

New York City Workers Speak: The Employee Case for Flexibility Among Professional Workers



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The National Partnership for Women & Families and Family Values @ Work convened a discussion group of 13 women workers who are salaried professionals. This short report provides a snapshot of the challenges these workers face and the kinds of flexibility they see as most valuable.



www.FamilyValuesAtWork.org

Some professional workers have successfully negotiated an array of flexible working arrangements, but many face significant barriers in accessing and utilizing the basic flexibility they need. Professional workers are often expected to work long hours and to be available after regular business hours. They may face penalties for requesting and utilizing reduced-hours arrangements or other forms of scheduling flexibility. Stereotypes about caregiving may inhibit their career opportunities. Many professional workers who do enjoy the benefits of flexible work arrangements report feeling like they must work extra hard to prove their worth. The economic climate has only intensified workers' concerns that using flexible arrangements may lead to being downsized or laid off.

Professional workers say workplaces that both offer and are accepting of flexibility generate a greater sense of loyalty and deeper employee engagement. Workers who use such arrangements, they say, are more efficient and productive and feel a higher level of commitment to their employers. They believe public policies may be helpful in changing workplace culture and setting a minimum floor.

Workers' Key Challenge #1:

Performing demanding jobs with high levels of responsibility while also meeting family obligations.

Long hours, high expectations, and little control over start and end times are significant sources of tension, particularly for workers with children.

For some professionals, inflexible schedules have serious financial consequences. "I had to get to daycare by seven o'clock, otherwise it was...15 dollars for every 15 minutes I was late," said one worker. Another explained that her constant inability to get to daycare before it closed meant having to pay a teacher to pick up her child. Others worry about not spending enough time with their children: "From the moment I wake up, I [am always feeling like] 'When am I going to get home?... Am I spending enough time?'" one woman explained. A lawyer recalled that when her twins were little, she constantly worried about whether she could make it home before bedtime: "The big thing every day [was] can I get to see them just for 20 minutes?"

Some workers have tried a number of arrangements to manage their obligations at home and at work. Several participants voluntarily reduced their hours, sought part-time arrangements as a condition of employment when looking for



Discussion group participants included:

- Lawyers with reduced-hours schedules on partner and non-partner career paths
- A full-time test developer for the city Department of Education
- A full-time photo editor with flexible work hours
 - A full-time non-profit administrator who arranged a 5 p.m. departure time
- A full-time sales analyst in the fashion industry with little flexibility
 - A lawyer who worked full time at a large firm before being laid off
- A digital marketing manager who works a 60-percent schedule
 - A full-time production professional in publishing
 - A full-time insurance claims manager
 - A full-time sales manager in finance
- A full-time immigration counselor

a new job, or selected a less demanding career path in order to do work they love while being involved parents or caring for a disabled child or spouse. Several admit these arrangements are less than perfect – they earn less money, are seen as less committed, and are concerned about career stagnation – but to them, the tradeoff is necessary.

“I wonder if I can progress in my company as much as I would be able to if I worked full time.”

— Digital marketing manager on a 60-percent schedule

Some employees’ workplaces have formal policies while others provide flexibility informally. In both cases, workers said their access to flexibility in hours or scheduling is up to their supervisors – and discretion often results in unfair treatment. A lawyer explained: “Working flex time was totally discretionary according to the practice group leader. Some women in my law firm got great deals out of it. Some of them really didn’t...” Even employees who have worked out helpful arrangements said “the discretion thing...can sometimes seem unfair.” A new mother in the fashion industry praised her “good manager” but recognized that “if I was working for the other guy who was not good,” her experience would have been very different. She added, “*I feel that most of the time ‘discretionary’ means ‘not fair.’*”

“I was eventually able to get an 80-percent schedule, which is certainly more livable than it was before. But...I worry about the financial pain.... I’m...the primary breadwinner in my family.”

— Law firm associate on a partner track

Job insecurity and concerns about layoffs add pressure – and workers who have negotiated flexible work arrangements described feeling that pressure more acutely than others. A staff attorney who purposely took a part-time job that allowed her to care for her disabled daughter in the evenings said, “I found that in order to stay there, I have to...stop the limits, even though that was the deal I negotiated.... There were huge layoffs a couple of years ago, and...if I had been really rigid...I probably would have been one of the casualties.” Workers who used to have assistants or support staff now go without, afraid to ask for additional help or seek other opportunities. An insurance claims manager explained that this means she is “taking on extra work” and has to “stay later hours or skip lunch.” A publishing industry employee explained that, at her company, women are never promoted. She said that she would have left years ago, but she feels like she should stick with it because there are few alternatives in the job market today. With the departure of her two assistants, she said, “I’m doing three jobs, so I know it would be really hard for them to replace me.”

Workers’ Key Challenge #2:

The perception that flexibility is a “perk” and the stigma that many workers feel when they seek and utilize flexible work arrangements.

Workers with flexible work arrangements used words like “grateful” to describe their feelings about their employers and said they feel an acute need to prove their worth. Every worker with flexibility recognized that the arrangements are mutually beneficial to employers and employees, yet they still used language that strongly suggested flexibility is a perk rather than a sound way of doing business. A lawyer for a hedge fund with a 50-percent schedule and the ability to work nearly exclusively from home said, “*I will do anything for them. If it is midnight or Saturday night, I don’t care because I am so grateful just to have the flexibility. There’s really nothing I wouldn’t do... to make sure they get more than [my] value in return.*” Another partnership-track lawyer – the only one at her in her practice group with an 80-percent schedule – said: “It is hard not to be grateful when there’s nobody around who has what I have.”

Many employees said they experienced significant push-back from colleagues and supervisors when they requested flexible work arrangements, and reported worrying about the stigma or other negative workplace consequences associated with working a non-standard schedule. Several participants said colleagues or supervisors questioned their commitment to their careers or companies when they asked for flexibility. For some, concerns about negative job consequences presented a disincentive even to request more flexible hours or a part-time schedule. One lawyer who was ultimately laid off despite continuing to work full time after childbirth explained that she had been “too afraid to ask for part time, because first of all, my practice group leader gave me a hard time over the six weeks’ maternity leave. And second of all, I [didn’t] want to get fired.”

Workers who chose flexible schedules or work part-time described having difficulty advancing in their careers. One worker has noticed that women who work flexible hours have not been promoted: “There is informal flexibility,” she explained, “but I’ve also noticed that all the women have not been promoted. ...You’re there for years and years in the same position.” The staff attorney who has chosen to work fewer hours because of her disabled daughter explained that she was hired in an “off-track position” that will never allow her to become a partner. She said, “[T]he firm has really taken advantage of that and kind of sidelined me. ...I’m not going anywhere; the salary is not increasing.”

Workers’ Key Challenge #3:

Workplace penalties for using basic protections like paid sick days, and disparate access to flexibility within workplaces.

Nearly all of the professional workers in the discussion group have some form of paid time off to use for their own illness or to care for an ill family member – a standard that, although basic, is out of reach for tens of millions of workers in this country. At the same time, nearly all said that there are penalties for taking a sick day. Taking a day to care for a sick child provides “just one more reason to be thought of as less committed,” one of the lawyers explained. A publishing employee commented that she is reluctant to take a sick day because she does “not want to be seen as the mother-type versus the career-type.” One worker admitted that the pressure to perform means, “I have sent [my daughter] to school borderline sick. ...[S]he had pink eye, I think... I wiped her eyes and shoved her off to school.”

Some workers reported having had their own pay docked or seeing co-workers lose pay or face workplace discipline for taking sick days to care for a family member. A textbook publisher described seeing women at her company lose their jobs after being home with a sick child or a sick parent, despite the lack of a formal written policy providing a specified number of sick days. She described the policy as “if you’re sick, you’re sick. That’s the rule. But somehow three women have been let go because they’ve exceeded the number of sick days – which isn’t written. I’m not really sure how that even happened.”

Several workers who benefit from flexibility recognized that support staff and other workers in their organization do not – and they said these disparities influence morale. A non-profit manager noted that professionals in her office have flex time and are able to work from home but, as a result, the support staff has less flexibility: “[T]hey have to be there...to support the people that are working from home.” Two women remarked that support staff often receive inferior sick and maternity leave benefits. The insurance agency claims manager noted that a support staff member with a chronically ill child is routinely docked pay and made to account for each day or half

WORKERS’ CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES AND WORK RESPONSIBILITIES OFTEN CONFLICT.

Discussion group participants included:

Married mothers with children ranging from two weeks old to college age who have varying caregiving arrangements that involve stay-at-home or freelancing spouses, paid caregivers, and daycare centers

Single mothers who work full time and struggle to find time for themselves while caring for their children

A married mother of a 20-year-old daughter with a severe disability

A married mother of a six-year-old daughter whose husband is disabled



“Longer maternity leave”

“Paid sick days...for all employees in all industries”

“[Allow] workers to have...the shift that benefits them the most. If it's easier for them to come in earlier, and that's possible, accommodate that. Or do some of their work...at another time at home.”

“Parental leave with a guarantee of return to work on the same career path”

“Flex time for mothers to continue to work while their children are infants”

“[Give workers] the ability... to manage their lives and get their work done...to have that understanding that there are some times, some circumstances [when] you need to take care of family needs.”

“Tax [incentives] or some kind of rewards for companies offering family flexible time.”

“Universal Pre-K”

day she takes leave, while a managing director with a chronically ill child can be absent for days at a time with no consequences. The same participant asked a secretary why she had come back to work one month after having a Caesarian section. The woman explained that she had one month of paid leave and couldn't afford to take any unpaid leave; the discussion group respondent had herself received three months of paid leave and described this differential treatment as “devastating.”

Key Solution:

Workplace policies and a workplace culture benefitting both employers and employees by respecting all workers' obligations at home, their commitment to their work, and their desire to advance in their careers.

Workers who have flexibility described improvements in employee commitment. One attorney working in the financial services industry was able to negotiate increased flexibility for herself, which “opened the floodgates” for others to do the same. Greater access to flexibility boosted office morale at a time when it was particularly low. Another worker described how she had pioneered flexibility in her workplace by asking to leave at 5:00 p.m. every day; now, workers routinely telecommute and work alternative schedules and cannot imagine working for an organization unwilling to embrace these arrangements. *“It makes people more committed to the work,”* one of these “pioneers” explained.

“I’m grateful I have flexibility.... I think everyone should have the same kinds of flexibility to do what they need to do.... I think it should be a standard.”

— Test designer, New York City Department of Education

Workers said flexible and part-time work options promote retention of high-quality employees – particularly women with children. Several participants pointed to the “brain drain” of women leaving the workforce after having children. “We’re losing people from the workforce because of their caregiver responsibilities,” a non-profit administrator explained. Policies that make it possible for parents to continue their careers and be involved in their children’s lives help to prevent this attrition.

Bosses need education around flexibility, explained one participant.

“It is not a gift to women,” she explained. “It is good for their workplace.”

— Hedge fund general counsel

Workers believe they are more efficient if they are able to work hours that accommodate their caregiving responsibilities. Workers who have already been balancing the demands of family and the workplace have developed strategies to maximize their efficiency. Many reported that flexible hours allow them to be more productive. And those who lack flexibility said having it would facilitate their ability to complete work more quickly.

Workers identified a range of public policies that they say would help promote a family friendly culture in U.S. workplaces. Participants recognized that everything from on-site childcare to job-protected paid leave to the right to flexible and part-time arrangements would bring much-needed change. Public policy standards can fuel changes in company culture, workers said, helping to remove the stigma that inhibits career advancement for those who work flexible hours or use paid time off. Public policy standards would also reduce unequal treatment within and across workplaces and reduce the role that supervisor discretion currently plays in limiting many workers' access to penalty-free flexibility. “We saw so many differences [in this discussion] in how different people were treated... [I]f there is some kind of policy or mandate – a standard baseline – then we can all feel like we’re being treated fairly,” explained a textbook publisher.