

Compelling Quotations

Compelling Quotations from Managers

Managers Overcome Initial Reluctance

As mentioned earlier in this report, managerial resistance is one of the more difficult hurdles to cross when it comes to making flexible work arrangements work for the employee and the business. Although a few of the 18 managers we interviewed were enthusiastic about the new program at the outset, most of them described their initial reluctance. Many of them spoke of three factors in overcoming their fears: (1) learning new ways to manage and evaluate employees; (2) working with teams to set up the program so that all are working toward similar goals; (3) and building trust. All of the managers spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of such programs to the organizations.

Managers Adjust

Managers clearly had to adjust to the new way of working. Most of them admitted to some reluctance in the beginning. One said it this way:

[When I first heard about the flexibility program] I had mixed feelings. It was clear that the program would provide a great deal of flexibility to help individuals balance their personal and work priorities, which would help to attract and retain talent. However, I was concerned that the flexible work arrangements could impact productivity [Our company] is a matrixed organization that relies heavily on cross-functional teams and meetings to accomplish goals. As the program was being described early on, I had some reservations about the ability for individuals to participate actively in the cross-functional working groups while working from home, or not being available full-time in the office.

Another manager reports nothing but positive experiences.

[Since the initiation of flexible working arrangements] I have several people who have taken advantage of the program, and generally, I have had nothing but positive experiences. Employees have been able to be effective on cross-functional teams by formalizing their responsibilities on the team and leveraging existing technology and communication capabilities. As a manager, I have adjusted the way I work with people who use flexible work arrangements to ensure they are well engaged and integrated into the organization, but I have not adjusted my expectations for their performance levels. I have found that people can be more productive when working from home because they often do not have as many distractions and can take advantage of time that was previously spent commuting to work.

Employees seemed to recognize that managers had to make adjustments. One employee told us that the process took some time and that the manager was initially reluctant, but that he came around. This employee said that her department now consistently delivers high performance based on the unique strengths of the team.

Like the manager quoted above, other managers confessed that their worst fears were not realized. One concern in particular that managers often have is the worry that allowing one person to work more flexibly opens up the floodgates for everyone to make the same request. One manager talked about his own experience with this problem:

I thought a lot of people would probably...I anticipated a lot more requests than I ever received, but I think it has more to do with the fact that, I think we are fairly flexible and accommodating, just in general, with people's balance of personal and workplace [needs]....When it works out, it is a win-win situation. The employee is happier and as a manager, you have been able to repay an employee that you obviously value, or you probably wouldn't have let them be on a [flexible schedule]. I mean, it demonstrates a commitment from [the company] that we are not just talking about having a work-life balance, but that we offer a program to make it work.

The Role of Teams in Making FWAs Work

In the eyes of several of the managers we interviewed, the role of teams and how they function seems to be a major factor in the success of alternative work arrangements. One manager made this explicit by suggesting that anyone interested in implementing one of these programs should “get their entire team together, sit down, and work this out.” He recommended including people who want to use the option and people who do not.

Another manager provided a rather dramatic example of this approach:

...I have seen phenomenal results; people completely turned around. I actually have in my very first group an employee who was very close to needing disciplinary action because her performance was not meeting those of her peers. And right as this [team approach] was being introduced, she was included in that group and has excelled and actually will probably be promoted in the next two months because it has completely turned her around. It's the first time she said that she felt that her contributions as an employee have been recognized since the early '90s, which I thought was very interesting.

The employee about whom this manager was speaking had similar thoughts:

I feel more responsible now, because we are more of a team. We need to meet our objectives and goals. Whenever I feel that I'm caught up, I try to go and see if there is anything else that the others need to achieve so we are in line...Because before, it was—“you do this, you do that, and if you don't do it, we're all going to fail—too bad, that's your problem.” Now...it's not you or you, it's us. So we are all responsible. My productivity has increased...

The Importance of Trust

Another important factor in the success of these programs is the development of trust, especially for those who are telecommuting. One manager said “It takes a little leap of faith.” Another manager was quite forthright about trust per se:

It really does revolve around the implicit trust that this [program] provides the employees. I view it as a tool. It's not an entitlement, it's not a bonus. It's something that they can use to choose how they approach the work that they are doing. And in fact, my style is pretty much hands off. I expect them to come to me for assistance in day-to-day activities if and when they need it. Otherwise, I hope they will feel comfortable in performing their duties unencumbered by managerial supervision. And part of that is I trust them that when they are working at home they are working.

Overwhelming Benefits to the Organization

All the managers with whom we spoke perceived many benefits to the organizations. While acknowledging the difficulty of setting up new ways of working, learning new ways to manage, and tracking performance differently, almost all the managers said that the “benefits outweigh the disadvantages.” One manager said the following:

...it's so hard to find good people that we're better off making accommodations for the folks we know who have been with us [for some time]. It just makes financial sense to do that.

Another manager said, “We know what it's like to have people burn out.” Most managers felt that productivity was at least as strong if not better than before the program was implemented. Most mentioned the value of the programs for employee retention: “We keep people we would otherwise lose.” Still another said, “People are happier; people think it's a good option to have.”

Another manager echoed the thoughts of several managers:

My experience has been that people [on these programs] will work hard for you. It's really kind of a give and take. So, if they need this to support their personal lives, and you support them doing it, I think that they give back and will meet whatever deliverables are necessary.

In all, we have summarized the comments of 18 out of 20 managers who have been won over, at least to some degree, by the success of these alternative work arrangements.

Compelling Quotations from Employees

When speaking directly about the flexible work arrangements offered in their organizations, employees' comments centered on four themes: personal benefits, increased productivity, feeling respected and understood by the organization, and increased loyalty to the organization.

Personal Benefits

The employees cited a number of reasons for needing flexibility in their work, with many noting that without such benefits they may not have been able to continue in their current positions. Whether the pressure was life stage, children, geographic issues, or almost anything else, the FWAs offered by their employers were regarded as key to balancing their work and home lives successfully.

For people that select this phased retirement, I think it helps ease them into retirement on a gradual basis rather than have this be, you know, all-or-nothing proposition. Very, you know, you're breaking your neck at work one month and then the next month, you're retired cold turkey. For me, that's just not the approach that I wanted to take." [employee enjoying phased retirement]

[To be able to] come home and spend more time with my children. I mean, there's not a price you could put on that. And it helps me be a better manager I feel like at my home situation and at work. The days that I work I feel like I'm able to give more of myself because I'm not spread so thin. Does that make sense? Interviewer: Yes. So in terms of the integration between your work and nonwork activities. It sounded like it was a little difficult at first because they overlapped. But how is that working now? Employee: For me, it's the perfect balance between the two." [employee, mother of young children]

Increased Productivity

As the employees' ability to take care of important matters in their personal lives are made possible by the opportunity to work more flexibly, their perception is their productivity at work increases. Employees described their increased ability to focus on their work and a renewed sense of responsibility, which led to improved performance. Listed below are the comments of several different employees.

I'm always embarrassed to say this when people ask me that, but it's really, I think productivity-wise, it's better because I'm home. I'm locked away in my office. I can truly concentrate on work. I'm not in that work environment where somebody is always coming by your office and asking you a question or to talk at the water cooler and all of that. It kind of takes that away. So I can really concentrate on my work better. And when I do have projects and things that I need to read or research, it really allows me to concentrate on those things better. [satisfied telecommuter]

So, for me, I was motivated to get my work done if I had a deadline because I wanted tomorrow off with my son. [working mother]

I would say, just by having happier employees definitely helps, who are more focused and dedicated, but you kind of feel that, even though it is a benefit and it is offered to everybody, if they are able to do it, there is an appreciation and a desire to work a little bit more, and I think that is true for other people I know on [program name], that aren't even part-time, people who work from home. It gets them—it just gives you better work-life balance, which makes it easier to get things done and be happy about doing them.

As mentioned above, the managers concurred. One manager, not mentioned previously, said the following:

If you think about it, the theory of all this is that they're adults in every sense of the word outside of the organization. They're making family decisions, investment decisions, buying a house, car, where they live. They may have a clerical role in this division, but it doesn't mean that they aren't capable of thinking and performing, analyzing, hearing messages, and so forth, and I think it's just one more thing that—you know if you treat everybody as an adult, they're just going to perform better and be a part of the team and loyal.

Feeling Respected and Understood by the Organization

A key theme underlining the employees' willingness to work harder and do more for their organization seemed to be that the organization was listening to the employees, recognizing their wishes, and respecting their need for flexibility.

But I've never seen a company that allows you to, you know, we're all in the same boat with our family and personal lives and still trying to make the business needs and meet those. You know, just whatever it takes is kind of the mentality of, you know, let's get this all done. But at the same time, they really respect the fact that we have families and outside lives, just however we can meet those needs and work around those. It's been a pretty good win-win, I think.

I can tell you when I got a job here I had a lot of friends tell me that I'm selling my soul. Now I walk into this company and they say, "Welcome. Let's do a good job and here's this program for you where you don't even have to set an alarm." You know what? ... You can take control of your life. You know, I have—there's not a bad thing I can say about this company. I am nothing but proud to say that I work for this company. You know, I'll go out—we'll go out for lunch or happy hour with friends, you know, on a Friday afternoon and all I hear is people complaining about their job.

All of the elements involved in offering flexibility from the employees', the managers', and the organizations' points of view were succinctly expressed by one of the managers who stated:

Well I think, you know, sort of in a nutshell, the thing is it's a marriage of two different ideas. It's the opportunity to increase productivity for and from a company standpoint and as far as being able to focus our work and getting greater results. But that goes along with providing an employee and supporting employees' need for flexible work arrangements to address their everyday issues, now, you know, with the current workforce with issues that might be related to taking care of a family and taking time away from the office for an elderly parent or whatever it might be. Or they function on a different level to be more effective at different parts of the day. So it's kind of understanding that from an employee perspective.

Increased Loyalty

Many employees said that they could not leave the organization unless they found another company who would provide similar options for working flexibly. One employee said, “If I were to work for another company, I would want something like this because it showed that they value family and being flexible and supporting that.” Another was more explicit:

[This FWA] has increased my loyalty to the company both because they are doing something so great for me, it makes you like working there more, but also because you think, “Well, what’s the alternative if I leave? Could I ever leave this company that’s allowing me this kind of flexibility and go to a company that doesn’t know me from Adam and wouldn’t allow me to do that?” That’s a lot to give up, in addition to my benefits and things like that. They’d have to offer me a lot more for me to want to leave because of the flexibility that I’m getting here.

Similarly, another valued employee who loved her job, when confronted with an unexpected move to another city, was offered the option to join a teleworking program. Her enthusiasm was infectious.

It was fantastic. To me, it was the greatest thing because I was really conflicted in that I loved the job, but I felt like I was...I’m not going to stay in the position because of the location. And, I was able to stay in the position AND move. So that was...it was perfect.

Another employee was equally effusive...

It takes a lot of responsibility but I like it. And I love the fact that this program allows me to live my life the way I do. So, I just make sure I’m doing the best job that I can do for this company because I never want to lose this.

And finally, one employee raved about her employer.

For me, [this company] is the perfect employer for the following reasons: (1) I love my job; (2) I’ve got a fabulous manager who makes my job easy; (3) I love working from home; (4) I love the flexibility to adjust my hours and take time off on short notice if needed. I wouldn’t dream of working anywhere else unless they could provide these four perks.

The employees we interviewed are extremely grateful for the autonomy and respect that flexible work arrangements confer upon them. One employee summed it up nicely: “When I am happy, I am happy to do my work.”