

While many employers have workforces that consist of mainly full-time employees, the number of employees requesting flexible work schedules is growing. Granting part-time and flexible work schedules occurs more frequently among existing full-time employees than people hired from outside the organization. The retail, healthcare and service industries are exceptions to this pattern since they typically depend upon a high percentage of part-time employees for staffing.

While interest in flexible schedules is growing, those about to enter into such a relationship should do so carefully to optimize individual and organizational effectiveness. First, put the flex schedule request into context from the organization, flex employee, co-workers and your own perspectives. Next, create an action plan that sets expectations on how the flex schedule will work and how to determine its success. Finally, implement the flex schedule with input from the work group and adjust as necessary. Planned and executed well, flex schedules can result in continued contributions to your organization and the retention of valued employees.

Note to AOL 9.0 users: Please add Carol_Bergeron@mail.vresp.com to your address book so you see all the great features of the newsletter.

BE FLEXIBLE WITH FLEX EMPLOYEES

By Carol Bergeron

1. Put into context

When an employee requests a reduced work schedule it is important to examine all aspects of the request before making a decision. These requests are often the result of an employee's dependant care demands, tremendous commute or return to school.

Why do you choose to grant flex schedule requests?

You should know why you are willing to work with individuals requesting flex schedules. Reasons may include: you value these top performers and their knowledge, skills or expertise, the jobs they perform are core to organizational operations, losing them is undesirable, their outstanding relationships with customers would be difficult to replicate as would their familiarity with the organization, the business and its contributors.

How will flex schedules impact the organization?

Start by reviewing organizational goals and those of the work group and its individuals. Anticipate impact to the organization. Will assignments have to be redistributed among co-workers since work historically done by the requester cannot be delayed given the flex schedule? Will the work redistribution create welcomed professional challenges? Will new assignments be challenging enough for the requester? How are co-workers inclined to react? Will there be an impact to customers or other stakeholders?

How do flex schedules fit with management practices?

Check in with human resources on management practices, precedents and the most effective approaches. Should telecommuting be part of the solution? Is job sharing appropriate? Address how the change impacts each component of compensation and benefits. Understand costs associated with the flex employee and tradeoffs between them and continuity in contribution. If your organization has little experience with flex arrangements then you will be venturing new territory. Keep track of what works and what does not so others can benefit from your learning curve.

Be clear on the length of time of the flex arrangement. Determine whether the arrangement is indefinite or designed to get someone through a specific situation. If temporary, then define the timeframe. Define check points to assess if the arrangement still works for both parties regardless of the length of the flex arrangement. This can be critical in avoiding misunderstandings that go on far too long.



Recognize the flex employee's viewpoint

The following quotes are from a few people who transitioned from full-time to flex employees. They were both relieved and thrilled to have had employers that granted them flex work schedules. Their appreciation was followed by some disappointment. Do any of these sentiments sound familiar?

"Your intelligence doesn't diminish just because you have a reduced work schedule."

"When I was full-time my opinion was valued and regularly sought after. Once I went part-time it was clear that my insight was far less important. That became evident in the decreased amount of influence I had on the organization and its future."

"It was not uncommon for co-workers to make belittling comments about my unavailability even though I worked beyond the flex schedule. I suspect that co-workers had no idea that their comments were hurtful, but they were."

"I sensed some co-workers wanted similar flex arrangements but their personal circumstances would not allow."

You are probably asking yourself "Why bother?" Simply put, continued contributions from valued employees benefit your organization and show up in business results. Using a more thoughtful and collaborative approach to planning will help you make flex schedules more effective by establishing common expectations.

2. Create an action plan

Formulate a preliminary solution

Formulate a preliminary solution that reflects the needs of the requester and considers co-worker and organizational concerns. Start informally testing the waters with co-workers through casual conversation. Leave room for adjustments.

Focus on the Employee WIIFM

Manage the transition with the flex employee by focusing on the Employee WIIFM (**What's in it for me?**) as discussed in our September 2003 newsletter:

- **Clearly communicate goals** and how they relate to those of the organization
- Extend every employee the **opportunity to influence** the organization & share ideas
- Provide **learning and development** opportunities
- **Recognize contributions**
- **Foster a productive environment** that values all employees, gives them the tools to be successful and opportunity to work with others who care about quality contributions

Be clear on the operational details and how to recognize success

How will the new schedule be communicated to the organization and clients? Work out the operational details with the flex employee in advance. For instance, how and when will the flex employee communicate with you, co-workers and customers? Determine how you will both know if the arrangement is successful? How frequently will you evaluate its effectiveness and with whom?

3. Implement

Manage the transition with co-workers

Share the arrangement with co-workers. Encourage the flex employee to communicate why the arrangement is needed. The more co-workers understand the better they will relate to the need and help make the arrangement successful. Work out how things will operate when the flex employee is not on-site. When is it okay to make contact at home? Set the expectation that all have the responsibility to let the flex employee and management know if the arrangement is or is not working. Raise awareness on how seemingly innocent comments can affect positive relationships.

Solicit feedback

At least quarterly, solicit feedback from the flex employees, their co-workers and other key contributors. Make adjustments to the arrangement to promote a win/win outcome.

Share success stories

Learning from each flex arrangement is important for the organization and the immediate work group. Make it a point to share success stories in appropriate work forums. If your company learns to do this well then it has another perk from which to attract prospective employees.

In summary, flex schedules may not be viable for all organizations but they are worth exploring if approached thoughtfully. Making flex schedules work takes planning and flexibility from you, the flex employee and co-workers. When planned and executed well, these arrangements can result in continued contributions to your organization and the retention of valued employees.

RESOURCES

Corwin, Vivien; Lawrence, Thomas and Frost, Peter. **“Five Strategies of Successful Part-Time Work.”** Harvard Business Review. July-August 2001.

Northeast Human Resources Association is about to publish results from its recent **Flexible Work Arrangement Survey**, www.nehra.com.

To read earlier editions of **Bergeron Associates’ Newsletters** and published articles, click the following link. www.bergeronassociates.com/publications.htm

ABOUT BERGERON ASSOCIATES

Bergeron Associates designs talent strategies and solutions to help business leaders hire, develop and retain exceptional people who execute business strategy with excellence.

Bergeron Associates
101 Middlesex Tpke, Ste 6, PMB 326
Burlington, MA 01803-4914
781-376-4071

carol@bergeronassociates.com
www.bergeronassociates.com

NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

If you would like to receive future newsletters then click here to subscribe: www.bergeronassociates.com.

© Copyright 2004 Bergeron Associates. This publication may be freely redistributed in full or in part as long as full attribution and our contact information, including company name, mailing address, email address, web site address and phone number, are included.