



BOSTON COLLEGE
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CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

A Missing Ingredient in our Messy New Reality: Flexibility

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For nearly two decades now at the Boston College Center for Work & Family, we have studied the issue of flexibility and remote work and collaborated with organizations on the development of their flexible work programs. The very first concepts I introduce when speaking with individuals or groups are the two most common components of flexibility: flextime and flex place. The concepts are pretty self-explanatory: flex time refers to **when** you get your work done and flex place refers to **where**.

Over the past few weeks, we've been asked to help organizations and their people adjust to new emergency remote work requirements. As with any drastic and unexpected change, all parties -- employees, managers, and leaders -- have been experiencing some bumps in the road with this transition. Add to the mix that for most parents, caregiving support, whether through daycare, schools, or babysitters, is no longer available. Employees whose caregiving responsibilities and home life were mostly invisible to the workplace are now feeling exposed, vulnerable, and overwhelmed.

As a result, a key ingredient to an effectively functioning workplace has gotten lost in translation. While work from home is often seen as an option that employees value, today it is not an option but a requirement. *When flexibility of place becomes rigid, what we need even more is flexibility of time.* Between virtual meetings scheduled back to back throughout each day and the "always on" mentality, we have left no room for people's flexibility needs.

I believe that some of the flex time ideas that worked historically, when people were required to be present at their office, can still be effective in our current required work at home environment. A few of these basic concepts include:

- **Flexibility in start and stop times** – this could mean getting up early in the morning and putting in several hours before assisting children with their schooling and then getting back online for work after that, potentially splitting shifts between caregiving partners, if possible. It could mean working later at night if that is what feels most productive in the moment. Flexibility is required on both ends to be able to accommodate important meetings, but working a constant, consecutive 8+ hour schedule may not be feasible at this time.
- **Part-time or reduced workload** - this flexible work option involves a reduction in the number of hours worked and a corresponding reduction in pay. This solution, at least on a temporary basis, may allow parents to continue to earn an income and still be able to attend to the needs of their families. Perhaps working three days a week feels sustainable while working five is overwhelming. Or, on a temporary basis through this crisis, working 5 hour days could be what fits best. If earning a lower income is not possible, perhaps using intermittent days/hours of PTO could fill in some of the gaps.

- **Compressed/Expanded work weeks** - putting in a longer day for a lesser number of days to accomplish your work responsibilities and goals in a compressed format. For some, putting in four 10 hour days and having the fifth day off may be the ideal way to balance their needs. Or conversely, putting in fewer hours over more days - an expanded work week. Since weekends are not very active these days, employees might be interested in working 6 days a week for a shorter number of hours each day.
- **No Meeting Fridays** or another selected day during the week - on a smaller scale when it comes to flex options, this allows employees to schedule concentrated time for themselves to get work done without interruptions or to be able to attend to other responsibilities on that day and then make up their work at another time.

The full-time, always on mentality that has been challenging for so many employees over the years (especially caregivers) is still present. We have just shifted the location where the work needs to take place. And this mentality has been made far more problematic for those with caregiving responsibilities with no school or day-care to allow employees the time to focus on their work. In order to make our emergency remote work situation sustainable, we must re-incorporate flexibility into how we get things done.

As I've said in training programs I have given to managers over the past decade, even a little bit of flexibility can go a long way and is greatly appreciated. It can make what seems impossible for many employees feel more feasible, thereby decreasing the stress they feel on a day-to-day basis. This is critical today. We need to be cognizant of how much this stress, coupled with the anxiety around the coronavirus and feelings of social isolation, is leading to concerns about employees' mental health.

So I'll advocate today what I have promoted over the years in my work on flexibility.

For **employees**, outline a plan with your manager that outlines the type of flexibility that you need. Reinforce your commitment to the organization and your appreciation for your manager's understanding. For **managers**, work with your employees to help accommodate their flexibility needs during these highly unusual circumstances. Some modifications to your expectations may be necessary at this time. Keeping workers engaged, healthy both mentally and physically, and as productive as possible should be the goal. For everyone involved, communicate frequently and clearly about goals, projects, and the support you need to make this happen. Set priorities on a regular basis to tackle the tasks that are most urgent and important. Make decisions about which objectives might need to be put on hold and which tasks/meetings are not adding value. Develop the two-way relationship of trust and accountability.

Once we are through this most difficult time of containment and quarantine, we hope that our experience and the lessons learned can be brought back into the workplace. Offering and utilizing both flex time and flex place options will seem like a gift. When caregiving supports become available again, we hope to see even more relief for stressed employees and managers. Until then, we must work together to do our best in this messy new reality.