



HR Resources | Best Practices Series

# GUIDE

## TO CREATING FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE POLICIES



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# Guide to creating flexible workplace policies.

Workplace flexibility is one of the hottest trends to have emerged in HR circles over the last few years. It is touted as a potential game changer – having the power to unleash a generation of happy, motivated workers who will produce amazing results for their employers. Basically, flexibility is supposed to create a win-win situation for both employees and businesses.

To some extent, such claims are true. Studies have shown that workplace flexibility can increase employee motivation, engagement, job satisfaction and productivity. However, such benefits do not come by default. They arise from a careful application of workplace flexibility under the auspices of a clearly thought-out policy.

The absence of a well thought-out policy can actually turn workplace flexibility into a nightmare. Anecdotal evidence shows that when poorly executed, flexibility can lower employee motivation, decrease productivity and increase an employers' wage bill.

The bottom line is that to enjoy the benefits of workplace flexibility, you need to create a robust policy. Fortunately, creating flexible workplace policies isn't that hard. It is a matter of knowing what to include in the policy. The following questions can guide you towards creating a flexible workplace policy. Answer them and you'll be on the way towards creating a robust and effective policy.

## Do you absolutely need a flexible workplace?

Don't rush to say "YES". Take time and think about it. Remember, HR professionals are just like everybody else – we have a tendency to get excited by new trends. We want to be on the cutting edge of our field. As such, we want to apply every emerging concept to our workplace. Unfortunately, this isn't always helpful.

The simple fact is that workplace flexibility isn't some magic elixir which will solve all your HR management problems. In some cases it can actually worsen them. The reason for this is simple – workplace flexibility isn't for everybody.

Therefore, before simply jumping onto the bandwagon, there are two things which you have to be absolutely certain about. First, that a flexible workplace strategy can be implemented in your company. Second, that you absolutely need it.

### Why you need a flexible workplace?

If you have answered YES to the first question, then this is the natural follow-up to it. Why do you need a flexible workplace?

Essentially, what problems are



you facing which can only be solved through a flexible workplace? Or, another way of putting it is “what benefits do you hope to get from workplace flexibility?”

Remember, workplace flexibility is a strategy for doing things better. As such, the starting point is ascertaining that things aren't the way they could be. The second thing is ascertaining that workplace flexibility is the simplest and most effective solution.

If everything is running as smoothly as it can, then you'd better follow the age-old mechanic's advice: **“if it ain't broke, don't fix it!”**

## What type of flexibility, and why?

Flexibility typically takes three forms i.e. time, location, and manner. In some cases, flexibility involves a combination of any of the three forms. For instance, an employee can be offered an option of telecommuting (location flexibility) and be allowed to choose their work schedules (time flexibility).

Basically, you have to choose the type(s) of flexibility which best suit your situation. Your policy should outline the different types, and the reasons why you have selected them.

## Who will get flexibility, and why?

Workplace flexibility isn't suited for every employee. As every HR knows, there are certain individuals who cannot work autonomously – they require close supervision. For such individuals, location flexibility may not be the best option.

Your policy needs to outline the criteria which will be used to offer flexibility to a worker.

## How will you monitor and supervise?

Flexible workplaces can provide a monitoring and supervision nightmare. Take time flexibility for instance. Imagine an employee chooses to work at a given time, and the supervisor chooses to work at a different time. How will supervision take place? Who will you force to alter their schedule?

A similar problem arises for location flexibility. **How will you monitor and supervise those who are working remotely?**

These are things which you have to think about. You need to come up with a workable strategy for monitoring and supervision.

## How will you handle communication?

One of the greatest downsides of workplace flexibility is that it can lead to a breakdown of communication. Not formal communication like memos or emails. Informal ones like chit-chat at the water cooler or during the tea break. Sometimes, brilliant ideas emerge from



these interactions.

You need a strategy to formalize such communications. Basically, if a brilliant tip, insight or idea emerges at the water cooler, you need a way to bring off-site employees into the loop.

Even the formal communications need to be streamlined. Basically, you have to make it easy for your employees to keep in touch with each other despite their flexible times or locations.

## **How will you engage employees and their unions?**

For workplace flexibility to be beneficial, the employees need to buy-in. Where relevant, employee unions also need to come on board. For this, you need a strategy for engaging both the employees and their unions.

## **How will you measure overtime?**

The issue of overtime can be problematic especially when using time flexibility. The reason for this is the legal definition of overtime. The FSLA defines overtime as any work done “outside normal working hours.” If your normal working hours are between 8 am and 5pm, any work done outside those hours is considered overtime.

In a flexible workplace scenario, this can be potentially disastrous. It means that

if an employee chooses to work from 6pm to midnight; that will be considered overtime. And you'll have to pay them 50% more than the normal rate. This can make workplace flexibility extremely expensive.

To avoid such scenarios, you need to stipulate your schedules clearly. Your policy needs to state clearly what will be considered normal working time, and what will be considered overtime. Having such a clear distinction will save you from overtime-related problems.

## How will you manage career development for flexible workers?

One of the most common criticisms of workplace flexibility is that workers (especially those who work remotely) miss out on career development opportunities. When it comes to promotions, and trainings, such workers are not given an equal opportunity as on-site workers. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence shows that this is often the case.

Fears of stifling their career development can make some workers reluctant to adopt workplace flexibility. To allay such fears, you need a clear career development plan for them. The plan can include a mechanism



for providing them with training, mentorship and constructive feedback. Make sure that you offer them with every opportunity possible to grow, develop and bloom.

In a nutshell, workplace flexibility can provide tremendous benefits to both the employer and employees. However, it can only be beneficial when it is well executed. The starting point is having holistic flexible workplace policies. Fortunately, formulating such policies isn't that complicated. The questions listed above can quite any HR professional towards developing an effective flexible workplace policy.