

## FLEXIBLE WORK

## THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY



By **ERIC DYSON**  
Trend Writer

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace flexibility was surging in popularity with 54% of global respondents reporting that they worked remotely 2.5 days a week, according to a survey conducted by Regus. Now, the pandemic has transformed flexibility from a desirable perk into a powerful people practice – and one that is expected to stick around long after the pandemic subsides, according to recent research from Mercer.

In fact, COVID-19 forced organizations around the world to transition their workforces into a virtual work model overnight – an adjustment that would force a mass experiment on a global level. Leaders quickly embraced flexibility in the workplace because they had no choice; but, before too long, many began to recognize its benefits, such as reduced travel and real estate expenses, increased employee productivity, and more efficiency – all of which fall right to the bottom line.

In this article, we'll cover what workplace flexibility means today and why organizations should consider extending workplace flexibility into the post-pandemic environment.

### WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY IS HERE TO STAY

Now that employees have become accustomed to commuting less, are embracing virtual collaboration and are working from the comfort of their own homes, it's likely that our new era of workplace flexibility is here to stay, especially for office roles. The tech industry, in particular, has led the charge with Google, Salesforce, Facebook

and PayPal extending remote working into at least next summer, while Japanese tech company Fujitsu is halving its office space and giving its employees unprecedented flexibility.

What's more, almost half (48%) of the U.S. employees surveyed by communications consultancy the Grossman Group said they wanted to continue working from home after the pandemic and that the shift to remote work had positively influenced their view of the company.

Therefore, as organizations transition out of crisis mode and regain a sense of stability, they have a window of opportunity to permanently embed far greater and broader flexibility; this could build upon the work-from-home model and reshape the workplace of the future with a hybrid model in which teams are distributed across multiple locations and work flexibly in a variety of other new and established ways.

### HOW EMPLOYERS BENEFIT WITH MORE FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

#### A BROADER TALENT POOL

When your workplace culture allows talent to work from anywhere, your talent pool instantly becomes global. As a result, your organization can source and recruit talent across the country or across the globe. And, with the establishment of communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Slack; secure intranets; and video conferencing, distance is becoming less of a hurdle in collaborating with talent globally.

### **IMPROVED EMPLOYER BRANDING**

Offering flexible workplace policies communicates to potential employees that your organization is committed to helping its employees achieve a better work-life balance. In turn, this can help improve job-seekers' perception of you as an employer as you provide flexibility in the workplace. Moreover, many candidates will research potential employers to learn about how they responded to the pandemic. If your organization failed to provide flexibility to your workforce, it may damage your employer brand and, consequently, your ability to attract top talent.

### **COST SAVINGS**

The most common benefit to flexibility in the workplace is cost savings. That's because the costs of business necessities – such as office supplies, real estate and utilities – are reduced when your organization provides employees the ability to work off-site.

### **HOW EMPLOYEES BENEFIT WITH MORE FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

#### **MEET PERSONAL OBLIGATIONS**

Prior to COVID-19, employees had a variety of personal obligations and family responsibilities to attend to. Add the rapidly changing pandemic landscape to the mix, and the need for workplace flexibility becomes even more crucial as employees' lives and living situations have been drastically altered. However, if you trust people to get their work done in a way that works for them, that trust is usually rewarded.

#### **EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT**

Flexible workplaces can also give employees an increased feeling of personal control over their schedule and work environment. Specifically, by allowing employees to set their own style for delivery, you appeal to the entrepreneurial spirit,

which can be good for your employees' sense of self-determination. Plus, during uncertain times in which everyone feels as though they have less control over their lives, providing extra autonomy to employees can increase morale.

### **REDUCED COMMUTING TIME & COSTS**

For some employees, commutes of more than an hour each way are not uncommon. To that end, employees working from home can potentially save 14 hours of time, untold money in fuel costs, and wear and tear on the road – not to mention the effect on well-being.

### **TYPES OF FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORKPLACE**

Despite the way most people think about it, workplace flexibility does not need to be a binary choice between working entirely in an office or entirely at home.

Rather, flexibility involves embracing any number of strategies that can yield a more nimble and productive organization. Below are some of the more popular forms of flexible work arrangements.

#### **JOB-SHARING**

Job-sharing is when two employees share the same role, which can be very appealing for your employees who may not want to work full-time, such as employees who need to care for their children who may not be back in the classroom. What's more, job-sharing can lighten the load of employees who have other circumstances affecting their ability to work full-time.

There are a number of ways employees in a job-sharing arrangement can manage their responsibilities. For instance, some employees sharing a role may segment the work by each taking responsibility for specific deliverables and tasks charged to them. Others may split the same

workload, with one employee working on projects and passing along their work to their job-share partner to do when they're off the clock. The model you and your employees choose will depend on the nature of the work performed, as well as the preferences and skills of each employee.

### REMOTE WORK

The current crisis is serving as a large-scale remote working experiment, thereby demonstrating what works and what doesn't. And, the trend toward more flexible workplace models – accelerated by the coronavirus crisis – has had a positive effect on employees as a whole, giving people more flexibility in terms of location and time management.

For many individuals and teams, working from home will be their preferred flexible work environment for their needs. For other employees, however, the home environment may not be conducive to productivity. In either case, opening your office for limited staff or renting space in a coworking environment may be a good way to provide employees with multiple remote work options. Giving people the choice of where to work is an important principle to ensure that remote work is truly flexible.

### FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING

COVID-19 is not the first time that a global pandemic has altered work schedules. In fact, the 1918 flu pandemic forced then-mayor of New York City, John F. Hylan, to introduce new laws that required businesses to stagger working hours in order to reduce the chances of infection.

Similarly, many organizations can add flexibility simply by embracing flexible scheduling. While flexible self-scheduling is not new, COVID-19 was a tipping point, as well as a way of protecting essential frontline workers unable to work from home. Moreover, when you implement flexible

work shifts, employees can come into work and leave for the day at different times. Staggered shifts then reduce congestion in the workplace, especially if your staff works in a small office. And, it becomes easier to implement social distancing and reduce crowding in common areas, such as elevators, cafeterias, kitchens and bathrooms. This will naturally limit contact between employees and minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. As an added benefit, staggered shifts also help your employees avoid public transportation (and the associated risk of infection) during rush hours. Plus, the safety benefits of spacing out work shifts may also ease the anxiety that some older and more vulnerable frontline essential employees may be experiencing regarding returning to work during a pandemic.

### THE GIST

In the end, increased workplace flexibility will become one of the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. But, for flexible work arrangements to work now and be sustainable in the future, both employees and employers must benefit. As a result, employees will need increased choice, autonomy and better work-life balance; in return, employers will gain higher productivity rates and a happier and more engaged workforce.

