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**Building a Flexible Workplace**By: [Catalyst](#)

*In today's business world, workplace flexibility is a powerful tool for maximizing individual and organizational effectiveness.*

There has been a great deal of talk lately about how the changes and demands of today's workplace are affecting employees' lives. Adapting to these changes and demands—as well as to company growth goals—requires employees to work smarter and improve their work practices to be more effective and productive. Employees are striving for improved quality and effectiveness both in their work and their personal lives. When employees achieve these goals, their employers benefit as well.

**Why Do Employees Use Flexibility?**

Catalyst defines flexibility in its broadest terms: variations in the time and place of work, in both the short- and long-term, on a formal and/or informal basis.

A number of recent changes affecting the corporate world have increased the need for workplace flexibility and helped move flexibility to the forefront of organizations' agendas. First of all, technological tools—such as email and voicemail—make it possible for employees to work anytime and anywhere, but at the same time, diminishing boundaries between work and personal time lead to overwork. Secondly, globalization and the resulting shift toward operating across geographic and time boundaries have increased work hours and business travel for many employees. In order to increase productivity without increasing headcount, employees have also expanded their work hours and are taking less vacation in order to respond to increasing demands. Additionally, demographic shifts—such as the influx of women into the workplace and the dramatic increase in dual-career couples in the workplace—have changed the profile of the typical employee and his/her work/life needs. In the midst of all of these trends, the new generation of employees comes to work with different expectations about what work means to them, the role it plays in their lives, and how work is defined.

Flexibility is used by many employees—men and women alike—for a wide variety of work and personal reasons, such as:

- To have uninterrupted time to complete certain tasks and to accommodate urgent work requests
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- To be available to colleagues and clients in other time zones
- To address life interests and needs put aside during periods of heavy workload
- To avoid long commutes
- To care for children or sick family member
- To exercise, engage in hobbies and community activities
- To transition from full-time work to retirement
- To pursue additional education or certifications

### **What Are the Benefits of Workplace Flexibility?**

Flexibility is a powerful—and often underutilized—tool for becoming an employer of choice and increasing work productivity and effectiveness. Offering flexibility allows companies to recruit the best talent and retain experienced and valuable employees. It also helps to boost employee satisfaction, engagement, and morale. A flexible work environment can be the difference between employees that feel energized, committed, and ready to go to bat for you and those that feel burned out, unsupported, and ready to walk out the door at the first chance they get. In addition, flexibility simplifies work processes and focuses on output. In doing so, it encourages employees, managers, and work groups to work more creatively and effectively. Flexibility shines the spotlight on leadership capabilities such as crystallizing and communicating priorities, setting the stage for thoughtfully executing plans, encouraging teamwork and coordination, and harnessing employee talents to drive results.

### **What Is the Business Case for Flexibility at Your Organization?**

The best place to start in incorporating flexibility into your workplace is to think specifically about your organization's goals and difficulties, and to understand how flexibility can address them. Identify the compelling reasons for using flexibility to help employees—as well as your organization as a whole—be more effective.

Historically, flexibility has been treated as an accommodation created in response to an individual's needs. But Catalyst finds that when businesses approach flexibility proactively, they can design flexible arrangements that suit the needs of both the individual and the business. Below are some questions that can guide managers in thinking about flexibility as a business tool.

- How, when, and where does work currently get done? In what ways is this system effective? In what ways could it be improved?
- What do employees get rewarded for in the organization?
- Do you have flexibility policies on the books that are unused? If so, why? Are employees penalized?
- Who do you consider to be the most talented employees? Who are the most effective employees? Are they the same? Why or

why not?

- Why do valuable employees leave the organization? Why do they stay?
- In what ways could work be structured differently for the benefit of both employees and the organization?
- Do employees have a forum for sharing their ideas, and are they encouraged to do so?

### **How Can Managers Create and Support Flexible Work Cultures?**

Clearly, workplace flexibility is more than a change in schedule. It is a way of thinking and working that seeks to help employees make their best contributions and simultaneously manage their personal lives. Companies that understand the business rationale, engage their employees in identifying innovative solutions, and create tools for managers and individuals will excel in this time of great change. The following tips are suggestions for helping managers create and support the most effective kind of flexibility.

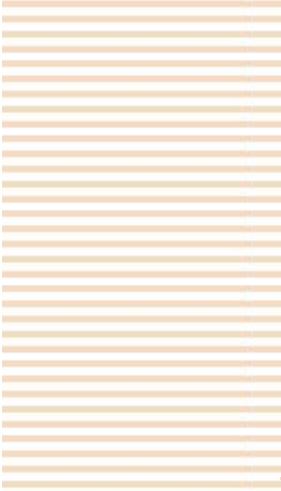
- Learn about your company's flexibility policies, programs, and resources, and disseminate information to educate your employees about what is available.
- Develop strong and consistent messaging about flexibility as a work effectiveness tool, communicating your organization's support for flexibility.
- Initiate open, honest discussions about workplace flexibility and effectiveness with your team, and empower your employees to suggest alternative ways of working to better address work/life needs.
- Evaluate management practices and challenge unspoken norms that reward "face-time" over results.
- Adapt organizational systems to ensure that performance is measured based on outcomes, not hours.
- Provide adequate organizational supports for managers and employees to work and manage more flexibly.
- Become a champion for working more flexibly and effectively. Demonstrate your commitment to improving work/life quality by role modeling smart ways to work.

Flexibility is about being creative and staying focused on what's important. Organizations now have the challenge—and the opportunity—to use flexibility as a means to improve outmoded work practices.

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### **About Catalyst:**

With offices in New York, San Jose, and Toronto, Catalyst is the



leading research and advisory organization working with businesses and the professions to build inclusive environments and expand opportunities for women at work. For more information about Catalyst's research, products, and services focusing on workplace flexibility, visit [www.catalystwomen.org](http://www.catalystwomen.org). You may also sign up to receive Catalyst's issue-specific newsletter, Perspective, and monthly email updates at [news@catalystwomen.org](mailto:news@catalystwomen.org).

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