and solutions that will guide those working toward a more flexible, supportive and effective workplace.
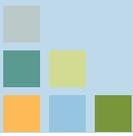
CLASS ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

Why Do We Need Flexibility?

Instructor's Notes

During this activity, students explore the flexibility needs of different employee demographic groups.

1. Divide students into four groups of 3-4 students. If you have more students, more than one group can work on a demographic group defined below.

2. Assign each group one of the following demographic groups:

   • Disabled workers.

   • Working parents.

   • Employees nearing retirement.

   • Young professionals.

3. Ask students to discuss and respond to the following questions.

   a. Why would this group want or need flexible work options?

   b. What kind of flexible work options might this group want or need?

4. Reconvene the class and ask each group to share their answers. Record their responses on a board or flip chart.

Activity Wrap-up

This exercise helps students understand that different demographic groups may prefer different flexible work options because of their unique interests and needs. When designing flexible work options, it is important to understand employee needs.

Sample responses your students may provide:

Disabled employees

   a. Why would this group want or need flexible work options?

   Offering disabled workers alternate or flexible work schedules is a common reasonable accommodation.

   b. What kind of flexible work options might this group want or need?

   It would depend on the disability. Some disabled workers may want to work from home. Others may want part-time work or flexible start times.
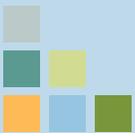
Working parents

    a. Why would this group want or need flexible work options?

      Working parents are often faced with a child's unexpected illness. Working parents may want to be involved in their children's school activities. Working parents also need to coordinate with school schedules that differ from their job schedules.

    b. What kind of flexible work options might this group want or need?

      Working parents may want flextime; part-time work; job sharing; or telecommuting. Basically any type of flexibility is attractive to parents.

Employees nearing retirement

    a. Why would this group want or need flexible work options?

      Employees nearing retirement may not have the financial resources needed to retire but do not want to work full-time. Others may not be ready for retirement but want to work less.

    b. What kind of flexible work options might this group want or need?

      This demographic group may look for part-time work, job sharing or contract work.

Young professionals

    a. Why would this group want or need flexible work options?

      Young professionals (or "Generation Y" workers) value work/life balance and time to pursue other activities.

    b. What kind of flexible work options might this group want or need?

      This demographic group may look for flextime options and compressed workweek schedules.

ACTIVITY 2

Benefits of Work/Life Balance Initiatives

Instructor's Notes

In this activity, students consider flexible work options employers can offer employees to help them balance their professional and personal lives.
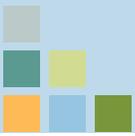
1. Divide students into groups of 2-4 students.

2. Ask each group to designate a scribe to record their ideas.

3. Write the following categories on the board:

    a. Help with family.

    b. Help managing life.

    c. Time-off benefits.

4. Ask students to brainstorm the flexible work options an employer could offer in each of these categories.

5. Reconvene the class. Ask each group to share their ideas. Record their responses on the board.

Activity Wrap-up

There are many ways employers can help employees achieve work/life balance. The benefits offered, though, must make sense for the organization. Before starting any programs, managers should ask employees what programs they would want. It is also important to determine how to evaluate the effectiveness of the flexible work options.

Sample responses students may provide:

HELP WITH FAMILY:	HELP MANAGING LIFE:	TIME-OFF BENEFITS:
• Establish a childcare facility at the workplace. • Offer a childcare referral program. • Offer childcare for sick children. • Offer flexible spending accounts so parents can save money for medical expenses. • Offer programs for older children, particularly in the summer. • Designate a lactation room. • Offer adoption assistance. • Develop an elder care referral program.	• Offer an employee assistance program. • Offer a concierge service to run errands for employees. • Start wellness programs that will help employees learn healthy behaviors (better eating, stop smoking, etc). • Offer in-house fitness programs.	• Offer paid time off. • Establish extended leave benefits such as maternity and paternity leave. • Start "phase-back-in" programs to allow new parents to return to work on a gradual basis. • Offer a "vacation day purchase" program. These programs allow employees to take a reduction in pay in exchange for more vacation days. • Offer sabbaticals.

ACTIVITY 3

Measuring Effectiveness

Instructor's Notes

In this activity, students learn practical ways to measure the effectiveness of flexible work programs.

1. Divide students into groups of 3-4 students.

2. Ask each group to assign a scribe to record their ideas.

3. Ask students to brainstorm ideas on ways employers could measure the effectiveness of flexible work options. Provide an example to get students started, such as suggesting that you could measure the productivity of employees who use flexible work options.

4. Reconvene the class and ask each group to share their ideas.

Activity Wrap-up

The best way to garner support for your initiative is to show that the programs benefit the organization. Evaluating the effectiveness of flexible work options already in place may also show where some are not working and how they can be improved.

Students may list the following suggestions to measure effectiveness:

Employee satisfaction survey

Ask employees to rate their satisfaction with the flexible work options offered by the organization.

Productivity measures

Evaluate productivity before introducing any flexible work options, and again six months or a year after. Has employee productivity increased, decreased or stayed the same?

Turnover

What was the organization's turnover rate before the introduction of flexible work options? Evaluate the turnover rate six months or a year after launching flexible work options. Has the turnover rate increased, decreased or stayed the same?

Recruiting results

Evaluate recruiting efforts before introducing flexible work options, and again six months or a year after. Has there been any change? Are you attracting more or better-qualified candidates as a result of your programs?

Attendance

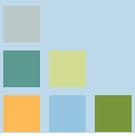Has employee attendance improved since introducing flexible work options?
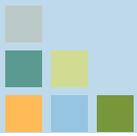
Employee relations issues tracking

Have employee relations issues increased, decreased or stayed the same since launching flexible work options?

Use of the employee assistance program

Are employees using the employee assistance program?

OPTIONAL INDEPENDENT ASSIGNMENTS

Design a Survey

Assume you are the HR director at a 500-employee manufacturing company. You want to offer some flexible work options but are unsure about what kind of options or other work/life balance support your employees need or want. Design an employee survey to determine what flexible work options your organization should offer.

Write a Sample Policy

Your organization will begin to offer flexible work options including part-time work, compressed workweeks and telecommuting. Write an employee policy that includes how employees can apply for a flexible schedule; how other benefits may be affected; and any other guidelines an employee may need when working on a flexible schedule.

Design a Training Program

Your organization will begin to offer flexible work options. Employees can request to work from home; work part-time; participate in a job share; or work compressed workweeks. You need to train managers about how to work with employees on a flexible work arrangement. Create an outline of your training program and explain the training content you suggest.
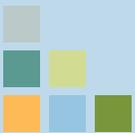
SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

Multiple choice questions

1. Flexible work options could be considered socially responsible behavior because flexible work:

    a) Helps the environment because some options reduce the number of commuters on the road.

    b) Supports families.

    c) Supports the community by giving employees flexibility to participate in community activities.

    d) All of the above.

    Answer: d.

2. Technology is crucial in creating a flexible workplace because:

    a) Technology workers receive higher pay, allowing them to work less hours.

    b) You can use technology to communicate your flexible work policies to your employees.

    c) Technology allows workers to communicate remotely.

   d) Organizations can research flexible work options on the Internet.

    Answer: c.

3. To determine what flexible work options to offer, an employer should first:

    a) Research the most popular options.

    b) Research which options offer the greatest return on investment.

    c) Collect information from employees to determine which options will help them achieve the work/life balance they desire.

    d) Find a consultant with expertise in flexible work options.

    Answer: c.

4. A compressed workweek means an employee:

    a) Works fewer hours each week.

    b) Works full-time but in less than 5 days each week.

    c) Works fewer hours each day.

    d) Works full-time but only every other week.

    Answer: b.
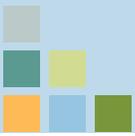
5. One of the most challenging barriers to implementing flexible work options is:

    a) Lack of employee interest.

    b) Maintaining effective communication with employees working flexible hours.

    c) Lack of organizational support because of a rigid culture.

    d) Lack of financial resources to offer flexible options.

    Answer: c.

6. Employees in flexible work arrangements are often more productive because they:

    a) Have less stress and can focus more on their work.

    b) Value their job and generous work arrangement.

    c) Are absent from work less often.

    d) A and b.

    Answer: d.

7. To be successful in a telecommuting arrangement, an individual must:

    a) Be self-motivated and able to work independently.

    b) Be an expert in technology.

    c) Have a large home from which to work.

    d) Have a workspace at the organization to store work supplies.

    Answer: a.

8. Employees should submit proposals for flexible work arrangements because it:

    a) Takes the burden of managing flexible work off of the manager.

    b) Allows the employee to thoroughly consider the proposed arrangement and work out any complications in advance.

    c) Discourages too many employees from requesting a flexible work arrangement.

    d) Ensures there is a paper trail in case of difficulties with the work arrangement.

    Answer: b.
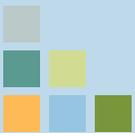
9. Benefits such as vacation days and extended leave programs are important because:

    a) Most employers offer them, so you have to offer them.

    b) In general, all people want to be off work a lot.

    c) Time-off gives employees flexibility to meet personal obligations, allowing for better work/life balance.

    d) None of the above.

    Answer: c.

10. Evaluating the effectiveness of a flexible work initiative benefits an employer because:

    a) The employer can use the evidence for valuable publicity for the organization.

    b) It helps HR build a reputation as a worthwhile department.

    c) The employer can learn what is working and what is not working and adjust the program.

    d) Most employers require it.
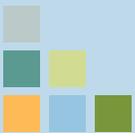
    Answer: c.

TRUE OR FALSE QUESTIONS

1) There is a connection between work/life balance and ethical behavior. TRUE

2) Flexible work options reduce absenteeism because employees can better manage their personal obligations. TRUE

3) The main goal of flexible work options is to help out working moms. FALSE

4) Employees electing a reduced-hour workload often become more productive. TRUE

5) A job-share arrangement is when an employee creates a new job by sharing in the duties of several different jobs. FALSE

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

1) Identify a demographic group that would benefit from flexible work options. Explain why this group might want flexible work options.

Answers:

- Flexible work options can help accommodate disabled workers.

- Flexible work options can help working parents feel more involved with their children's lives and can help in emergencies.

- Employees near retirement can continue to work, but work less and have more freedom to purse personal activities.

- Young professionals can enjoy better work/life balance.

2) How does technology make it easier to implement flexible work options?

Answer: Technology allows for communication any time, anywhere. The Internet allows remote access to organization systems, making it possible to work from home or other locations.

3) List and explain at least two other benefits employers can offer to improve employee work/life balance.

Answer: Employer-sponsored childcare, adoption assistance and elder care help employees manage family obligations. Employee assistance programs, concierge services, wellness and fitness programs can help employees manage their life. Time-off benefits such as extended leave, "phase-back-in" programs for parents and sabbaticals can help employees meet their personal obligations.

4) Explain why it is important to get employee input before starting a flexible work initiative. Explain methods an employer can use to collect input.

Answer: Employers must understand the challenges employees face in managing their lives so they can provide work options specific to those employee needs. Feedback can be collected through surveys, focus group discussions and exit interview data.

5) Explain a method to measure the effectiveness of a flexible work initiative.

Answer: The effectiveness of a flexible work initiative can be measured through an employee satisfaction survey; productivity measures; turnover tracking; recruiting effectiveness; attendance rates; employee relations issues; or use of the employee assistance program.
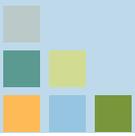
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