

# FLEXIBILITY

## CURRENT METHODS AND PRACTICES

**T**otal rewards/HR professionals have heard it all before: “My son is sick today,” or “I have to take my mother to the doctor,” or even, “My dog is sick.” Employees’ family responsibilities have an impact on work, sometimes causing tardiness, absenteeism or even turnover. Many households are affected by dependent-care issues, such as having a child with a serious health condition or caring for aging parents, making flexibility absolutely essential. Flexible work options are becoming a necessity for attracting and retaining top human-capital resources.

Yet many employers are challenged to meet the bottom line while simultaneously trying to maximize employee well-being. Employers of choice are realizing the benefits of offering benefits and flexible work options as a total rewards strategy to engage their workforce and enhance human capital. In truth, flexibility provides a win-win solution to managing workforce challenges related to employees’ dependent-care responsibilities. Increases in employee retention, higher productivity and relatively low administration costs make flexibility a viable business strategy.

It seems like an obvious choice for employers, and a majority of

organizations have some type of flexibility program available, according to a recent survey of 552 compensation, benefits and work-life professionals by WorldatWork, The Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP) and the Regional Research Institute at Portland State University. This article outlines the results of the “Work-Life Flexibility and Dependent-Care Survey,” addressing the discrepancy between the availability and utilization of formal and informal flexible-work arrangements, workplace culture, equity, knowledge about dependent care in the workplace, and training and other resources for total rewards/HR professionals to enhance managing flexible-work options.

### Flexible Scheduling at a Glance

While most organizations offer some type of flexible-work arrangement,

#### QUICK LOOK

- ➔ Increases in employee retention, higher productivity and relatively low administration costs make flexibility a viable business strategy.
- ➔ More than one-third of the respondents report that even when flex options are available, the organizational culture inhibits the employees’ usage, and an additional 11 percent indicate that the flexibility programs do not meet employee needs.
- ➔ Although overall results indicate strong support of work-life integration, this may not be the complete picture.

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FIGURE 1: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF EMPLOYEES HAVE ACCESS TO AND/OR USE FLEXIBLE-WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

	Accessible	Used by more than 50% of employees	Not applicable
Clerical/Administrative	73%	13%	19%
Technical	74%	14%	16%
Professional	84%	15%	10%
Managerial	78%	14%	14%
Sales/Customer Service	54%	11%	28%

the survey findings show a discrepancy between the availability of flexible options and their utilization. If employees value flexibility and employers offer the opportunity, what explains the gap? Workplace culture may be the culprit. Similar to the findings of other work-life studies, more than one-third of the respondents report that even when flex options are available, the organizational culture inhibits the employees' usage. An additional 11 percent indicate that the flexibility programs do not meet employee needs.

What types of flexible arrangements are available and who has access to them? Salaried employees have the widest array of flexible arrangements at their disposal. About half of the organizations responded that salaried employees can exercise flex time on a daily basis, and slightly more than half can telecommute.

Hourly employees have somewhat more restricted access to flexible work. Approximately one in three organizations offers flex time to hourly employees, including daily flex time. However, telework, defined as full-time work from home with limited worksite face time, is not available for any employees at 60 percent of organizations.

Although flexibility programs exist, survey responses reveal a sizeable gap

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between what organizations offer to their employees and what is typically practiced. Only a small percentage of employers report that flexible schedules are used by more than 50 percent of employees in each category. (See Figure 1.)

### A Good Enough Reason

Flexible scheduling has not become such an acceptable option that it can

be secured automatically without offering a reason, except in about 15 percent of organizations that indicated disclosure of need has no bearing on the decision. Employees who discuss why they need a flexible schedule increase the likelihood of securing approval for the request in three out of four organizations.

While disclosure may be necessary when requesting flexible schedules, it might not be sufficient to acquire approval. When employees divulge a reason, supervisors or total rewards/HR professionals may be tempted to assess its merit, a practice that may invite inequitable decision-making. Subjective discretion also signals an attitude that flexibility should be reserved for individuals disclosing the most pressing needs, leaving out employees with less-worthy reasons.

Survey participants were asked how likely they were to grant flexible work requests given a variety of reasons. Requests likely to be approved involve personal reasons related to family care. For example, care for a family member with a terminal illness was "very likely" to be approved in 56 percent of organizations. Also, short-term child-care difficulties would "likely" earn approval in 50 percent of organizations.

Parents whose children are experiencing behavioral difficulties at school may find their employers more ambivalent. About 44 percent of employers were neither "likely" nor "unlikely" to grant a flexible schedule for a parent whose child was acting out at school, and 43 percent were swayed in neither direction for a parent whose child was expelled from school. The message? More than a desire for increased autonomy appears necessary to trump traditional presumptions about when work takes place, and the degree of social acceptability attached to the reason can influence flexibility outcomes.

FIGURE 2: FOR EACH OF THE TOPICS BELOW, PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER YOUR ORGANIZATION HAS OFFERED ANY TRAINING DURING THE LAST 24 MONTHS.



## Conclusions

Keeping pace with the realities of today's workforce is a formidable challenge for employers. If organizations are to attract and retain valuable human-capital assets, they must be responsive to employees' needs and circumstances outside of work. Support for work-life integration through flexible-work options that are not only accessible, but embedded in a workplace culture that values the personal side of employees, is a viable business strategy. Organizational leaders can significantly shape workplace culture to strengthen work-life integration by directly communicating their support for flexibility and providing the necessary training to total rewards/HR professionals and supervisors on significant work-life issues. WS

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## RESOURCES PLUS

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- Type in this key word string on the search line: **Workplace flexibility.**

Go to [www.worldatwork.org/bookstore](http://www.worldatwork.org/bookstore) for:

- *Work-Life Effectiveness: Bottom-Line Strategies for Today's Workplace*

Go to [www.worldatwork.org/certification](http://www.worldatwork.org/certification) for:

- B5: Managing Flexible Benefits
- W2: The Flexible Workplace — Strategies for Your Organization.

## Personal Needs

Respondents reflected on their organization's culture through a series of statements regarding work-life issues. When asked to agree or disagree, 84 percent reject that their organization has an "unwritten rule" forbidding employees to deal with personal issues at work. Seventy-five percent dispute the statement that their organizations look unfavorably on employees who put family needs ahead of their job. Although overall results indicate strong support of work-life integration, this may not be the complete picture.

As it turns out, supervisors are important gatekeepers of flexibility. In nearly one-third of the organizations decisions about flexibility are decentralized and primarily occur at the line or supervisor level. While 56 percent report that supervisors are generally supportive of employees addressing personal needs during work hours, 40 percent specify that support fluctuates across supervisors. Because individual supervisors can vary significantly in their views on flexibility and work-life concerns, disparate practices and attitudes can flourish within individual organizations.

## Are Total Rewards/HR Professionals Prepared?

Total rewards/HR professionals play a key role in addressing flexibility and dependent-care needs of employees. When asked to rate their knowledge level about dependent-care issues, more than two-thirds of the respondents indicated they were "very knowledgeable" or "somewhat knowledgeable" about the topics of parenting and child development, while one-third were least knowledgeable about the topics of adult disabilities, child disabilities and children's mental health.

Continuing to reflect a policy-practice gap, few organizations have offered recent training on work-life issues or flexible work arrangements to total rewards/HR professionals. Likewise, supervisors have not recently been offered training about flexible scheduling or work-life matters in about three quarters of organizations surveyed. (See Figure 2.) Training for total rewards/HR professionals and supervisors who are primarily responsible for making decisions about flexibility represents a critical link that translates an idea promoted by leadership into a program actually used by employees.