

## Finding the traffic fix in workplace flexibility

By **Dr. Jennifer Swanberg**  
Columnist: Work/life issues

About how much time do you spend commuting to and from work? (Be sure to consider the amount of time you are stuck in traffic during the early morning and evening “rush” hours.) Have the commuter bottlenecks on Harrodsburg, Richmond or Versailles Road ever pushed you to the brink of road rage? What about the traffic jams encountered while you try to get on and off New Circle Road or Man O’ War Boulevard?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are not alone. Granted, Lexington commuting times and hassles may pale in comparison to commute times by workers in New York City, Boston or Los Angeles, but for a city our size, the congestion irritates and produces stress for many.

Possible solutions to reduce Lexington’s traffic congestion have included increasing LexTran ridership, expanding bike trails, and even encouraging car pools. These are superb remedies, but there are many people who work in Lexington but live outside the city, rendering public transportation or reliance on bicycles impossible. So I’d like to throw another solution into the possibility arena - the promotion of workplace flexibility.

That’s right, workplace flexibility! As a strategy to reduce traffic congestion, Bill White, the mayor of Houston, Texas, is launching Flex in the City. Flex in the City is an initiative that seeks to reduce traffic congestion and improve employee retention and productivity. Mayor White has invited CEOs of firms large and small to sanction the use of various forms of flexible work options (telework, compressed workweek, flexible start/end times) that make good business sense for their organizations and that will reduce employee commutes during peak congestion times. More specifically, he has asked companies to offer the predetermined flexible work options during the weeks of September 18-29 and then to measure the flex options’ effect on employee productivity. Simultaneously, Mayor White has requested that participating flex-time users complete an online survey assessing changes in commute patterns.

To test the unknown possibilities of the effects of flexible work arrangements on traffic patterns and employee productivity, the city partnered with Duke Energy Company (DEC). DEC implemented a flexible work option called 9/80s. This initiative allowed employees to be off from work every other Friday in exchange for extending their work hours on the other nine workdays. Of DEC’s 400 employees, 260 elected to “flex” their hours. The results convinced Mayor White. Not only were fewer cars on the road on Fridays, but fewer cars clogged the road at peak times the rest of the week.

The city’s evaluation of 9/80s revealed an overall timesaving of 1.08 minutes for each driver making an average 16-minute commute during peak travel times. This translates into a savings of nine hours per year for every driver commuting during peak use time. While a little over two minutes per day in time saved seems minimal, consider that 6,200 cars are on the highway during one peak commuting time in Houston. Using transportation industry standard calculations for travel savings, city officials estimate a possible \$1,000,000 annual user cost savings associated with increased productivity, decreased fuel usage, and reduced traffic accidents for all highway users.

If September’s launch of Flex in the City mirrors the results of Duke Energy Company’s success, not only will Houston have the potential to ease traffic congestion with the implementation of workplace flexibility, but employers will benefit from increased productivity as measured by reduced absenteeism and tardiness. In addition, Houstonians will have better quality lives resulting from reduced traffic congestion, and environmentalists will be happy with the possible reduction in fuel usage. Furthermore, I suspect that employees will benefit significantly by having one regular day off

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every two weeks. Three-day weekends twice monthly could assist in stress reduction, allow for a set day to make and attend to medical appointments, and possibly reduce costs associated with care giving.

Bravo to Mayor White, Duke Energy Company and Houston for testing and then implementing an innovative employer-community collaboration that has had and will continue to have radiating benefits for employers, employees and the entire community.

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