

Dallas Workers Speak: The Employee Case for Flexibility



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The National Partnership for Women & Families and Family Values @ Work convened a discussion group of 17 small business employees and owners in Dallas to discuss employees' workplace flexibility needs. This short report provides a snapshot of the challenges that workers face and the kinds of workplace flexibility that are most valuable to them.



Introduction

The changing workforce in the United States and new business norms mean that employers and employees are searching for effective ways to promote flexibility. Like workers everywhere, the workers in the Dallas discussion group have a wide array of caregiving and personal responsibilities. Some work for businesses that recognize their employees' varied needs for flexibility. Other employers have yet to appreciate that flexibility for all workers—salaried and hourly, full-time and part-time—is key to supporting a more productive workforce and that flexibility must involve more than just individual arrangements between employees and supervisors.

Employees need and value flexible work arrangements that provide the ability to vary work hours and work location, as well as the security of being able to take paid time away from work without fear of retribution or termination. In contrast, employees feel resentful and undervalued when workplaces provide flexibility for some workers but not others, and when workplace policies are unclear or fail to acknowledge workers' flexibility needs. While those in the discussion group understand business constraints, most also believe government policies are important in setting minimum standards for all businesses and creating new workplace norms.

Worker satisfaction correlates with a positive workplace culture that embraces flexibility and fosters trust. Employees value employers that acknowledge their personal and family commitments by providing time off when emergencies arise, allowing flexibility in scheduling, and allowing flexibility in work location. Employees mention trust and respect as particularly important.



Children
with spouses or partners and as single parents, divorced parents, and foster parents

Parents
including a mother driven out of Louisiana by the hurricane

Grandparents
A relative with early onset Alzheimer's Disease

An adult child
with a chronic ailment

Themselves



"It would be easier to attract younger workers, who care about time."

"[Flexibility] motivates people. There's not a lot of motivation when you don't see the benefits, when the company is closed for Memorial Day and you don't get paid."

"Look at top employers—they take care of people. They find out when you have happy employees, you have a better company."

"A lot of companies would be more productive. Workers would appreciate their job more so they would work harder."

"Happy employees are generally more productive."

For example, one Dallas-area worker who was extremely satisfied with his company's work-family practices explained that his company "is owned by a husband and wife team, and they have never questioned anybody to take care of a husband or wife or car. . . . [T]hey will always ask how you are doing. . . . They shift around things" to help get the work done when someone needs to be out of the office.

Several participants praised their supervisors for their willingness to consider employees' personal needs: "I have a great boss and he works with you a lot. . . . If you don't have any vacation time, he would allow you to work overtime to make up for it. We are pretty much left to do our own thing. We know what we have to do." Another participant with grown children and an elderly mother needing care praised her company for allowing her to move to an office location that was closer to her family members' homes.

Flexibility and trust are particularly important both when family crises strike and when more routine family needs arise—and workers appreciate employers that provide support. Over their working lives, employees face a variety of family and personal needs, ranging from the death of a loved one to periodic school closings. One woman explained, "[M]y father passed away in January and he lived out of town. . . . I had not accrued any vacation time; my company took care of it for me. I don't know how I would have paid my bills." Another shared that when her husband passed away, her employer—a small medical office—provided six weeks of paid leave. With respect to more routine challenges, a mother with young children praised her company's flexibility in allowing her to bring a child to work: "*Monday, school is closed. I will probably have my 5-year old and 3-year old in there watching movies. I'm pretty fortunate that [the employers] work with me. . . . [Y]ou are responsible as long as you get your work done.*"

For all employees—those with flexible workplaces and those without—being a good family member and a good employee is a source of great stress. A participant who is dealing with her own health problems and those of both her children and her husband explained, "If you're happy in the workplace, which I am, that's good, but other issues cause your life to implode." An educational diagnostician who serves as a caregiver to a relative with early-onset Alzheimer's expressed her daily concern: "I worry about not getting home in time because the person I'm caring for is home all day alone. I check several times by phone. *The stress comes from worrying about whether I can fulfill my other obligations and my work obligations.*"

Flexibility is critical for employees who are managing childcare and eldercare responsibilities or dealing with their own health problems. Workers find that flexible schedules and the ability to take time off on short notice to meet basic needs provide enormous benefits. For example, one dad described the kinds of challenges facing working parents: "I'm divorced, my daughter was sick. The school called my daughter's mom, she wouldn't answer her phone, [so I] got a call from the school. I had to immediately leave and get my daughter. Things come up, things happen." The same participant acknowledged, "Maybe I'm very lucky. *My work week is busy, but stressful is not a word I'd use, only because of the atmosphere my bosses create.*" The woman caring for the relative with early-onset Alzheimer's acknowledged her reliance on her ability to take time off during the day and make up the time later: "If I need to leave for an hour, I can rearrange my schedule. You want to make sure you are fulfilling your other obligations and your work."

Workers in small businesses value clear rules and expectations, but often find troubling inconsistencies between official company policies and practices of their direct

supervisors. Several workers have encountered arbitrary practices that lead to stress and uncertainty. In the most extreme case, one participant explained that she did not know her company's policies about time off or overtime: "My boss is okay. The company in general is not. I am the only hourly employee in this company. My daughter was sick.... I am getting phone calls from corporate because my boss lets me off.... The policy is not set. That's my issue." She went on to say that she hears others in her company talk about flexibility, but she has none and that "[i]t would make a difference to know what the policies are." Others experienced a similar divergence between official policy and practice. One woman explained that whether she is paid for a sick day "depends on who does the payroll."

Workers become resentful when there are workplace inequities in access to flexibility—when some workers have it but others do not. Workers who lack flexibility and see different rules applied to those around them chafe at seemingly arbitrary differences in treatment. "*It is not right. It should be the same structure for everybody,*" noted a salaried medical bill collector and mother of five. Her workplace has rules that vary from department to department and employee to employee. For example, she is required to work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a one-hour lunch, but others can take a 30 minute lunch and leave at 4:30. The same worker also noted that employees in some departments are permitted to take time off during the day and make up the time later, whereas people in her department are required to use paid time off for any time away from work and are not allowed to make up the time.

Even workers who have flexibility at work find such inequities unfair. The educational diagnostician explained, "[There is a] difference in how people are treated when they use their accrued sick time or when they need some flexible time. It varies. I think it depends on the personality of the administrator." One executive at a company that has formal flexibility policies acknowledged, "By policy, we have a flexible work schedule.... [But] some managers are better than others allowing for that flexibility."

Employers create a productive and motivated small-business workforce when workers are able to take time off to deal with sick children, their own illnesses, and other caregiving responsibilities without losing pay or risking workplace discipline or termination. Workers value employers who understand that time off for illness is unavoidable. An outreach specialist at a non-profit spoke glowingly about her employer's policy during last year's H1N1 crisis, explaining that the organization allowed parents to stay home with sick children without requiring them to use any of their allotted sick time. In contrast, workers without sick time that can be used for a child's illness are put in a bind. As one participant explained, "*I send [my daughter] to school and let the school call me because I need to be at work.*" She crosses her fingers that the school won't call, and relies on her sister to pick her daughter up, if necessary.

At the other end of the spectrum, worker morale is harmed by policies that punish workers for taking sick time. Several workers spoke about time-off policies that penalize workers. "[PTO] is accrued," explained a worker at one company. "You can use it if you've accrued the time, but depending on your supervisor, if it's unscheduled, you can be disciplined. If you're out of time, you can't take off. My daughter is asthmatic. I have 8 hours left to last me until December. If you call in, you're written up. If you're written up twice, you lose your job." "When we call in sick, it's unscheduled, I don't think it's fair. *It penalizes you for being sick,*" explained another participant.



**SEVERAL
PART-TIME
WORKERS
SAID...**

Several of the part-time workers in the group described a pay and benefit scale that was lower than for full-time, salaried workers:

"Everyone that was salaried got paid two to three dollars more than me."

"In my previous jobs, it was a huge discrepancy—at least a five or ten dollar difference."



“Job-sharing opportunities.”

“Family leave pay, not only for maternity but for responsibilities for primary caregivers.”

“Businesses with more than 50 employees should provide or pay for child care/senior care.”

“Paid childcare expenses for working parents.”

“An incentive or some type of pay for time off needed to take care of dependents.”

“Have real flex schedules, any 8-hour scheduled day. Not penalized for calling in sick or having a sick child.”

“Allowing people to work from home.”

“Better health care benefits.”

“Having a better maternity leave system where a mother is not rushed back into the workplace so quickly...[and] giving fathers the opportunity to take off as well.”

“Trusting employees enough to allow some flexibility in hours/days worked to allow for sick family members or just a break—caregiver leave.”

“Work at home, onsite daycare.”

Hourly and part-time workers who lack the same pay scale, benefits, and flexibility as full-time salaried workers feel they are not valued. A mother of three acknowledged that she has flexibility to leave work when her children need her but is keenly aware that she is not paid for that time, whereas salaried workers with the same job responsibilities are. Additionally, when the office is closed for “Thanksgiving or Memorial Day, I don’t get paid. I didn’t ask to be off.” Another participant explained that she resented that “anyone else can work from home.” And a former medical office worker explained that she was on salary but “fe[el]t bad” for hourly workers “because there were certain days when we took off and they didn’t get paid.” At the same time, she said, if the office was open for four hours on Saturday, the hourly workers were expected to be there.

Poor benefits for hourly and part-time workers—particularly a lack of health benefits—create real hardships and feelings of inequity. “I am one of two that are hourly out of thirty employees. [Unlike salaried workers,] *if I am not there, I don’t get paid,*” explained one younger worker with chronic health conditions and an elderly grandmother to care for. “I am in the gap where I don’t work full-time so I don’t get benefits but I make too much to qualify for [community health] programs.... My direct supervisor offered to give up some of his salary so I could get more hours,” but the supervisor’s supervisor denied the request because he did not want to provide the worker with benefits. “*I feel like I am walking on eggshells all the time,*” this worker explained. Another recalled a time when she was a contractor and had no benefits: “If I missed work, I got no pay. If my daughter was sick or I [was], there was no doctor visit.”

Worker input into scheduling—especially for long shifts and odd hours—is critical.

Workers who have the ability to help shape their schedules feel valued. For example, a single mother praised her organization for its sensitivity to her childcare needs when assigning workers to overtime shifts, explaining that she prefers to work in the middle of the night when she is most easily able to find friends to watch her daughter. In contrast, workers who are called upon at odd hours without notice feel their employers are overburdening them. One participant explained that she is “given the opportunity” to make up lost time when she must take time off to care for her daughter by taking her boss’s laptop home to do work in the evenings or on weekends even when she finds it difficult to do so. “I will bring the laptop home,” she explained. “It is a big company. It would not be anything to let me go.”

Workers understand that employers need flexibility to meet the needs of their business and their workforce, but favor minimum standards—especially for paid time off.

Employees see basic standards for time off—both for paid sick days and for longer-term paid family and medical leave insurance—as an important way for business and government to make workplaces more family-friendly. “*I had a co-worker who came back to work three weeks after giving birth because she was on FMLA and couldn’t afford it,*” one worker lamented. As an administrator in an entertainment company and mother of two reasoned, “we have the minimum wage, all kinds of minimums.”

Employees believe that offering minimum amounts of time off to meet basic needs will benefit workplaces by lowering stress, motivating workers, and promoting loyalty. “People need time for family and themselves, whether due to medical or personal reasons. A happy employee is more productive,” wrote one worker. We need “a minimum of hours in paid time off for all employees regardless of employment status—part time, full-time, salary/hourly,” wrote another. Workers are not unreasonable in their expectations about minimum standards. As one worker noted, “It would have to be monitored and fair.”