

How A Flexible Work Schedule Can Help You Strike The Balance

Tammy Hunter was obsessed with her handheld device. It got so bad that her children would bring it to her whenever it lit up, because they knew she wouldn't want to miss any important call about work. She faced a very familiar challenge: How could she ever feel fully involved in her job and yet fully relaxed at home?

Hunter has now struck that balance by taking advantage of certain policies at her company. She's a tax partner at KPMG, an audit, tax and advisory firm in Atlanta. In the summer, her work day ends at 3 p.m. on Fridays. She volunteers in her community with the help of a program that gives her 12 hours of paid time per year to do so. And she uses a buddy system to ensure her work is completed when she takes a vacation. But the program that has done the most for her ability to strike a work-life balance is flexible scheduling.

In Pictures: Institute A Successful Flexible-Schedule Policy

Flexible scheduling allows employees to adjust the time or place their work is completed. It can mean compressing 40 hours into four days, starting and ending workdays at different times, or doing some of your work at home. The reason may be as simple as wanting to better manage a long commute. Some parents choose to arrive at work later so they can take their children to school. Some companies may offer these options to retain female employees who might consider leaving their jobs after having children.

So far, the program has been so popular at KPMG that an estimated 50% of its employees take part. But there's more to it than just announcing policies—Hunter insists the approach must be top-down, with managers actively supporting participation. She not only maintains a flexible schedule but encourages her employees to follow her lead.

"I struggled when I thought I could be great only if I was at home 100% of the time or at work," she says. "Now that I have a balance, I feel like I spend enough time at home *and* enough time at work." She has three children.

Companies are finding that flextime boosts productivity, and more and more of them, including Kraft Foods, Texas Instruments and First Tennessee Bank, are taking advantage of it. When employees manage their own schedules, their stress levels decline and they focus better on their tasks. According to a recent study by Georgetown University, employee stress from trying to find time for their children correlates with decreased productivity and increased absenteeism. The study found that unplanned absences were costing some businesses nearly \$1 million a year.

Not everyone sees flexible scheduling as a win-win situation, though. David Lewis, chief executive of OperationsInc, a human resources consulting firm, says that it can create tension in the work environment and stigmatize those who take part in it. "It's the 'have and have-not' syndrome," he says. "Businesses try to implement it so that the right positions have flexible schedules, but other employees can view that as distrust that they can work outside of the home as well."

Lewis also warns that some employees may even be passed over for promotions if their adoption of a flexible schedule makes them appear to be less dedicated to their work. And it can be especially difficult to justify in the current economic environment (see "Flextime In A Down Economy.")

Pat Katepoo, founder of WorkOptions.com, says that even though the risk of a negative stigma exists, it should be manageable. Once you've exhausted all your other options, she says, switching to a flexible schedule should certainly be better than losing your job.

Although some companies, like KPMG, have policies already in place, at others you'd have to propose the idea yourself. That may sound daunting, but Katepoo points out that thousands of people have done it successfully. She recommends that you try it only if you've been employed at the company for at least a year.

Create a detailed and comprehensive proposal that outlines exactly how you will ensure all your work gets done, and present the proposal in person. If it makes sense, it will help your company as much as it helps you, because, Katepoo says, your employer will be on the road to higher worker retention and productivity.

Tammy Hunter agrees. For her, it only makes sense that a more relaxed work environment would boost productivity. "When you enjoy your work environment and you aren't stressed out about getting other things done," she says, "you are more productive." she says.

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