

Managing Employees Who Work a Flexible Schedule or Remotely

Many organisations support flexible working arrangements. These arrangements include flexible hours, a compressed workweek, job sharing, part-time work and remote working. Studies have shown that well-managed, flexible arrangements can lead to increased productivity and efficiency, as well as improved recruitment, retention and morale.

This article focuses on types of flexible arrangements that are at the employee's request.

The challenge of managing flexible work arrangements

Because experts expect workplace flexibility to increase, a well-rounded manager knows how to manage employee flexibility effectively. Here are questions that often arise when managing employees who work a flexible schedule:

- How can you tell whether employees are really working when you can't see them?
- Should employees on flexible work plans be evaluated in the same way as other employees?
- What if more people want flexibility than can be accommodated?
- What if employees working in the office resent covering or providing support for those working from home??

Managing these and other challenges requires ongoing communication and careful planning to maximise the probability of a successful outcome. It's important that your own manager and everyone on your team understands the details of the arrangement, from work hours to measuring goals to making

efficient use of technology.

Plan carefully

Once you and the employee have an agreed-upon plan that has been approved by your managers, create a written document that you can refer to and update as necessary. A written plan can also be a useful reference tool if other employees make requests for flexible work arrangements. Check with human resources (HR) early in the process about established policies and procedures for setting up and monitoring these plans.

Every plan will be different, but the working plan between you and the employee should include:

A trial period. Such a period, which might be three months, allows each party to evaluate the benefits of the arrangement. If the trial period concludes successfully, plan to hold periodic re-evaluations. Write a provision that clearly states that the arrangement can be ended when it's not working for either party.

Hours and days the employee will work. Whether employees work on site or at home, you - and work colleagues - need to know when they are working and available. For employees who are eligible for overtime, you will need a tracking system that ensures any overtime worked is compensated. Talk to HR about this early on.

How responsibilities will be shared. If two employees are sharing a job, spell out each person's duties, including how and when they will communicate with each other, with work colleagues and you. Employees working flexible hours or compressed workweeks (regularly working some long days to earn either a day or part of a day off) should have a plan for handling phone calls and questions when they are out of the office.

How contingencies will be handled. Will the employee attend meetings held on days that are not "office days"? How will the employee pitch in during peak or seasonal production periods?

Working Remotely

When drafting the initial written plan for off-site employees, include guidelines for child or elder care, office setup and safety. Here are some common guidelines for managing employees who work remotely:

Make sure the employee's home office area is appropriate to the nature of the work. In most cases, that means an area in the home, such as a bedroom or study, preferably with a door, set aside for business. In order to be productive, remote workers need a quiet and uncluttered space, free from the demands, distractions and interruptions of life at home.

Review the off-site arrangement with the HR department to clarify safety and liability issues.

In most cases, the organisation provides the off-site employee with the same type of technology that on-site employees have, including computer, voice mail, telephone, and so on. Technology has made remote working easier. It's up to the remote worker to make efficient use of all the tools available for working with colleagues and customers.

Employees who work from home only a day or two per week at their own request, often provide their own equipment while the company provides technical and other support.

Establish ground rules about child and elder care. Employees should not use remote working as a substitute for childcare. Many employers require documentation that care arrangements have been made for the hours during which the employee will be working.

Job sharing

Two employees sharing one job can help the employees and the company, which benefits from two people's ideas and energy while paying a single salary. Job sharers can also take over for one another if one is ill or has to be away from work. When drawing up a job-sharing agreement, it is especially important to delineate responsibilities to ensure clear communication between the job sharers, the other employees and the manager. Be sure to include in the written agreement if those sharing the job are expected to cover for each other, especially in the event of a protracted absence, such as a sick leave.

Job sharing requires a high level of cooperation between two employees. Always treat job sharers equally, since employees who are job sharing may sometimes worry that the other employee will do his or her half of the job "better," or alternatively, that the other employee won't do a full half of the job. Try not to create competition by comparing the employees to one another. Of course, if one employee isn't meeting expectations, you'll need to address the issue with the employee individually and confidentially, focusing on their own performance.

Set measurable goals

When an employee has a flexible schedule or works off-site, you and the work colleagues may not see them for several hours, or even days, at a time. In the absence of "face time," it's important to set measurable goals and performance metrics so that the off-site employee, other work colleagues and you will be able to objectively confirm that the job is getting done.

One of the best ways to measure the success of a new arrangement is to evaluate an employee's performance or a department's productivity before and after implementing the arrangement. Many companies place great weight on employee responsiveness, how quickly off-site employees respond to email and texts and return phone calls. When someone is slow to respond, people may ask themselves, "Where are they? Are they 'shirking from home'?" Other commonly used measures of productivity cited in the survey included using the same standard metrics as for on-site employees and having the employee report progress against assigned tasks on a regular basis. Software exists that measures employee computer activity, but this is much less commonly used.

Supporting flexibility

If you have planned carefully and communicated expectations clearly, flexible work arrangements should run smoothly. However, like any change, the new arrangement will need maintenance, and there will inevitably be some bumps in the road.

Anticipate a transition period. This transition period might result in decreased productivity, but it shouldn't last for long. Employees may need extra support at the beginning of a new endeavour.

Respect the schedule. If you wouldn't call a regular employee at home at 6 a.m., give the remote worker the same courtesy. Remote workers should not be on call all the time simply because they have the "privilege" of working at home. If frequent early morning, evening and weekend contact is part of the job, it should be written into the original plan.

Educate others. As a manager, you set the tone for the department. If flexible working is new in your department, you may want to talk to other team members about the benefits of flexible working. Let your employees know that your company or department supports flexible work in certain circumstances. If helpful, tell them that this is partly because research on flexible work has shown positive effects on productivity, recruitment, retention, absenteeism and engagement. Be prepared to field their requests and to answer any questions or concerns about issues of coverage and extra work for office-based employees.

Meet regularly with the employee. Regular meetings help keep problems in check.

Maintain a personal connection with the employee. An electronic birthday card and other simple gestures can help to keep the connection between you positive.

Address issues or problems right away. If you see a problem or a problem brewing (missed deadlines, incomplete reports, or complaints from customers), sit down with the employee and review the situation. Sometimes employees may hesitate to mention a problem out of fear of losing the privilege of a flexible work arrangement. But if you encourage employees to come to you with issues from the beginning, you may be able to handle them before they become big problems.

Recognise that sometimes a flexible work arrangement doesn't work. In that case, you and the employee - and, if appropriate, an HR representative - may want to meet, discuss the situation objectively, and either make plans to go back to the original work arrangement or come up with an alternative solution. Flexible work arrangements are dependent on several factors, such as current job

performance and attendance, the ability to work independently, the nature of the work to be performed, the employee's commitment and good communication skills.

When things are in place and managed well, flexible arrangements are a win-win situation and generally work to the benefit of the employee, the team and the organisation.

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