What are the Pros and Cons of Flex Time?



By Mary Teresa Bitti, Financial Post

Flex time is part of a growing trend in the workplace that encompasses flexible work arrangements. It falls under the larger category of alternative work arrangements, such as telecommuting and job sharing.

Even within that paradigm, flex time is, well, flexible. It can be a compressed work week: Longer hours Monday through Thursday, to earn Fridays off. Or, it might mean modified start and end times organized around core or peak work times. Or, maybe it means leaving early each Tuesday to make Susie's soccer game. Or, perhaps an employee wants to incorporate training into the middle of the day and will work later to make up the time. In other words, the possibilities for a flexible work arrangement are limitless.

The notion that employees do not have to be tied to their desks emerged in the 1990s, says Claude Balthazard, director, HR Excellence, Human Resources Professionals Association. Then, employers were more bound to face-time, and technology did not offer the capabilities it does today. In other words, it wasn't really done.

Today, flexibility is a business reality. And as new generations enter the workforce, it is an expectation. "Employees truly appreciate this," Mr. Balthazard says. "It allows them to juggle the many areas of their lives and, in turn, when they are on, they are on. They have a greater sense of loyalty, which means they want to stay. Plus, productivity goes up."

"Computers have changed the landscape," Mr. Balthazard says. "Go back a decade, and the ability to bring work with you was nowhere. Today, employees can check in from anywhere and be much more present even though they are not at their desks. That has made employers more open to embracing flex time."

This is particularly true for small business owners. "Most small employers see the ability to provide and manage flex time as a competitive advantage over larger companies because they can sometimes be even more flexible to meet the needs of their employees," Mr. Balthazard says. "It's a great way to attract and help retain employees."

It's easy to see why. Managed well, there are many pluses to flex time, experts say. There is, at least anecdotally, a direct line from flexible work arrangements to engagement to increased productivity.

“Allowing employees to work from home one day a week, for example, means they can avoid fighting traffic or it gives them the ability to deal with personal issues, and that means you are actually helping them lessen their levels of stress,” says Mario Paron, chief HR officer, KPMG Canada, in Toronto. “Less stress can lead to a higher level of engagement, which can lead to increased productivity. There is potential for a win-win.”

That potential hinges on doing all the upfront work right. “Once you decide you are going to allow some degree of flexibility, it’s important to put the communication and protocols in place, because flexibility can be a great success or not,” says Karen Wensley, People Leader for Ernst & Young in Canada.

One of the keys to getting it right is understanding and making it clear that this is a two-way responsibility.

“It is the employer’s responsibility to allow employees as much flexibility as they can to meet their personal goals,” Ms. Wensley says. “At the same time, employees have to realize they are working as part of a team. And to the same degree that they get to benefit from flexibility, they have a responsibility to support the flexibility of others on their team. If they want to leave early on a particular day, when the person in the next office wants to do the same, then you have a responsibility to say, ‘How can I help?’ If it’s all about me, it doesn’t work. If it’s about my team and this is a goal we have for everyone, then it can work.”

It’s important the whole company be aware of what the policies and responsibilities around flexibility are so that no one thinks one or two individuals have a sweet deal. There should be a general policy that may be broad in scope but has specific arrangements tied to a particular job and its requirements. The goal is that all jobs get done as a company allows as much flexibility as it can within the scope of that job.

To succeed, Ms. Wensley says, leaders have to be clear on what the policy is and then share it. “Communicate it to all staff,” Ms. Wensley says. “If you don’t, then you run the risk of employees feeling they are not all being treated fairly; that some have more entitlement to flexibility than others. That’s why you need a clear policy.”

Then, be clear about how that flexibility will work. “Have clear protocols in place. Maybe that means the person working from home needs to call in once an hour,” Ms. Wensley says. “The protocols will vary depending on the company and the needs of the job, but they need to be there. If someone is taking advantage and not following the protocols, there should be consequences for not doing the job properly.”

A small company may not have multiple people who have the same skill set and can do the same job. You need to be clear on how you are going to meet your customer needs with your people having flexibility.

Part of that comes down to having a good performance management system in place. “If someone is not accomplishing work objectives you have to be able to discern why,” Ms. Wensley says. “It’s easy to pin the blame on flexibility and sour on it when it often has nothing to do with flexibility.

It’s the fact that you didn’t set clear goals for performance, and no one is measuring how they are achieving their goals.”

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