



STATE ISSUE BRIEF ON
FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS
JUNE 2009

FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS IN STATE AGENCIES

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This Issue Brief is one of the resources prepared for managers and supervisors as part of the States as Employers-of-Choice project. Questions about this Issue Brief or the overall project can be directed to either Tay McNamara at Boston College (mcnamatd@bc.edu) or Bob Davis at the Twiga Foundation, Inc. (davismcs@msn.com).

Acknowledgments

The Twiga Foundation, Inc., and the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College are appreciative of the support provided by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for the States as Employers-of-Choice project as well as other research initiatives of the Sloan Center on Aging & Work.

We would also like to express our appreciation to the representatives of 222 agencies from 22 states who took the time to respond to the survey questions.

States as Employers-of-Choice

A Collaborative Project of the Twiga Foundation, Inc., and the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Report prepared by Melissa Brown, Michelle Wong & Tay McNamara, PhD.

INTRODUCTION

This first in a series of Issue Briefs highlighting the findings from the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey focuses on flexible work options. Flexible work options, also known as alternative or nonstandard work arrangements, refer to a number of opportunities that offer choice and control to employees and supervisors about where and how work gets done. Regardless of place of employment, the vast majority of the workforce reports that having access to flexible work options is “very important” to them.¹ Such arrangements benefit not only the employees and their families but employers as well.

This Issue Brief will discuss why flexible work options are important to both employees and employers and provide an overview of flexible work options offered by agencies that participated in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey. The States as Employers-of-Choice Survey was conducted in order to assess state agencies’ level of awareness and understanding of demographic changes, help them evaluate their response to the aging workforce, and contribute to planning for possible action steps.

As offering flexible work options is one possible action step for agencies to consider, this Issue Brief compares agencies that have made the link between workplace flexibility and overall effectiveness “not at all” or to a “limited” extent to those agencies that report having made the link to a “moderate” or “great” extent. The results of the workplace flexibility component of the state agency survey, including the types of flexible work options offered to state employees, the factors motivating state agencies to offer flexible work options, and some of the barriers that discourage state agencies from implementing flexible work options, are presented by contrasting agencies that have made this connection with those who have not yet done so.



WHY ARE FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS IMPORTANT?

Research across both the public and private sectors has highlighted the significance of flexible work options for both employees and employers. A national survey of employees found that those with access to flexible work options reported greater life satisfaction and better mental health as well as less interference between work and family domains.² Their employers also benefited: Employees with access to flexible work options reported higher levels of job satisfaction and engagement as well as greater loyalty to their employers.

Similarly positive outcomes have been found in research that focused on the public sector. Federal agencies offering flexible work options have benefited from improved employee morale and a reduction in unscheduled absences, whereas employees reported greater ease in balancing work and family needs.³ Yet, although researchers have gathered substantial information on flexible work options in the private sector and the federal government, such research has not extended to the state level.

Because of the significant benefits to both employees and their agencies, it is important to understand the prevalence of flexible work options in state agencies and the agencies’ perceived motivators and barriers to offering flexible work arrangements. The findings from the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey can offer these valuable insights.

Table 1: Flexible Work Options Included in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey

Flexibility in Number of Hours:

- Work part-year; Phase into retirement; Provide input into overtime worked; Job share

Flexible Schedules:

- Request changes in start/quit times occasionally; Request changes in start/quit times daily; Choose a work schedule that varies from the typical schedule; Work a compressed workweek; Choose which shift to work

Flexible Location:

- Work off-site (tele-work); Work part of the year at one -site, part at another site

Options for Time Off:

- Take caregiving leave; Take a sabbatical; Take education/job training leave

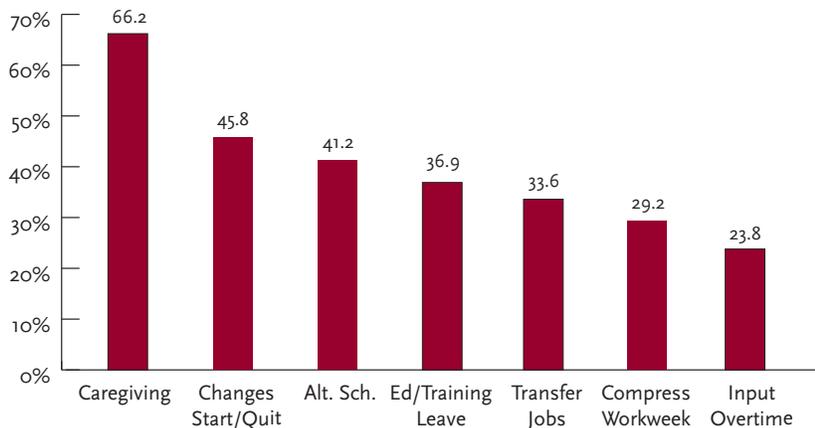
Other:

- Transfer to job with reduced responsibilities/pay; Request changes so job a better fit; Reduce hours and remain in same position

HOW PREVALENT ARE FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS IN STATE AGENCIES?

Figure 1 shows the most common flexible work options offered to “most” or “all” state employees by the agencies in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey. The seven most prevalent flexible work options included the following: take an extended leave for caregiving, request changes in starting/quitting times from time to time, choose a schedule that varies from the typical schedule (alternative schedule), take paid/unpaid leave for education or training, transfer to a job with reduced pay and responsibilities, work a compressed workweek, and have input into the amount of overtime worked.

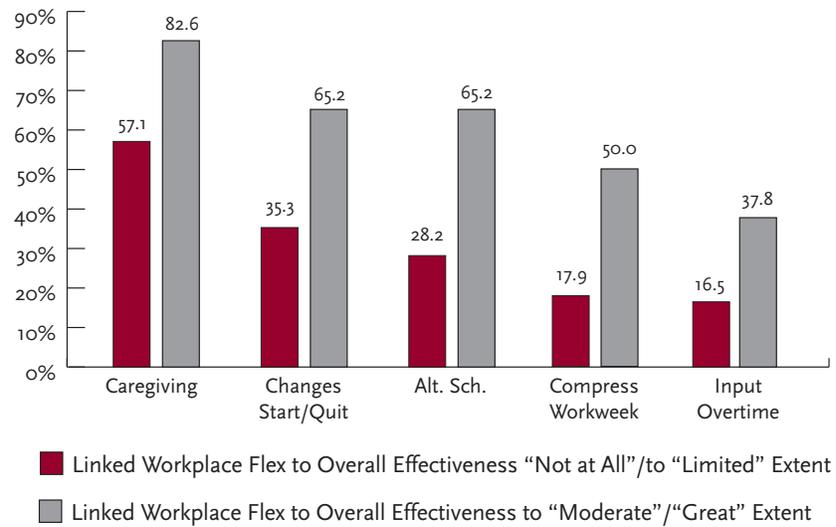
Figure 1: Most Common Flexible Work Options Offered to “Most” or “All” Employees



Less common flexible work options offered to “most” or “all” employees included phasing into retirement (9.2%), working off-site (8.1%), and job sharing (4.6%). Along with the variability in the types of flexible work options offered to state employees, there was also variability in the extent to which agencies have made the link between workplace flexibility and overall effectiveness. Just over a third of agencies (35%) report making this connection to a “moderate” or “great” extent, whereas 65% reported that their agencies have not made this connection at all or have only done so to a “limited” extent.

Among those that did make the link between workplace flexibility and agency effectiveness, they were significantly more likely to offer certain types of flexible work options. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the extent to which an agency made a link between workplace flexibility and overall agency effectiveness and the extent to which those agencies offered various flexible work options to their employees.

Figure 2: Flexible Work Options Offered to “All” or “Most” Employees



➡ WHAT MOTIVATES EMPLOYERS TO OFFER FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS?

There are many reasons that employers may be motivated to provide flexible work options for their employees. Not only do employees typically benefit, but employers might also find advantages to offering such alternatives. Many of the reasons state agencies in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey acknowledged as motivators to offering flexible work options are supported by findings from similar studies. For instance, nearly two-thirds of state agencies (63.2%) stated that they offer flexible work options because they believe it improves employee morale. Other research focusing on the public sector has substantiated this finding, showing that employers benefit from increased employee morale when they offer alternative work arrangements.⁴

Along with improving morale, other top motivators for offering flexible work options noted by the agencies in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey included: to help employees manage work and family life, to do the right thing, to respond to requests from employees, to improve morale, and to retain employees in general. (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Top Motivators to Offering Flexible Work Options

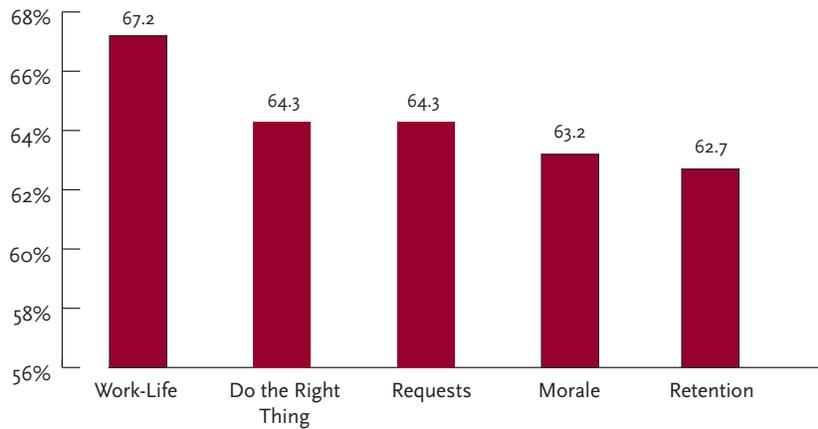
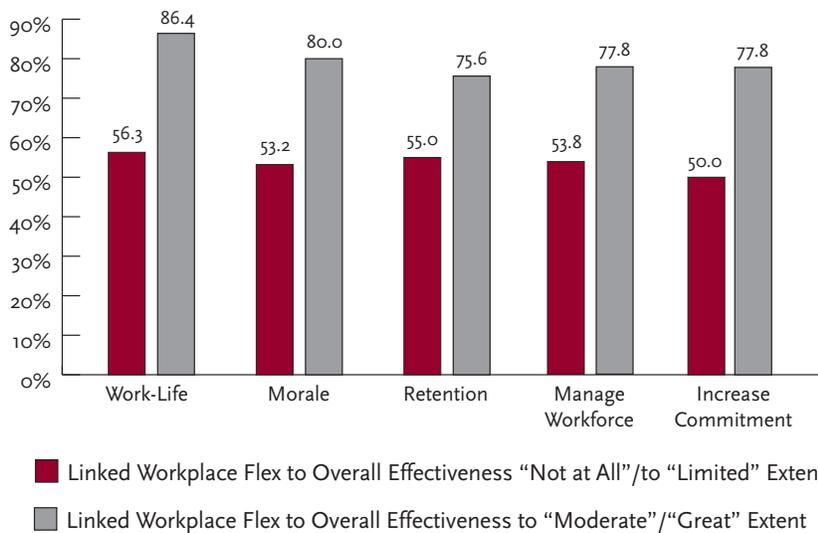


Figure 4 shows the relationship between the extent to which an agency made a link between workplace flexibility and overall agency effectiveness and the extent to which those agencies were motivated by a number of factors.

Figure 4: Agencies Motivated to Offer Flexible Work Options to a “Moderate” or “Great” Extent



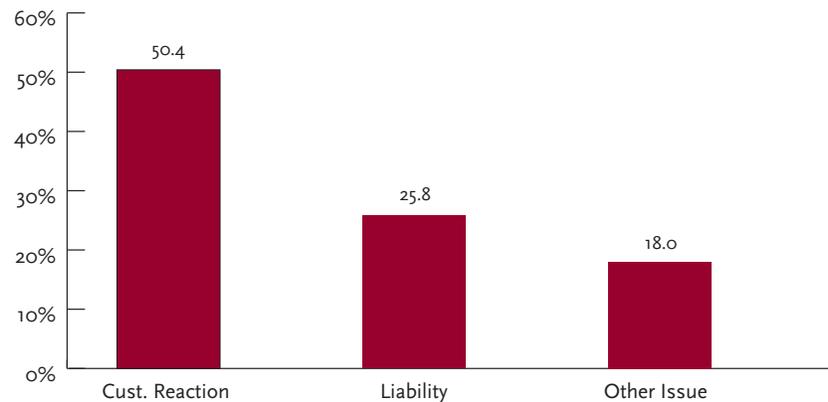


WHY MIGHT EMPLOYERS BE RELUCTANT TO OFFER FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS?

Although flexible work options can be a “win-win” for employees and employers, some workplaces might note actual or perceived difficulties in implementing flexible work options. For example, within the federal government, some agencies have reported a lack of support from management, along with inconsistent implementation across departments, as barriers to the effective implementation and utilization of flexible work options.⁵

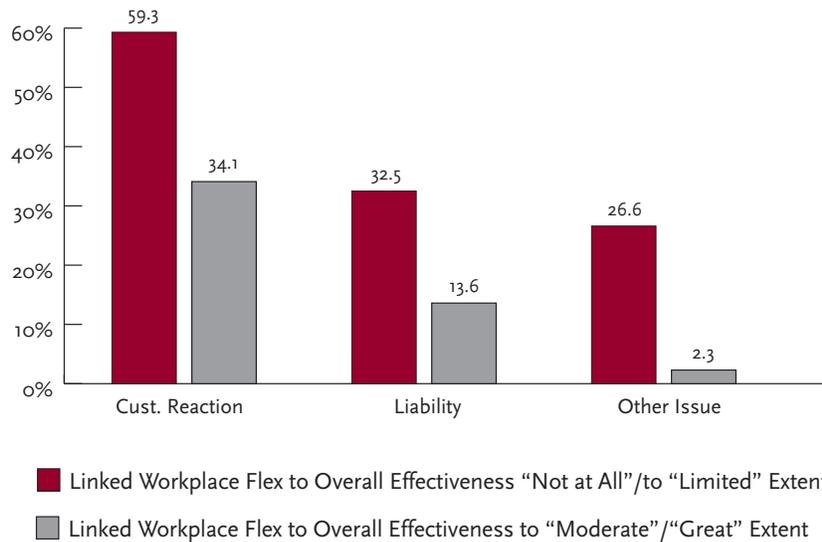
Agencies in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey also reported barriers to implementing flexible work options. Over half of the agencies surveyed indicated that difficulty with supervising employees, concerns about treating employees equally, and concerns about the reactions of clients and customers were barriers to implementing flexible work options to a “moderate” or “great” extent. Some of the most common barriers are depicted in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Top Barriers to Offering Flexible Work Options



Notably, barriers to implementing flexible work options were more prevalent in agencies that reported they had “not at all” or to a “limited” extent made the link between flexibility and overall effectiveness, compared with agencies that had made the link to a “moderate” or “great” extent. Such barriers included concerns about the reactions of customers and clients, viewing flexible work options as an accommodation rather than a management tool, more pressing issues, and concerns about possible employee complaints or liability. Figure 6 illustrates some of the perceived barriers broken down by the extent to which the agency reported making the link between flexibility and overall effectiveness.

Figure 6: Barriers to Offering Flexible Work Options to a “Moderate” or “Great” Extent



CONCLUSION

There are clear differences between agencies that reported making the connection between workplace flexibility and overall effectiveness and agencies that have not yet made this connection. Most significantly, a greater proportion of the workforce had access to a variety of flexible work options in agencies that made the connection. This is not surprising, given that these agencies are also more motivated to offer flexible work options and indicated fewer barriers to doing so.

Agencies making the connection between flexibility and overall effectiveness may find they are better prepared to respond to the challenges of an aging workforce. Among older workers in particular, flexibility allows individuals the opportunity to work with their agencies to structure a mutually beneficial employment relationship. Offering alternative arrangements can help state agencies retain the experience and institutional knowledge of older adults while also providing these employees with the opportunity to meet their personal and family needs. Missing such opportunities will not only impact efforts to recruit and retain an engaged workforce but might also exclude an important group from state agencies’ available labor pool.

Offering a variety of flexible work options to employees across the age spectrum can be a critical component of an effective action plan to meet the challenges of changing workplace demographics. Although some of the agencies in the States as Employers-of-Choice Survey had made a connection between workplace flexibility and overall effectiveness to a great extent (11.9%), it would be beneficial to for all agencies to make the connection and realize the benefits that comes with creating a better fit between employee needs and work options.

Organizations

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the Center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

The Twiga Foundation, Inc., founded in 2005, is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to inspiring, promoting, and maintaining family consciousness at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Workplace flexibility is a key component in addressing the mismatch between the workplace and family needs. The Twiga Foundation's efforts are centered on bringing to light an understanding of workplace flexibility as a good business strategy that, additionally, helps to insure a strong workforce for the future.

Authors

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At a Glance: The States as Employers-of-Choice Study

The States as Employers-of-Choice Project is a collaborative initiative being implemented by the Twiga Foundation, Inc., and the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College. This project is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The 2-year project provides resources to HR managers at state agencies so that they can respond to shifts in the age demographics of the workforce.

The States as Employers-of-Choice Study is one component of the overall project. Data collection began in spring 2008 and was concluded in fall 2008.

A total of 222 agencies from 27 states responded to the online survey used to gather information.

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Additional Publications from the States as Employers-of-Choice Project Include:

State Research Highlight:

- States as Employers-of-Choice (March 2009)

State Issue Briefs:

- Flexible Work Options in State Agencies (June 2009)
- Comparing the Priorities of State Agencies and the Private Sector (June 2009)

State Fact Sheets:

- State Population Aged 55+ with College Degree (March 2009)
- State Unemployment Rates for Persons Aged 55+ (January 2009)
- State Unemployment Rates_by Age Group (June 2008)
- State Government Workforce_by Age Group (June 2008)