

Blog: The New 9-5: Offering Flexible Work Arrangements in a Technology-driven World

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By **Stephanie Romeo** - June 28, 2019



Stephanie Romeo // Courtesy photo

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Given the availability of today's technology, nearly half of all Americans hold jobs that are compatible with remote work, more commonly referred to as "working from home." Generally, an employee needs only a laptop, internet connection, and a cell phone for a

productive day. Video or telephone conference technology is efficient and fairly easy to operate. Common workplace distractions, like "watercooler talk," are eliminated.

As *DBusiness* discussed in a recent report, more Michigan companies are offering flexible working arrangements.(1) According to the American Society of Employers' first Workplace Flexibility Survey, 66 percent of responding Michigan-based organizations offer some kind of flexible work arrangement to employees, with flexible hours being the most prevalent arrangement. This amount is significant, but also shows that approximately one-third of Michigan employers fail to offer remote work options.

Working from home has transitioned from a luxury to an expectation for today's workforce. It is not just a millennial trend; all types of employees are seeking the ability to work from home on an as-needed or even regular

basis for a multitude of reasons ranging from child and elder care needs, mental health needs, and beyond. However, despite these clear trends, many employers are struggling to build and adopt policies that reflect the new realities of the modern workplace.

Do Full-Time Jobs Require a Full-Time Presence at Work?

Many employers allow for flexible work schedules, while others deny employees the ability to work remotely because the employer believes a full-time presence at the workplace is necessary.(2) Although it benefits employees and employers, many employers may be hesitant to offer remote work options because of the perceived challenges. For example, a lack of “facetime” in the office could make it difficult for employees to establish connections with their co-workers. Managers may also feel it is more difficult to hold their employees accountable.

When developing remote work policies, employers should consider *why* full-time attendance in their office at their particular workplace is necessary, rather than simply assuming so. What are the essential functions of the job? Can they be easily completed remotely? How could the company be *advantaged* by offering its employees flexible work schedules and the opportunity to work remotely?

The Advantages of Allowing Remote Work

Employers’ concerns regarding remote work are often manageable and are often outweighed by the advantages. Telecommuting allows employees to improve their work/life balance, giving them flexibility to engage in healthy hobbies, raise children, and manage their stress levels, but employers benefit as well. Although employers often fear their employees want to work from home to “beat the system” or “get out of work,” research shows that telecommuting has the opposite effect.

Employers lose about \$1.8 trillion a year in productivity when implementing a traditional office work environment for various reasons such as lengthy commutes, office gossip, and health issues.(3) However, when offered flexible work arrangements, employees are generally more productive and more engaged in their work. Employees invest time and

energy into their projects rather than navigating traffic, or being forced to take time off from work simply because they cannot make it into the office. Allowing for remote work also improves employee morale, with one study showing that 76 percent of telecommuters were willing to work overtime and felt more loyal to their company when offered flexible work arrangements.(4)

Don't Forget the Consequences of Non-Flexible Work Schedules

As stated by the president and CEO of the American Society of Employers, companies "need to offer flexible workplace arrangements to suit various employee needs and remain competitive." With advances in technology, employees are finding it unreasonable for employers not to offer flexible work arrangements. As another *DBusiness* blog noted recently, employees are not afraid to quit their jobs and seek other opportunities.(5) The Labor Department recently reported that in May 2018, 2.4 percent of all those employed quit their jobs, typically to take another job. This is the largest share in 17 years. If employers want to retain their experienced employees and avoid expending valuable resources interviewing and training new ones, they should consider focusing on developing and implementing policies offering flexible work opportunities.

Implementing New Policies

Even when employers understand the importance of flexible work schedules, they are often unsure how to implement changes. These flexible work schedules do not need to be extravagant or disruptive. Even allowing varied start and end times can have a significant, positive effect on employee morale and productivity. Employers can also set up telecommuting schedules with their employees, allowing them to work from home on specified days of the week. By accommodating employees but still ensuring they adhere to a set schedule, the employee's in-person availability is clear. Employers should also consider allowing for telecommuting on an as-needed basis to account for infrequent occurrences such as unexpected bad weather, personal emergencies, and doctor's appointments.

When implementing these policies, it is important to encourage open and frequent communication, and to set guidelines and apply them consistently, especially if allowing for remote work on an as-needed basis. If one employee is allowed to telecommute in the morning, and take only the afternoon off from work, another employee should be able to do the same. Inconsistent treatment can have a negative effect on employee morale and can also impact an employer's legal liability on claims for discrimination and accommodation of disabilities.

As flexible work arrangements become more prevalent, employers should consider offering these opportunities, and develop policies and procedures specifically designed for their work environment. In this area, one size does not fit all. Employers that take the time to address these issues and develop effective and practical individualized policies regarding flexible working arrangements will be able to reap the benefits of remote work while still maintaining employee productivity and workplace culture.

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1 See Grace Turner, Report: More Michigan Companies Offering Flexible Working Arrangements, <https://www.dbusiness.com/daily-news/report-more-michigan-companies-offering-flexible-working-arrangements> (Mar. 20, 2019).

2 Recently, when employers have used this reasoning to deny employees with disabilities the ability to work from home as a reasonable accommodation, courts have determined that the employer's decision was in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. See *Hostettler v. College of Wooster*, 895 F.3d 844 (6th Cir. 2018); *Mosby-Meachem v. Memphis Light, Gas & Water Div.*, 883 F.3d 595 (6th Cir. 2018).

3 See Andrea Loubier, Benefits Of Telecommuting For The Future Of Work, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrealoubier/2017/07/20/benefits-of-telecommuting-for-the-future-of-work> (July 20, 2017).

4 See *id.*

5 See Todd Palmer, Blog: The Revenge of Employees, Ghosting Employers is New Norm, <https://www.dbusiness.com/business/blog-the-revenge-of-employees-ghosting-employers-is-new-norm> (July 30, 2018).

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