

# Flexible work arrangements and fairness during COVID-19

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Business expert Brian Martucci



Many companies have stepped up to provide employees more flexible work arrangements during the COVID-19 crisis. However, doing so can also bring about questions of fairness and equal treatment. Many workers face stressful, unprecedented situations due to the COVID-19 crisis. Greater choice over when and where work gets done allows employees to better balance professional and personal demands. For example, a parent may need to shift hours in order to assist a child with online learning. An employee with an underlying condition could ask to continue working from home after the office reopens. Organizational attentiveness to such plights goes a long way toward maintaining productivity and building loyalty. However, companies need to remain sensitive to possible charges of preferential treatment for certain groups or individuals.

## One-size-fits-all policies vs. individual need

Businesses typically aim to apply company policies and procedures across the board. Consistency promotes an atmosphere of fairness - rules are the same for everyone and each person is valued equally. The pandemic, however, has thrown some curveballs into the equation - especially as it relates to flexible work arrangements.

“It’s a matter of fact that some workers, particularly those with school-age children in virtual classrooms and those with health issues that make them especially susceptible to COVID, need more flexibility than others these days,” says business expert Brian Martucci of [Money Crashers](#). “But it’s also true that extending this flexibility to some workers but not others leaves leaders open to charges of favoritism or even bias.”

For Martucci and many others, the solution is clear. Ensure any and all flexible workplace policies apply to any and all workers, regardless of need. “These policies could include the option to work 100% remotely for all those whose jobs can be done remotely, flexible hours without mandatory on-call periods, and generous or unlimited PTO,” he says.

Some leaders, however, feel these unprecedented times require a different approach.

“Companies should be thinking about equitable decisions and not equal decisions,” says Amelia Ransom, SPHR, senior director of diversity and engagement at [Avalara](#). “The objective should be to give your employees what they need, and it just so happens that certain groups of people like parents and caregivers have needs that other people don’t during these unusual circumstances. It’s completely okay to give certain groups in need resources as long as you’re not tasking the remaining employees with having to bear an additional burden.”

## **Maintain open communication with employees**

Understanding your team's needs and concerns relies on frequent communication. You'll have a more accurate picture of what struggling workers are going through. In addition, it provides a heads-up on any tensions that may be brewing.

“Any perceived unfairness of flexible work arrangements will only be uncovered if managers are listening to their folks,” says Dr. Dana Sumpter, professor of organization theory and management at [Pepperdine Graziadio Business School](#). “This is more difficult when everyone is virtual. Having regular check-ins and feedback sessions at all levels can help to ensure that leaders have their fingers on the pulse of how their employees are doing.”

She suggests avoiding a “no news is good news” approach. Instead, commit to weekly or monthly scheduled conversations with each employee. Routinely include questions such as “How is your job going?” and “What can I do to better support you as you continue to work remotely?” Things you hear may prove eye-opening.

“Parenting is far from the only form of struggle these days,” Sumpter notes. “There are people experiencing their own health issues, caring for older loved ones, or who have had personal upheavals (such as partner job loss or moving). Isolation and loneliness are a stark reality for many single people who live alone. There is also the significant issue of mental health needs, which have escalated during this crisis, and that can influence one’s ability to work.”

Group meetings can provide a sense of community and an overall sense of staff satisfaction. Leaders should ensure both parents and non-parents have a chance to bring up concerns about flexible work arrangements. This sharing helps everyone feel heard and valued and assists management in formulating fair and effective policies. Not only that, it gives colleagues a greater understanding of each other’s predicaments, which oftentimes promotes empathy.

## **Balancing flexible work arrangements among employees**

Maximizing flexibility for all proves one of the fairest methods of handling the challenges the pandemic has thrown at workers. However, circumstances can necessitate other measures. Projects may demand that at least some staff work specific hours or at the physical site, and choices must be made as to who does what.

Some employers financially compensate employees who take on more than their share in order to assist working parents or others needing to remain home. This action helps prevent resentment by leveling the playing field.

Other leaders, such as [Cable Compare](#) manager Todd Ramlin, have turned to creative solutions:

“What we’ve done to create as much flexibility as much as possible while not hurting the business is create a marketplace. People can post something they need or want, such as certain days off or working remotely, where other employees can respond and offer to help in exchange for something they want or need. If they’re able to reach an agreement, they send it to management for final approval. What matters is that the work gets done, not who does it. If people can help each other without disrupting the business why shouldn’t they?”

**Additional Resource:** Learn more on [managing remote employees](#).

## **Re-evaluate periodically**

Fairness in flexible work arrangements looks to remain an issue for the foreseeable future. As needs can change rather quickly, encourage all employees to keep you posted on their circumstances.

Likewise, be as transparent and timely as possible in conveying company responses to ever-changing pandemic conditions. Transparency and keeping people in the loop go a long way toward establishing the type of “we’re all in this together”” vibe that assists in getting everyone through these tough times.