

Managing

Making Alternative Work Schedules a Win-Win

MARCIA PENNINGTON SHANNON | Why would a firm want to implement alternative work schedules? It's an excellent management strategy—and it's good business. Alternative work arrangements help you retain highly valued employees.

These arrangements provide good options for employees who, because of other time demands or personal goals, no longer find it viable to work a "traditional" schedule (read 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday). They can also be helpful to growing firms that aren't ready to hire long-term, full-time employees but could use staff on a part-time or other alternative basis. But whatever the reason for providing an alternative schedule, you, the supervisor, need to work with the employee to find a creative arrangement that results in a win-win for all involved.

Options in Alternative Schedules

When thinking about alternative work arrangements, there are a number of choices to consider.

■ **Part-time.** This is the most common of the alternative arrangements. Usually part-time employees work somewhere between 20 and 30 hours per week. For lawyers, part-time

also means a reduced caseload consistent with the agreed-on number of work hours.

■ **Flextime.** This option falls under the category of full-time employment, but it enables the employee to work a schedule that's different from traditional office hours. It could mean that the employee's workday begins earlier and ends earlier, or that the employee arrives in the office later than others and, correspondingly, leaves later in the day.

■ **Compressed workweek.** The employee works a full workweek's hours, but in this instance does so in less than five days. Commonly this option involves four longer (e.g., 10-hour) days.

■ **Job sharing.** This option enables two individuals with similar abilities to share one full-time position and its responsibilities. For example, one might work only mornings while the other covers afternoons, or the two might work eight-hour days on an alternating basis.

■ **Flexi-place.** The individual works at a location outside of the office. Most often that location is a home office. This option can be used with part-time, full-time or contract employees.

■ **Project or contract.** The individual

is brought on for a limited time period, typically to work on one specific case or project for which extra (or specialized) assistance is needed.

Benefits for All Parties

Good supervisors will work with an employee to find the right arrangement, because they understand that finding a way to keep a valued employee is more cost-effective and beneficial to the firm than trying to find a replacement. They also understand that employees are much less likely to "burn out" when their supervisors help them find a way to manage both work and personal demands. Studies, in fact, show that employees with alternative work schedules are highly productive.

By implementing alternative work arrangements, you also set the stage for increased loyalty and commitment from your people. Employees of firms that offer such arrangements are generally more satisfied with their employer. And this is true for all employees in the organization—not just those who are taking advantage of an alternative schedule—because the firm has sent the message to everyone that it cares about its employees and will work with them to accommodate their needs when possible.

This also makes a firm more attractive to potential recruits. Plus, it translates to better service for clients overall.

Keys to Making the Arrangement Work
Most agree that offering alternative



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work arrangements is a good idea. However, making a success of each individual arrangement is another matter. It requires that everyone involved—the supervisor, the employee and firm management—take responsibility. The following are important steps, but the key ingredients throughout are communication, flexibility and mutual trust.

■ **Settle on the details.** Before starting the arrangement, you and your employee should discuss your respective visions for how this arrangement will work *and* the practical applications of those visions. You want to discuss all the potential pros and cons, as well as any possible obstacles to the arrangement's smooth flow. It is essential that both you and the employee communicate your expectations to ensure that the two of you are on the same page. That, in turn, decreases the chances of misunderstandings that can derail the arrangement later.

■ **Put it in writing.** Next, create a letter of understanding laying out the specifics. Provide a full description of the agreed-on arrangement, including compensation, benefits, expected in-office days and specific work hours. In the case of lawyers, this means addressing partnership track considerations, too. You should also include provisions for periodic review and evaluation of the arrangement. The letter might also include other items that will help ensure the arrangement's success, such as agreeing to provide computer equipment and other technological assistance for home offices, or to pay the monthly fee for cell phone or BlackBerry use.

■ **Discuss issues as they arise.** Many have cited this as a critical factor in these types of arrangements. Remember, one problem doesn't mean the arrangement isn't working. Rather, it

means you and your employee have an opportunity to use creative problem solving to improve on the arrangement. In like vein, you need to show your ongoing commitment to both the arrangement's and the employee's success, by providing mentoring, substantive and timely feedback, and opportunities for the employee's professional development.

■ **Stay flexible to meet the situation.**

When client emergencies arise, an employee with an alternative work arrangement will need to be flexible in terms of meeting the needs of the situation. But as the supervisor, you need to be sure that when you call something an "emergency," it truly is one. Otherwise, you'll be perceived as taking advantage of the employee, violating the work arrangement agreement and, thus, negating the mutual trust on which the arrangement's success depends. Building and maintaining trust should be everyone's top priority.

Being a "Best Place to Work"

It is said that today's workers, while dedicated to their careers, expect more from life and, in turn, from their employers. This might mean wanting to spend more time being with children, taking care of aging parents or pursuing other interests outside of work. Any employer who recognizes the importance of helping its people to integrate competing demands through alternative work arrangements will be taking a large leap over competitors in both attracting and retaining talent.

Moreover, the firm will be rewarded with committed, productive and loyal people who recognize they're employed by a firm that cares about its people and their needs and goals—the kind of firm that employees tout as a "Best Place to Work"! LP

Action Plan

- Talk openly with the employee about mutual goals and expectations, including what ups and downs might be involved in the new arrangement.
- Settle on the specific details, from in-office hours to benefit adjustments, and put them all in a letter of agreement.
- Use creative problem solving as difficulties arise in the arrangement, while ensuring that both you and the employee maintain flexibility and mutual trust.
- Reference these resources to help build alternative work arrangements:

Balanced Lives: Changing the Culture of Legal Practice prepared by the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession. ABA, 2002.

Solving the Part-Time Puzzle: The Law Firm's Guide to Balanced Hours by Cynthia Thomas Calvert and Joan Williams. NALP, 2004.

"Report and Sample Policy on Alternative Work Arrangements" prepared by the New York State Bar Association Committee on Women in the Law, June 1995. Available at <http://womenlaw.stanford.edu/altwork.htm>.

For an example of how a firm describes alternative work arrangements for recruiting purposes, check out www.piperrudnick.com/recruiting.