

WorkLife: The win-win of workplace flexibility

By Jennifer Swanberg

Columnist: Work/Life Issues

A few weeks ago during a productive workday, parents Robert F. and Alexa Y. received notice from school that their respective daughters were feeling ill. Robert, a senior vice president at a bank and single father, heard the news from the school nurse while sitting in his office preparing for his next meeting. Alexa, a line worker at a manufacturing firm and single mother, found out about her daughter's ill health two hours after the nurse attempted to reach her on her cell phone. Alexa's only opportunity to receive personal voice mail messages is during her mid-day break.

Upon learning about his daughter's fever, Robert asked a colleague to cover the next meeting and then left for the day. Alexa, however, had to get approval from her shift supervisor to leave work early. Alexa knew this request might cause a problem; over the past month, she has missed three days of work and has twice arrived to work late due to her daughter's asthma-related sickness. Alexa's supervisor granted her request.

In the scenario above, Robert and Alexa appear to be in very similar situations. Each has been employed by their respective companies for over five years, is a single parent, and is a valued employee. However, Robert is in a salaried position, while Alexa is an hourly employee. Although leaving early from work to pick up his daughter inconvenienced Robert, he handled the situation with few work-related consequences. For Alexa, the incident resulted in lost pay and reconsideration of a promotion to shift supervisor.

The other difference between Robert and Alexa's situations is that Robert's employer has flexible work policies and Alexa's employer does not have such practices. In Robert's firm, salaried employees are able to use "flex-time" to handle unexpected situations like an ill child. Although he left work early, his company expects that he will complete his work and make up his hours later in the week. In Alexa's firm, employees earn a certain number of sick and vacation days per year. Once the sick days are exhausted, employees taking time off for illness do so without pay. Employees are not allowed to use vacation days for personal or family illness.

Workplace flexibility, broadly defined by New York-based research and policy think tank the Families and Work Institute, is a way to characterize how and when work gets done. While workplace flexibility has been recognized as a strategy to assist employees in meeting their work, family and personal responsibilities, it is increasingly becoming used as a tool to recruit and retain employees, manage workload and respond to employee diversity. Some in the business community recognize that recruiting and retaining talented employees, all of whom have a range of personal and family needs, means making workplace flexibility paramount.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. workforce is growing less than 1 percent annually, and the number of available workers between 25 and 44 will shrink within the next five years. Furthermore, The Saratoga Institute found that it costs 150 to 200 percent of an exempt employee's yearly salary to replace him or her. As a result, the need for and the recruitment of qualified people are forcing companies to rethink recruitment efforts, workplace policies, work schedules and work processes.

Workplace flexibility includes policies such as flex-time, schedule-swap, and flex-career. It can also include such policies as extending the parameters of traditional sick time to include paid time for personal or family

Work-Life: The win-win of workplace flexibility - page 2

illness. In the scenarios presented, Robert had the “flexibility” to finish his workday at home by accessing his e-mail and participating in meetings via conference call. Though the nature of Alexa’s work does not allow for comparable practices, if her company had a flexibility policy that allowed employees to use vacation time to cover personal or family illness, she would not have lost pay.

Locally, Lexington Division of Parks and Recreation Director Chuck Ellis has implemented a variety of flexible work arrangements as a strategy to meet the division’s work load, to retain and recruit valuable employees, and to assist employees with work-family situations. For instance, the parks department implemented four 10-hour workdays for people mowing the parks’ fields and lawns. “It made good business sense. Not only does it take time to load the machinery and drive to one of the several city parks, but also sometimes it takes more than six hours to mow a field. Four 10-hour days gives workers more time to complete tasks. It saves time, money and most employees like the schedule.”

Ellis has also approved another situation for a female employee expecting twins and experiencing a high-risk pregnancy. After careful consideration, Ellis and his administrative staff realized that much of her work is computer-related. Providing her with a laptop allowed her to continue working, but under modified work conditions. “I have retained a valuable employee who might have otherwise taken a leave or reduced her hours; we could not afford to lose her,” reported Ellis. Modifying traditional work hours is a practice that should be taken seriously,” says Ellis. “Not every job can be flexible, and each employee situation is unique and should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, when flexibility works, employees are more productive, loyal and happier.” National research supports Ellis’ experience. Research suggests employees with access to flexible work arrangements report higher levels of commitment to their employers and report working harder than required to help their companies succeed.

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