

Effective Managers Keep Things Flexible

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The old adage among employers was once "recruitment, recruitment, recruitment." Significant resources were spent in pursuit of the ideal employee. Once hired, the pressure to invest in finding the right talent subsided. More recently, "Retention, retention, retention" has become the new mantra, with recruitment falling to a close second. As we have moved to a service-based economy, successful businesses have recognized that they have to invest in human capital.

At a recent local meeting with workforce, economic development and business leaders, a participant inquired about the relationship between retention and compensation, stating, "I thought bonuses and compensation helped to keep people." Although monetary incentives such as salary and bonuses may motivate employees in the short term, workplace flexibility is one of the key factors associated with retaining top talent. In fact, research suggests that flexibility and supervisor effectiveness are two workplace factors closely linked to employee engagement, retention and business success. Research also suggests that when given a choice between additional money and flexibility, more employees opt for flexibility than money.

To some readers, this may come as a surprise; to others this information may confirm their experiences as an employee, supervisor or business owner. Managing workplace flexibility is just one component of supervisor effectiveness. Yet workplace flexibility is impossible without effective supervisors. An organization may offer "flexible work options," but it is the skill, attitude and creativity of the supervisor or manager that determines whether flexibility is accessible, and to whom it is accessible. In essence, flexibility is inextricably linked to effective supervision.

To complicate matters even more, workplace flexibility is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Within one organization, flexible work options may vary by job function, occupational status or position. For instance, offering flexibility to a non-exempt employee is very different from offering flexibility to a professional salaried employee. If a bank teller or a grocery store cashier shows up 15 or 20 minutes later than the required starting time, ramifications may follow. Such jobs are time sensitive. Banks and grocery stores have to be open and ready for customers. In contrast, professional workers generally have more control over when they work. Modifying the start of the business day may be interpreted as a good use of time and, in some instances, encouraged. Bank executives often meet with clients late into the evening, thus reporting to work a little later than the standard time is common practice.

So what does a supervisor or manager do? Well, it is a complicated answer. In some instances, managing standard flexible work practices may be easier than managing "as needed" flexibility. As an example, when I worked in New York City, my administrative assistant, who was an aspiring actor, asked to modify her work hours on Thursdays to accommodate her acting auditions. She was an exceptional employee; I did not want to lose her. We established a mutually beneficial arrangement. She worked longer hours two days a week in exchange for the missed hours on Thursdays. The modified schedule worked beautifully. She fielded calls on the

nights that I worked late and assisted me with complicated projects, and she was able to pursue her dream of becoming an actor.

Requests for flexibility on an "as needed" basis also require finesse, critical inquiry and support from others. However, quick decisions are required in these types of decisions. And while managers want to be supportive of employees' personal circumstances, work needs to be done. What does a manager do when a deadline is drawing near, yet a lead team member must leave town unexpectedly to care for an aging parent? Or what happens when a team member has a child who is chronically sick and unable to attend child care? Generally, the manager and co-workers pick up the slack, or a supervisor may request the employee to work from home. But what happens when the employee's function is location specific, such as a bank teller or cashier?

These are difficult questions with no easy solutions. Studies provide enough evidence that employees are much more loyal when supervisors and managers incorporate flexibility into day-to-day work practices. Yet, given the complexity of the issue, the experts are less clear about the top strategies for maximizing flexibility at the workplace. Moreover, sometimes it is impossible to offer flexibility. In these circumstances, acknowledging the situation can have a profound and positive effect on the employee. Next month, my column will highlight supervisor and manager strategies for managing workplace flexibility.