

## **Flexible Work Arrangements Can Mean Good Business**

Three mornings a week, Chris Caswell heads out for his forty minute commute, arrives at his desk at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), and sits down to his job as a programmer/analyst. A copy machine whirs noisily in the space just outside his cubicle, and he works hard to concentrate amid all the distractions of a busy office. But on the other two days, Caswell simply puts on his slippers, turns on a little background music, and sits down at his home office computer. It's a schedule that suits Caswell's needs perfectly, but it's nothing special at MSKCC, where many departments view flexible work arrangements as beneficial to all.

“We just evaluated the telecommuting program, and the responses were overwhelmingly positive from both employees and managers,” says Nancy Montgomery, Manager for Work/Life Initiatives. “People say they have more control over their time, and that they are at least as productive—if not more so—as they were on a standard schedule, because they are able to be more focused. Managers say they have been able to hire people that they couldn't otherwise, and that they were able to keep some people they would have lost.”

In fact, a growing body of research indicates that flexible work arrangements are often a win-win for organizations and their employees. One recent study by WFD Consulting found a connection between workplace flexibility and reduced turnover, increased revenues, faster cycle times, better client service, stronger employee commitment and reduced stress.

Paul Rupert, president of the flexibility consulting group Rupert & Company, has his own theory of why flexibility can have such a positive impact on the business.

“Once you're in the business of negotiating a flexible work arrangement,” explains Rupert, “you have to rethink every aspect of how your work gets done. And for most of us, there is almost no aspect that doesn't deserve to be rethought. It forces you to take out the useless, redundant work.”

MSKCC started implementing flexible work arrangements about four years ago, when one of its departments was having trouble finding space for coders—a computer-based hospital job that requires little interaction and involves concrete measures of productivity—and another was simply receiving numerous requests from employees with long commutes. The solution for both these departments was telecommuting—full-time in the case of the coders, which not only freed up expensive real estate for the entire organization but actually cut down on absenteeism, apparently because employees who might have called in sick with mild ailments continued working from home.

Since then, the organization has successfully introduced a range of other formal flexible work options, including compressed work weeks, job-sharing, and part-time.

### **Some jobs are more flexible than others**

Montgomery stresses that flexible work options aren't for everyone, and aren't suitable for every job. That's why employees and managers at MSKCC who are interested in pursuing flexible work options must go through a formal education and application process. For this, they turn to a bundle of online flexibility guidelines and training tools, designed and customized by Rupert & Company. Here, employees and managers can learn about flexible work options generally, engage in exercises to assess their own readiness to take on--or manage--an option, and even find checklists and forms for making and evaluating a flexible work proposal.

JPMorgan Chase is another organization in which flexible work arrangements have become a part of the culture. Six flexible work options are available (flextime, part-time, job-sharing, compressed work weeks, telecommuting and remote work) and while everyone is eligible to apply, the company uses its own online tools to take employees and their managers step-by-step through a rigorous process.

"We look at the realities of the person's job, and what impact the requested work arrangement would have on it; the person's ongoing performance; and their personal characteristics, such as reliability," explains Christine Fossaceca, the company's Manager for Work-Life Solutions. "The employee and the manager each have their own checklist—the goal is for the manager not to just react, but to listen to the employee's request." Sometimes this process results in a compromise—an arrangement that isn't precisely what the employee requested, but will work for all concerned.

Why go through the trouble? Like Montgomery, Fossaceca believes that flexible work arrangements are good business. Surveys at the company indicate significantly higher retention and satisfaction scores among employees who work flexibly than among those who would like to work flexibly, but cannot. (There are also those who don't work flexibly because they don't want to, and these employees score well for retention and satisfaction, too.) In addition to hard data, Fossaceca hears plenty of anecdotal evidence:

"People come up to me all the time and say, if I weren't able to use a flexible work arrangement, so I could manage my life, I wouldn't stay here."

In fact, while most flexible work arrangements at JPMorgan Chase are employee-initiated, the company is currently experimenting with manager-initiated arrangements, designed specifically with business reasons in mind. One site in Texas, which works with customers from across numerous time zones, is currently piloting the use of flexible work arrangements to increase coverage while decreasing overtime costs.

### **Never forget the needs of the business**

Experts agree that understanding the business case for flexibility is not just a reason for implementing it, but a crucial element in implementing it successfully.

"You need to be sure you are creating a business-beneficial arrangement, rather than a one-sided accommodation," explains Rupert.

In order to do that, Montgomery works to ensure that both managers and employees understand five cardinal rules: flexible work options are not an entitlement; the work must get done as well, or better, than it used to be; nobody else should have to pick up the slack; an employee's performance history matters; and the reasons an employee wants to work flexibly, while important to the employee, should never be a factor in making the decision.

If these rules are taken to heart, Montgomery says, the situation really does become win-win. Certainly that seems to be the case for Chris Caswell.

“When I'm working at home, I get right to work,” he says, “So really the business gets that extra hour or more I'd be commuting roundtrip. It helps me meet my deadlines, there's less stress, and I like the quiet of my own little environment.”

Or, as a manager at JPMorgan Chase reported to Fossaceca, “When you give employees flexibility they work so incredibly hard for you—I get emails at all times of the day and night—those employees work all the time!”