

## Workplace Flexibility: Making it Work

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A Kentucky-based small business owner asks a common question: "Workplace flexibility may work for professionals, but what about everyone else? What about unmotivated people?" A manager of a large public organization expresses a related concern, saying, "If I allow one person to have some sort of flexibility, then I have to do it for everyone. I agree, flexible work options have benefits, but unless it can be implemented fairly, it may create too many hassles."

As I discussed in last month's column, a growing body of evidence clearly indicates that workplace flexibility results in positive outcomes for employees and employers. Yet, the implementation of various forms of workplace flexibility stymies many businesses, locally and nationally. Concerns pertaining to fairness, accountability and work ethic prevent action. According to Judi Casey, director of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network at Boston College, the three most common barriers to implementing flexibility occur "when a workplace culture places more value on face time than on performance outcomes; when a business considers flexibility as a benefit rather than simply the way work gets done; or when a business views flexibility as an accommodation rather than a business strategy." Casey suggests that when firms assimilate flexibility into their business strategy, everyone wins. "Management needs to understand offering flexibility is not a benefit or a policy; it's just the way to do business."

Several Lexington companies have successfully integrated various types of flexible work options into their business operations. Kentucky Orthopedic Rehab Team, a private physical therapy management company specializing in outpatient physical and occupational therapy and industrial and sports medicine, has made workplace flexibility an integral part of its business plan. Telecommuting and four-and-a-half-day workweeks are part of the regular options. Since KORT was established, the entire marketing department works from home, while clinicians are given the flexibility to work 4 days as standard practice. Central Baptist Hospital is leading the way in creating career flexibility for older workers, while W. Rogers Company, a family-owned general contracting business, provides a four-day work week to its employees — a practice rarely found within the construction industry.

Elizabeth Croney, president and CEO of Croney & Clark, Inc., a medium-sized, for-profit social service agency that provides mental health and case management services to children with severe psychiatric conditions, has created a very successful business. Part of that success has come from her establishment of an organizational culture that focuses on outcomes and a culture that allows people to have the lifestyle they want. "Most people want a life outside of work; if you can create the climate that promotes this, people are more satisfied and more committed."

In the past seven years, Croney has grown her company from a three-person operation to a firm that employs over 75 employees. The firm's strategic vision of focusing on performance

outcomes rather than when people work, is clearly one of the critical elements of the company's success. This strategic vision compliments a culture of flexibility. At Croney & Clark, Inc., the majority of workers are mental health service providers, including social workers, psychologists, nurses, licensed professional counselors and psychiatrists. Clinicians typically treat children and families in their homes, and occasionally at the office. According to Croney, "What matters at the end of the week is that the clients receive good services, not when they are served." Clinicians are encouraged to create a work schedule that fits best with their clients and their own work-life needs. "If clinical staff are able to see clients in three days, then they can take two days off. As long as their clients are served and they have their billable hours for the month, clinicians are able to create whatever schedule works best for them." A management information system keeps track of client treatment hours, and clinical supervisors ensure quality care.

While the majority of employees at Croney & Clark, Inc. are clinicians, the firm could not function without the administrative staff and the management team. As with the clinical staff, performance outcomes and flexibility are also paramount for management and administration personnel. All members of the five-person management team work from home at least one day a week.

"The job is stressful," Croney said. "Working from home allows them to get a break from the stress, but it also allows them to focus on whatever task at hand, be it work or non-work." "As long as the work gets done, it does not matter when or where it's getting done," she said.

Working as a team maximizes the administrative staff's flexibility. The administrative support staff is fully informed about the others' jobs. According to Croney, the team approach ensures that job tasks are covered while allowing for some flexibility when employees need personal time off. For instance, if one administrative team member needs to attend a medical appointment or a field trip with a child, the other person covers. Croney & Clark, Inc. seems to have blasted through the barriers that block many firms from fully incorporating workplace flexibility as a key management and business strategy. The firm values performance outcomes more than face time; flexibility is perceived as the way work gets done, rather than an employee benefit; and flexibility is part of their overall business strategy, rather than a case-by-case accommodation.