Chapter 5

Developing Flexibility At Work

Sandra Triulzi

Our own work and family experiences, those of our friends and peers, the experiences of our children and of enterprises as they groan and shudder through the pain of change, all of these feed into the debate on "flexibility".

Why is flexibility at work so important? To answer this, it is necessary to look at demographic and other trends and their impact on the workplace. The advent of technology has wrought major changes to industrial society; technology also has paved the way for modern work practice based on information. Many organisations however have neglected to introduce innovative human resource management programs; their focus has been on improving the bottom line by installing bigger and better items of capital equipment and often extending at both ends hours of work.

A recent study, Flexible Working Arrangements, by the Catalyst Organisation in the U.S. concluded:

The accepted employment pattern requiring five eight-hour days of work is being questioned in many fields, and new patterns for longer, as well as shorter, working days are beginning to emerge. The eight-hour shift made sense in steel mills and factories where human work was manual and working hours were determined by the need to keep costly machines in constant operation. When profit and benefits to society depend more on the quality of a worker’s performance than on the hours he/she spends, it is fair to question traditional definitions of full-time, part-time and overtime. Only when employers determine their need by the work to be done rather than by the hours to be spent in doing it will this situation be changed.1

Change in Organisational Structures

Social and cultural shifts have also often been accompanied by a change in organisational structures with many companies moving away from the old style hierarchy and bureaucracy to a flatter network style. This has required different management competencies, such as communication and interpersonal skills. In the emergent information society women and men will be involved mainly in services production. Business will be competence-based with a need for continuous learning. Management will involve teams of leaders who create a work climate which stimulates and develops others. Skills traditionally held by women will become more highly valued.

Catalyst further reports that in anticipation of the challenges of a more diverse workforce, U.S. corporations are experimenting with various programs to provide employees with more flexibility in work schedules and other areas.

Similar experiments are taking place in the British, Canadian and European organisations as their workforce becomes more diverse. Progress towards a single European market has also encouraged organisations to introduce flexibility into their working environment, in order to attract and retain sought-after skills. Organisations now recognise that the quality of personal life and the quality of working life interact. They also understand that their business interests rely on the motivation and commitment of skilled human resources. In this sense, there is a convergence of the needs of individuals and those that employ them.

What is meant by flexibility in the workplace? I will briefly look at some examples.

Part-time Work

This can take several forms. For instance, reduced weekly hours schemes may diminish the part-time employee’s workload to correspond with the reduction in hours worked; the employee may do project-based work; or, the employee may have to fit a full-time work load into part-time hours. A second approach is based on reduced annual hours where part-time employees attempt to reduce their hours throughout the year to an agreed-upon percentage of a full-time schedule. A third way involves transactional part-time work: an employee works full-time on a particular project and then takes time off before starting a new project.

Job Sharing

Job sharing can take one of three basic forms. The first involves shared responsibility. Commonly, two employees share the responsibilities for one full-time job. The two employees jointly provide the full range of services associated with the single position they fill. In this form of job sharing, there is no formally stated division of responsibilities. Alternatively, two employees sharing one full-time position may divide the responsibilities of the position, usually by project or client group. Though job sharers in this type of arrangement individually perform separate tasks, they also provide backup for each other as required. There are further examples where (say) two employees...
perform completely separate and unrelated tasks but are matched for purposes of headcount. Though job
sharers in this type of arrangement usually work in the
same department, their duties bear no relationship to
each other, nor do they provide backup to each other.

Telecommuting

Telecommuting refers to work at a location other
than the main office. There are two basic types of
arrangements. First, there is telecommuting from
home. The employee, working with a computer,
completes his or her regular work tasks at home.
Second, the employee may use a computer at a satellite
office set up specifically for telecommuting purposes.
The computer is part of the employer’s main system.
This option is used when the employee lives closer to
the satellite office than to the
main office. The satellite
office may or may not be in a
location where other
company business is con
ducted.

Other forms of flexible
work arrangements include
flexitime, compressed work-
weeks, work sharing and
contingent work. Flexitime,
compressed work-weeks and
work sharing are forms of
flexibility that, typically, are
used by whole departments
of companies. Contingent
work involves bringing additional employees into a
company under special circumstances.

Recent experience in Canada and West Germany is
instructive. In Canada the concept of a “pre-paid leave
plan” is being piloted. Employees sign up with their
employer for five years and take four-fifths salary each
year. In the fifth year the employee takes the time off,
still on four-fifths salary. This concept is voluntary and
is seen as providing valuable options and choices for
employees when they may be juggling child care,
looking for other options, or seeking to phase their
working hours down as they approach retirement. The
idea is that it provides an opportunity to “re-charge”
employees to their benefit and the organisation’s.

In West Germany, an innovative form of flexible
working is “flexible working years”. Within this
system employees’ net working hours are computed
for a whole year and then individuals are free to choose
their own working times in order to fulfil the yearly
quota. The West German experience suggests that the
benefits of this option may include improved ability to
handle seasonal or cyclical fluctuations because of a
more flexible workforce. The firm is also able to take
full advantage of a vast pool of full-time, part-time, job-
sharing and even seasonal staff. Employees have the
opportunity to work less than 40 hours a week without

losing their full-time status, whilst temporary or
seasonal staff enjoy a status change by becoming
permanent employees. Greater productivity, lower
absenteeism and turnover has been the result of this
experience.

The rationale for a changed approach is made up of a
number of different strands. More flexible work is
often linked to higher retention rates, especially
because of the decision of female employees to return
to work following the birth of a child. Such
arrangements often assist recruitment and there is the
general perception that greater flexibility encourages
productivity. This has been difficult to prove.
Certainly, levels of morale are generally believed to be
higher.

Several issues arise for managers. First, it has often
been hard to persuade middle managers of the virtues
of more flexible arrangements. In addition, some companies fear that
flexibility will be costly.
Currently, most organisations
prorata part-time employees’
and job-sharers’ pay and
benefits so any additional
costs associated with these
arrangements are minimal.
Moreover, a cost saving to
companies has been
employees’ quicker return
from maternity leave.
Turning to other matters,
benefit, vacation and sick
days are handled in a wide variety of ways by
companies using flexible work arrangements.
Increasingly, organisations, particularly professional
firms, offer full medical coverage to part-time
employees; however, most require a minimum number
of hours for eligibility, typically 20 hours per week.
A major organisational concern about flexible work
arrangements is their compatibility with the prevailing
corporate culture, that is, the fabric of shared values
and beliefs that are of paramount importance to a given
organisation, and which characterise it to its employees
and outsiders as well. In this regard, a key issue is
whether a formal written policy is necessary or
desirable. The ad-hoc introduction of flexible work
arrangements meant that they had not come through a
formal policy initiative. However many organisations
have now put a formal written policy in place. This
approach was generally part of a more comprehensive
family-sensitive work environment.

One of the most common concerns articulated by
management has been that, by setting a precedent and
allowing one flexible arrangement, it would open a
“floodgate” of other requests. This has rarely been a
problem in practice. Further, managers have generally
reserved the right to request that employees utilising
flexible work arrangements modify their schedules to
meet pressing business needs. It is not yet clear whether a long-term flexible arrangement does permanent damage to employees' career prospects. Recent research has shown that while flexible work arrangements provide individuals more time with their families, they do not reduce the cost of child care. Further, companies and individuals involved in telecommuting, or other forms of home-based work arrangements need to be especially sensitive to the fact that home-based work arrangements are not a substitute for child care. The issue of child care needs to be addressed as part of a comprehensive review of work and family matters.

Job with Supervisory Responsibilities

A commonly held perception is that flexible work arrangements are not suitable for positions that involve supervisory responsibility. Successful supervisory flexible arrangements were more likely to be found in situations in which a full-time schedule is only reduced slightly — the supervisor can be reached by phone, or fax — when only a small number of persons are supervised or when the responsibility involves other part-time employees or telecommuters.

New technologies have provided the means to extend the use of flexible work arrangements to a greater number of employees. However, many new forms of technology, available to companies and employees, are not being utilised. The perceived cost of installing equipment at home, or at a satellite office may be a factor, however, unwillingness to move beyond the "traditional" organisational structure is more likely responsible.

Management support at all levels is crucial to the successful implementation of a flexible work policy. An effective strategy for developing senior management support is a successful pilot program. Hand-selecting "pioneers" to participate in a pilot can ensure success. There is a strong belief on the part of human resources professionals that middle management can make or break a flexible work policy. These managers are often reluctant to consider use of a flexible work arrangement until they are confronted with the possibility of losing a valued staff member. A critical factor for acceptance is the communication of the business rationale behind the implementation of a flexible work policy. In addition, training to negotiate with, and manage, employees who need work flexibility, is also a must.

Conclusion

Greater flexibility at work has much to offer employees and employers. But to reap the benefits, organisations must seek to create a family-friendly environment. It is important that companies recognise that the introduction of flexible work practices, such as childcare or elder-care programs, will not have the desired effect if the culture in which flexible work practices are implemented is not changed. And so we return once again, as we have so often in the debate around change programs, to the challenge of intransigent culture and the importance of leaders in senior roles.

REFERENCES

1. Catalyst Study: Flexible Work Arrangements - establishing options for managers and professionals.