

# How to Negotiate a Flexible Work Arrangement in a New Job Interview

By Pat Katepoo

workoptions.com

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Interviewing for a new job is a tough-enough situation. But what if you want both a job and a flexible work arrangement to go with it?

Finding a flex-friendly employer paves an easier path, but not all companies fit that category. Even those that do sometimes have a waiting period before new employees can telecommute or work a non-traditional schedule; the employer prefers new workers get oriented to their position—and demonstrate job performance and reliability—before flex scheduling kicks in.

I won't mince words: it is usually tough, tricky, and even risky, to negotiate a flexible work arrangement during a new job interview with a typical employer. But it's not impossible. **Information** and **timing** are key elements to negotiating success.

## Information: Scout Out Clues

Before the interview, surface clues about the company culture that will help you to decide whether or not to bring up the topic, and if so, how directly.

Check the company's "Careers" section of their website to see if they position flexible work arrangements as one of their desirable employment features.

Savvy employers recognize that workplace flexibility helps in recruitment and is a strong driver of retention. They promote it and practice it. But some don't walk the talk. Verify actual practices by checking with current or past employees; use LinkedIn and GlassDoor to find people to ask.

If nothing is publicly mentioned about telecommuting and other flexible work arrangements, the prospective employer is probably not using them as a business and human resource strategy. Now you know. But before you jump to a firm conclusion...

Look for subtle clues about company culture when you arrive for the interview. Are there indicators that a personal life outside of work is openly acknowledged? For example, do you see family photos on desks or children's artwork posted on cubicle walls? During the interview, tune into the hiring manager's verbal, physical (does s/he look well-rested or tired?) and environmental signals that reveal his or her work-life perspective.

## Strategies for Asking

Depending on what information you surface, you might be bold enough to be direct, asking about a typical day, or typical number of hours a week, as well as expectations about extra hours during special projects.

Inquire about employee connectivity during "off" hours; are employees expected to check email in the evenings or on weekends? If flexible work policies are mentioned on their website, ask about the level of employee participation. (Or you could check the employee parking lot after-hours to get your answer.)

How does the hiring manager respond to these types of inquiries? Tune in to the vibes; they are very telling.

Collectively, these company culture clues should drive your decision about whether to and how to bring up a request for a flexible work arrangement. Add your intuition to the mix as you gather these signals during the interview.

In some cases, the inquiries I've suggested so far are best reserved for the second interview, if you're called back for one. Which brings us to timing.

### **Timing: Know When to Negotiate a Flexible Work Schedule**

The time to negotiate specific terms of employment is *after* you've been extended a solid job offer. As with salary and benefits, flexible work arrangements can be a part of those employment terms to agree upon before you accept the offer.

Bring it up after both sides have finished negotiating salary and have come to a mutually-agreeable figure. (Salary is an *expected* area of negotiation in a new job offer, so you should be well-prepared to get your well-researched figure in that category. But that's another article.)

From there, you could segue into talking about your history (if you have one) as a telecommuting or four-day workweek employee and how it proved to positively impact your productivity. Then present your desired flexibility terms as a topic for negotiation.

### **Warning: It Could be a Deal-Breaker (on Either Side)**

Be ready and firm from the start about what you are or aren't willing to accept in salary, flexibility and other terms.

If flexibility is so important that you ask directly as part of your negotiated work terms, are you ready to decline the job offer if those terms aren't met? Be prepared with a menu of acceptable variations of flexible work options so that you have room to negotiate and compromise.

Are you willing to risk having the offer withdrawn if they perceive your request as unreasonable? That's another possibility for which you need to be prepared.

Take a look at the big picture of your circumstances to determine how you should proceed with asking and negotiating.

### **Alternative Routes**

So much of work-life (and life in general) is about trade-offs; if you really want the job—the work is interesting, the money's great, the commute is smooth, or whatever else appeals—a lower risk approach is to get hired first, then negotiate a flexible arrangement later.

If that doesn't happen, you may want to focus your job search efforts on employers and jobs that offer flexibility from the start.