

Employers Take Informal Approach to Workplace Flexibility

Flex options are often left to the manager's discretion, with no manager training

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By Stephen Miller

While a large majority (98 percent) of U.S. employers offer at least one workplace flexibility program, most (nearly 60 percent) use an informal approach, such as no written policies or forms, or leave it up to manager discretion, according to a [Survey on Workplace Flexibility](#) from WorldatWork, an association of total rewards professionals.

Compounding matters, most U.S. organizations (79 percent) that offer flexibility programs do not provide training to the managers of employees using these programs.

WorldatWork collected survey data Oct. 20-Nov.2, 2010, among its members employed in the HR and compensation and benefits departments at mostly U.S. organizations.

The study found that a stronger culture of flexibility is correlated with a lower voluntary turnover rate. In addition, most employers report that workplace flexibility had a positive impact on employee satisfaction, motivation and engagement. But surprisingly, the study found no correlation between the number of programs offered and turnover rates.

"When it comes to workplace flexibility programs, culture trumps policy," said Rose Stanley, a practice leader for WorldatWork. "It's not about the quantity or formality of programs offered; it's about how well supported and implemented the programs are across the organization."

Key Findings

The survey covered 12 flexibility programs and found that, on average, organizations offer six types at one time. Companies tailor their flexibility programs to fit the needs of their workforces as well as their organizational priorities. The most prevalent programs are:

- **Flex-time** (flexible start/stop times).
- **Part-time schedules** (with or without benefits).
- **Teleworking on an ad hoc basis** (meet a repair person, sick child, etc.).

Each of these programs are offered to some or all employees in more than 80 percent of surveyed organizations. When offered, they are the most commonly used by employees, with flex-time the highest ranked.

Prevalence of Flexibility Programs	
Program	% of organizations that offer to all or some employees
Part-time schedules (with or without benefits)	84%
Flex-time (flexible start/stop times)	84%

Telework on an ad hoc basis (meet a repair person, sick child, etc.)	83%
Phased return from leave	59%
Telework on a regular monthly basis (at least one day per month but not full-time)	58%
Telework on a regular weekly basis (at least one day per week but not full-time)	57%
Combination of programs tailored to fit employees	52%
Compressed workweek*	52%
Shift flexibility	44%
Telework full time (every regularly scheduled workday)	37%
Job sharing	27%
Phased retirement	27%
Career on/off ramps	19%
<p><i>Source: WorldatWork.</i></p> <p>*Compressed 40-hour workweeks include a 4/10 one-week schedule with employees working four 10-hour days, and a 9/80 two-week schedule with employees working eight nine-hour days and one eight-hour day, with the tenth day off.</p>	

Different sectors emphasize flexibility programs with varying degrees, the survey found:

- **Compressed workweeks** are most prevalent in the public sector (68 percent vs. 52 percent of all respondents).
- **Part-time schedules** are most common among nonprofit organizations (90 percent vs. 84 percent of all respondents).
- **Ad hoc telework** is most frequently offered by publicly traded companies (89 percent vs. 83 percent of all respondents).

Organizations with telework programs are likely to feature them when recruiting talent, the survey found, indicating that they use these programs to distinguish themselves as an employer-of-choice.

Obstacles to Implementation

The study, however, revealed several common obstacles to adopting effective flexibility programs including:

- Lack of training.
- Top management resistance (more so than middle management).

- Lack of employee interest in programs such as phased return from leave, phased retirement and career on/off ramps.

“Telework on a regular or full-time basis might be even more common if not for certain obstacles,” said Alison Avalos, research manager for WorldatWork. “Nearly four in every 10 surveyed organizations say that resistance from top management and/or the lack of jobs conducive to these arrangements are keeping them from offering all types of telework programs.”

The full report, along with additional resources, are available from World at Work [here](#) (sign-up required).

Stephen Miller, CEBS, is an online editor/manager for SHRM.

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