

Alternative Work Arrangements Benefit the Employee and the Employer

In the context of belt-tightening throughout many industries, how can an organization attract and retain top-notch employees? One option is offering alternative work arrangements, such as flextime, job-sharing, and teleworking. In a recent study by the recruitment company Spherion, 86 percent of 3,200 employees cited work fulfillment and work/life balance as their top career priorities, rather than promotions and raises. Today's workers want time to spend with their families or focusing on other activities.

Although flextime arrangements are not standard in many industries, they are becoming more and more prevalent, and they may some day be necessary in organizations that want to compete for the best workers. Recent studies by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Hewitt Associates reveal the following:

- 28 percent of American employees in the public sector have flexible schedules (up from 15 percent in 1991)
- 48 percent of employers allow part-time employment
- 30 percent allow some version of teleworking
- 28 percent allow job-sharing
- 21 percent allow compressed workweeks
- Flextime benefits are common in jobs with the federal government

Flextime

Flextime is the most common alternative work arrangement. Employees still work the same number of hours, but they come in and leave early or come in and leave late. Often, companies insist that employees be present for certain core hours. The advantages to the employees are many: e.g., for parents with children in day care, it may be easier to drop off and pick up their children if one parent has a different work schedule. Other people may want to avoid rush hour. Still others may want to work late hours because it suits their personal diurnal rhythms.

Another option is the compressed workweek (such as four, 10-hour days), giving the employee a full, extra day to be with the kids or take classes or care for an elderly relative.

Benefits

- more coverage before and after standard work hours; this may be particularly useful if your company deals with people in different time zones
- increased employee satisfaction and retention
- less absenteeism and presenteeism since employees have more opportunity to take care of personal matters outside of work hours
- increased productivity during early or late hours when the workplace is relatively quiet

Challenges

- the possibility of the flextime employee missing some meetings or other activities; however, participation may be possible via telephone
- co-workers losing track of the flextime employee's schedule
- envy on the part of co-workers whose job responsibilities don't allow flextime options

Job-sharing

It may be hard to fill certain jobs with superior employees, since so many people are now focusing on their lives outside of work as much as their lives at work. One solution is to split a full-time job into two, part-time jobs. Job-sharing (where two qualified employees who can work well in coordination split one position) can be an excellent solution when managed properly.

Benefits

- more coverage of a single job
- increased employee satisfaction and retention
- less absenteeism and presenteeism since employees have more opportunity to take care of personal matters outside of work hours
- increased productivity as two people focus their best energy on one job

Challenges

- the potential for breakdowns in communication or organization between job-share partners
- confusion among coworkers

Teleworking/telecommuting

With the right equipment and tools (computer, fax line, cell phone, remote access to servers, etc.), many employees can do their jobs from home offices.

Benefits

- reduced overhead
- increased employee satisfaction and retention
- opportunity for employee to work without the distractions of the office

Challenges

- limited ability to supervise employee

While these work arrangements are not right for everyone in every organization, it is an important option, where appropriate, for the organization that wants to attract and retain the best employees.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

For more information on flexible time arrangements, the following Web sites are a good place to start:

- Benefitnews.com: <http://www.benefitnews.com/index.cfm>
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Publications and Research Papers: <http://www.bls.gov/opub/home.htm>
- Society for Human Resource Management: <http://shrm.org/>
- Workforce Management: <http://www.workforce.com/index.html>