

Everybody Wins with Work from Home Options and Flexible Schedules... Until They Don't

Written by Dave Melville, CEO of The Bowdoin Group

Last month, I was thrilled to be included in The Boston Globe's article, [Free beer isn't enough anymore](#), about the ever-changing landscape of benefits and flexibility.

Since this is a hot topic for many of our clients, I wanted to explore the opportunities and challenges of offering flexible schedules even further. It seems to be a common sticking point across many organizations (including my own!).



Flexible Schedules: What's in it for Me?

Prospective employees love the opportunity for flexible schedules, and it's quickly becoming one of the most sought-after benefits companies can provide. One key factor driving the increase in companies offering flexible hours is the desire to avoid the daily commute. Headhunters know the best time to reach a contact is when they are sitting in traffic on the way home.

Another very real factor is childcare responsibilities. We've seen situations where caregivers request to work 6 am-2pm so that they can meet the bus by 2:30 and avoid childcare costs. Giving employees the flexibility to balance family needs and personal commitments is invaluable to many candidates, and there is a lot of research around its positive effect on employee satisfaction.

Flexible work schedules are advantageous for employers as well. Entrepreneur found that 42% of employees would take 10% less pay for flexible hours or the ability to work remotely. [i] Another study revealed that flexible workers are more productive than 9-to-5ers. The study found that flexible workers:

- Accomplished more
- Worked more hours
- Used sick days less often
- Were happier in their jobs [ii]

So what's the problem?

It is very hard to develop and maintain a strong culture with people working remotely and on different schedules.

I know this challenge well because I experience it firsthand. When we fully embraced flexibility and work from home, our team members loved it; however, internal surveys showed the fewer hours a person spent in the office, the more detached they felt from our company and our culture. I solved one problem but had created another one.

Building flexibility into a work culture is not easy, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. It may not even be right for your company or certain teams within your company. Every company needs to understand what level of flexibility is right for them, and more importantly, why they're incorporating it in the first place. Will it make employees more productive? Will it increase retention? Is it consistent with your company's mission?

If you are going to implement a flexible schedule, I highly recommend reviewing your culture in the office to make sure it is an engaging, fun, and productive place to work. In addition to focusing on the working environment, we offer team volunteer days, a fully stocked refrigerator, a unique office environment, and in-office corn hole so that when employees are in the office, they enjoy being there. If you only focus on encouraging employees to get out of the office through flexible schedules or work from home, those that remain could get bitter – especially if they're holed up in a conference room on a miserable day while their colleagues are phoning in from the comfort of their home. If there are equal incentives both in and out of the office, you'll get the best of both worlds.

Mastering flexible schedules requires three things:

1. **Trust** – Employers need to trust that even if you can't see your employees working, they are. If you don't trust your employees, flexible schedules cannot work for your organization (and you likely have bigger problems).
2. **Regular communication** – Team lunches and side chats can be incredibly beneficial for spreading important messages throughout the organization. There need to be open lines of communication from both parties for flexible schedules to work, which requires time and effort.
3. **Agreed upon deliverables** – Extra emphasis needs to go into communicating specific outcomes. If a person needs to work a half day on Fridays, but a project is due on Monday, they still need to find a way to achieve their goal.

Overcoming the challenges of flexible schedules is possible, but it is a commitment. Here are some practical tips we've learned from clients and from our own experience managing flexibility:

1. **Communicate expectations early.** We see many companies that create informal guidelines around flexibility rather than hard policies. Guidelines like these require clear expectations. For example, if working from home is acceptable on most days, but not on days when there are important company meetings, set those expectations up front.
2. **When flexibility is not feasible for a specific job, be crystal clear as to the reasoning.** We've seen this happen in the medical field for researchers and physicians whose job cannot happen remotely or outside of a specific time frame. Be sure to clarify this to candidates up front so they're not surprised or resentful when their colleague in the next department gets flexibility and they don't.
3. **Communicate that flexibility is a two-way street.** It's important for employees to understand that flexibility doesn't mean you're working any less. We've found that this can be a sticking point for younger candidates especially. Setting the expectation that work must achieve goals and meet deadlines, even if that means working evenings and weekends, is important.
4. **Maximize face time.** Find regular blocks of time when most people are in the office to maximize the time you have together in person. While flexibility is great, sometimes nothing beats good, old-fashioned face time as it can help to foster innovation, make communication easier, and build a sense of belonging among employees.
5. **Make extra efforts to share company updates with flexible employees.** Important updates may be obvious to those who heard them at the water cooler, but not for those who work remotely. We started a "Shout Out" program where employees can publically recognize a team member who has gone above and beyond. It is our single most popular communication tool.
6. **Leverage technology to simulate face-to-face interaction.** Use whatever forms of technology are appropriate within your team – email, Slack, text, live video – to bring people together, but not before you set expectations on how your team should use them. If an 8 pm work-related text is not appropriate, you must set those ground rules.
7. **Live your policy.** If in-person attendance is critical for a meeting, make sure everyone understands the reasoning. Creating a flexible schedule that is frowned upon in practice is worse than not having a flexible schedule at all.

Before you get tactical, it is critically important to understand why you are looking to expand flexibility in the first place. Carefully consider what you're trying to achieve before you make the leap. And while you're at it, get to know what your competitors are offering and figure out how you can compete.

Giving people more control over their schedules is empowering and advantageous for employers and employees. It's undoubtedly a trend that is here to stay. The earlier you can figure out your stance and begin to implement it (if it's right for you, of course), the better.

Despite the challenges, I am a big fan. It's given my team the freedom to manage their own schedules while remaining accountable for their work, and when they are in the office, they enjoy it. They are more empowered than ever before, and that's a beautiful thing.

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and get access to your next great hire.**

[i] <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/infographic-employees-accept-less-money-more-flexibility/>

[ii] <https://people.stanford.edu/nbloom/sites/default/files/wfh.pdf>