

Analysis • Week 17

How to Hack Flexibility

Does your company have flexible work policies? How many top performers actually take advantage of them? Dr. Alison Wynn talks about how companies inadvertently stigmatize flexible work, and what you can do to change it.

By Alison Wynn

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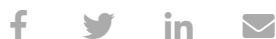


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Flexibility policies—providing employees with options to accommodate their personal needs—have become a go-to strategy for building a diverse

workforce. It's a particularly popular strategy for retaining more women. But do these policies live up to the hype?

While more companies are offering flexible working options, our research suggests that employees often won't or can't take advantage of those options. The main reason: the very definition of success in these industries stigmatizes flexibility and undermines organizational efforts to promote these policies.

In three recently published papers (available [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), my colleagues and I examine the challenges to implementing effective flexibility programs. Our research focused on management consulting and academic medicine; however, we believe these findings are useful in thinking about flexibility policies in many professional settings.

Defining Success and Flexibility as Mutually Exclusive

In the organizations we studied, success often meant long hours, face time and visible displays of compete devotion to work. The organizations we studied all had "Type-A," competitive cultures. According to Dawn, a single woman in her early 40s working for an elite management consulting firm, "People have this—it's almost like a military mission mentality, where we're gonna go and do whatever for our client. It's like we're all on a mission from God."

Such organizations also serve clients or patients, so, not surprisingly, employees take this service mandate very seriously. However, according to our findings, the assumption that effective client or patient service requires intensive work is often wrong.

For example, Steve, a single man in his mid-20s working as a new management consultant, told me a story about a consultant on his team who bucked the long-hours norm: "Clients love her. ... Do the work, get it done, leave at a decent time, go home, relax, come back and do the same thing. But it's not seen that way internally

[at our firm]. ... [Clients] take her as a listener, somebody who's patient, ... just trying to do the work right on a day-to-day basis.”

Counter to the prevailing assumption that clients always demand long hours and on-site travel, we often found examples of clients who would rather their consultants focus on work quality rather than work hours. Similarly, research by [Kate Kellogg](#) demonstrates the limitations of the patient service assumption in the medical industry.

Measuring Inputs Not Outputs

In addition to these cultural norms, we found that organizations' performance management structures often reward hours and face time rather than productivity, effectiveness, or quality. Because actual work quality can be difficult to measure in service and knowledge professions, firms often rely on proxies such as hours and face time.

According to Lauren, a 26-year-old married woman without children, “They compensate based on the type of sacrifices that you are making.” When I asked Steve about the factors considered for promotion, he laughed as he answered, “Um, so your metrics ... Right? So not how productive you were, but maybe how *unproductive* you were. How many hours you billed.”

However, these proxies are poor representations of actual quality and can even backfire. Employees sometimes seek ways of filling the long hours to appear productive even if the work could be completed more efficiently.

Given this restrictive definition of success, it's not surprising that employees doubt the effectiveness of flexibility programs and tend to avoid using them. According to Amy, a 30-year-old married woman without children, “[Our department] doesn't really use [the flexibility program.] ... We don't understand what it means from an evaluative standpoint. If you're on [the flex program], what's the impact to metrics,

what's the impact to performance, what's the impact to career trajectory?
Tactically speaking, how do you get evaluated if you're on [the flex program]?"

Recommendations for Effective Flexibility

Taking all this into account, how can organizations design flexible work options that employees actually use?

Hold leaders accountable for team satisfaction.

In organizations where employees work in teams, cultural acceptance of flexibility often depends on the norms and standards set by managers. Organizations can incentivize managers to create more effective team cultures. Demonstrate that the happiness of more junior employees is important to the organization by incorporating 360 evaluations as a component of promotion to higher levels of leadership. Track work hours and employee satisfaction on individual teams, and step in if the hours get too high or satisfaction gets too low. Establish consequences for teams routinely "in the red," and create metrics of accountability for team satisfaction. Then, standardize processes across projects and leave less to manager discretion, so teams won't vary so wildly across the organization. Recognize and reward successful managers and projects.

Foster community.

Feature role models and build a community around flexibility. Connect people who have flexible needs and experiences (e.g. a caregivers' employee resource group.) Encourage "[uncovering](#)": leaders should feel comfortable sharing their personal lives and stories of flexible work.

Build flexibility into existing policies, procedures, and practices.

Focus on procedural changes rather than opt-in accommodations. According to research by [Perlow and Kelly](#), approaches to flexibility that involve all employees—rather than singling out employees who appear to need more flexibility—tend to be the most successful. Create policies that encourage and enable employees to communicate their personal needs, and plan project deliverables accordingly. [All employees](#), regardless of gender or parental status, have personal lives that need to be integrated with work.

To that end, decide up-front how work-life situations will factor into employee evaluations. Rather than tacking a flexibility program on top of existing performance management policies, rethink how performance management will operate in a flexible work culture. Consider how to create an evaluation and promotion process that won't disadvantage employees working flexibly. For example, reduce reliance on work hours as a metric of success and instead focus on work results. Then communicate these expectations transparently to employees.

In addition to considering how flexibility impacts performance management, build flexibility into project assignment procedures as well. Make careful decisions about how to staff projects. Staffing employees on projects located nearby can help minimize employees' travel, for example. But it's important to make sure a) that the employee wants this type of project assignment, and b) that the employee's development and advancement needs are considered.

Iterate, innovate, and incorporate.

Lastly, continue innovating and experimenting. Organizations can be reluctant to take risks because they fear compromising client or patient service. However, [research](#) has shown that flexibility can actually improve client service and create

better long-term outcomes. Don't be afraid to take some risks. Continue to innovate and test solutions on different types of projects to smooth any issues.

Once organizations have the right programs in place, additional steps are needed to infuse sustainable work processes into the overall culture. Leaders must be held accountable for their teams' work-life satisfaction. Creating a sustainable work experience must become a core tenet of leadership success, rather than a "nice to have." To increase employee confidence and loyalty, the organization must set a new cultural standard for valuing work-life balance.

A More Flexible Future

By engaging in these efforts, organizations can do more than offer flexibility programs that only exist on paper. Organizations can fundamentally build flexibility into the cultural fabric and structural procedures that guide employees' lives, ultimately leading to a happier, more diverse workforce.



Alison Wynn

Contributor

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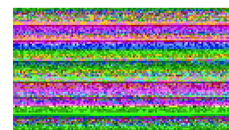


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