

4 ways to inject more oversight into flexible work arrangements



Seems like many employees view flexible work arrangements as an entitlement these days—maybe because HR has pushed the idea for years as a way to balance work and home responsibilities that sometimes conflict.

Now more organizations are rewriting their rules regarding who can use flextime and how they can use it. Employers may perceive flex schedules as a key retention tool, but they're no longer shy about insisting that day-to-day productivity can't suffer because of an employee's altered schedule.

Putting more structure and accountability into the process makes flexibility less of an ad hoc perk. Here are four ways to structure flexible work arrangements in a more systematic way.

1. Ask employees to apply

Create guidelines and systems for the administration of flex programs that address all business needs and stand up to tests of fairness and comprehensiveness.

Example: RSM U.S., a large accounting and audit firm headquartered in Minnesota, requires all employees to justify their flexible schedules in writing. They submit a short proposal to show how the flexibility helps clients and co-workers (in addition to themselves) and describe how it should be evaluated.

2. Make workers manage their own schedules

Ultimately, a flex arrangement is only worth keeping if it benefits your company's financial, strategic and production goals.

Example: At an Arizona insurance office, employees discuss their compressed workweek schedules and plan how the assigned workload will get done. Everyone—not just managers—knows all co-workers' schedules and duties. Bottom line: Making employees more accountable for results has increased productivity and cut absenteeism.

3. Require cross-training before you approve flex schedules

Training workers in multiple jobs ensures that backup employees are always available to fill in.

Example: PrintingforLess.com, a commercial printer, runs customer service employees through a grueling 16-

week training program so they can perform an array of sales, customer service and production tasks. Then, employees work in three-person teams—with trained “designated hitters” as added backup—to schedule their own workweeks.

4. Set a trial period

If you’re not sure a flex arrangement will work, set a three- or six-month trial period, after which adjustments can be made. Explain up front that you’ll cancel the arrangement if results don’t pan out.

Most flex plans are informal

WorldatWork’s 2017 “Trends in Workplace Flexibility” survey report (download it at tinyurl.com/WaW-flex) found that most flexible work arrangements are informal in nature, with individual managers having discretion to offer it about 70% of the time.

On the other hand, more than half of employers do have a written flexibility plan designed to maintain business continuity in case of disaster or other circumstances that make it impossible to work at the usual locations.

Very few organizations—under 20%—provide training to help employees perform successfully in telecommuting roles, or to help managers successfully monitor employees’ work.