

Flexibility Helps Employees to Do Their Jobs Better

Harvard work/life director Nancy Costikyan broke an elbow the day before she was to fly to Ann Arbor MI to present at the College and University Work/Family Association (CUWFA) national conference in May. Normally she'd either bow out or travel with a broken arm. She did neither.

She and her co-presenter, WFD Consulting president Debbie Phillips, worked with conference hosts to bring her in by Skype. They got a classroom with two projection screens, the PowerPoint on one and Costikyan on the other.

"We were able to demonstrate flexibility in a way we wouldn't have otherwise," Phillips told *WIHE*. "Pretty much everything is possible." Letting go of assumptions about what it means to be present, they used technology and creativity to meet individual and conference needs.

Flexibility isn't just about meeting personal needs, although that's a big factor in recruiting and retaining talent. It's also about fulfilling business objectives by giving workers the autonomy and control to do their jobs. The catch: We need to quit measuring productivity by face time and focus instead on what we want to accomplish.

Flexibility as a business tool

Phillips worked first in childcare and then for the state of Massachusetts in childcare licensing and policy before she was recruited to WFD Consulting (Work/Family Directions) nearly 14 years ago. By the time she became president last October, she saw flexibility as so much more than helping out mothers and families.

"Often these situations are perceived as women's issues. In reality, both women and men are equally feeling the stress," she said. Workers burn out under heavy workloads and round-the-clock accessibility. They thrive when they can work under whatever arrangements allow them to do their jobs best. "It's not a women's issue, it's a talent issue," she said.

Flexibility can serve other organizational needs in addition to retaining talent. For example, cash-strapped universities can save on real estate by encouraging staff to work remotely one or two days a week and share office space.

Support services such as human resources can be made available over a wider range of hours. We tend to assume everybody has to be in the office from 9 to 5. Students and faculty no longer operate that way; most of their communication isn't face-to-face. If some staff work earlier or later hours from home, they could provide more support services online or by phone.

Some colleges, including Harvard, are concerned about sustainability and limiting their carbon footprint. They encourage workers with a long car commute to protect the environment by doing part of their work close to home.

Spectrum of flexibility

Where is your school on WFD's flexibility spectrum?

1. *Individual accommodations.* "Often businesses started



Nancy Costikyan

flexibility as accommodations for individual needs," Phillips said. These secret arrangements are worked out case by case, informally and under the radar.

2. *Policies and programs in place.* Flexible working arrangements are in place on paper but they're used only in pockets across campus, depending on the individual supervisor or chair. "Almost everybody falls between the first and second part of the spectrum," she said.

3. *Widespread flexibility.* At this stage flexibility has many faces. Broad formal and informal use of flexible policies responds to workplace and individual needs.

4. *Results-driven culture.* New ways of working shift the focus from face time to outcomes. The culture changes as flexibility becomes a positive management strategy to achieve targeted results.

Phillips envisions the 21st century workplace without boundaries of time and space. Operations can happen any time, any place. Personnel policy, technology and real estate are aligned to support a dispersed workforce. Flexibility, efficiency and connectivity lead to positive business outcomes.

"It's really about the organization thinking about its operational objectives, then letting people propose how they will meet those objectives," she said. If the institutional need changes and a staff member's arrangements no longer meet that need, then it's time to reassess.

With this shift in culture, flexibility is no longer tied to an individual worker's motives. She doesn't need to present her case in terms of childcare, eldercare, an ailing partner or service to the community.

If she wants to play golf every Wednesday afternoon or take a lunchtime nap, that's nobody's business so long as the work gets done. All the college cares is whether her work gets done; all the staff member has to say is how she proposes to do it.

The flexibility equation

Want to move your school up the flexibility spectrum?

- From flexibility as personal accommodation to flexibility as a business solution and talent management tool
- From informal, inconsistent practices to a more structured approach based on guiding principles
- From a lack of integrated resources to an accessible, practical set of materials and tools
- From manager concerns about abuse, equity and productivity to employees taking responsibility for success and accountability for results
- From an ad hoc, individualized approach to a process that is clear, equitable and consistent

How do you move forward? "Cultural change is not easy, as everyone knows. You have to really understand your needs, have leadership support, have a clear plan and then communicate, communicate, communicate," she said.

It's summarized in WFD's flexibility equation:

'It's really about the organization thinking about its operational objectives, then letting people propose how they will meet those objectives.'



Debbie Phillips

Process + Leadership + Structures + Implementation + Measurement = Culture

Base the strategic process on organizational goals, aligning personnel targets with those of the university. What's the desired outcome? How will you measure success? Top leaders need to be genuinely and visibly committed to the process.

Structures should be business based, employee initiated and reason neutral—workers don't have to state their motive, only how they'll fulfill their job. Provide policies, procedures, guidelines, proposal forms and self-assessments. Offer tips and tools for managers and employees and clarify their respective roles and responsibilities.

Implementation includes a flexibility Web site and training for everyone involved. Actively communicate the business objectives, senior leadership commitment and everyone's shared accountability for success.

Evaluation and improvement depend on measurement. Track the use and effectiveness of flexibility options. Measure their effect on engagement, productivity, stress and burnout. WFD's extensive database shows measurable benefits of flexibility across organizations in terms of health and wellness, employee engagement, work effectiveness and retention.

Expansion and continuous improvement overcome organizational barriers to embed flexible ways of work into the culture.

Case study: Harvard University

Speaking by Skype, Costikyan described Harvard University's experience working with WFD to build flexibility into its culture. Like most schools, Harvard started on the border between the first two stages, "individual accommodations" and "programs and policies in place."

Its start-up survey found that more than half of the respondents used some flexibility and that two-thirds of their direct managers were supportive. Their unions intervened when members were refused accommodation. But the occasional use of flex seemed to do more harm than good.

Stress and burnout were much higher among survey respondents who used flex options occasionally ("occ." in chart below), compared to those who used them regularly or never. Only 54% of occasional flex users felt positive about their ability to manage the demands of work, personal life and family, compared to 78% of flex users and 63% of non-users. Other results:

Percent Agreeing with Statement

| <i>On using flexible work arrangements</i> | Yes | No | Occ. |
|--|-----|-----|------|
| Often feel drained at end of the day | 51% | 54% | 68% |
| Just can't get everything done | 48 | 57 | 65 |
| Work/life stress affects my health | 48 | 25 | 50 |
| My job requires too much time | 26 | 28 | 54 |
| Job detracts from other responsibilities | 16 | 18 | 39 |
| Other responsibilities detract from job | 16 | 9 | 31 |

These results are not uncommon, Phillips said. Occasional users of a sporadic, unclear system feel pulled in all directions. "They are trying to be all things for everyone, feeling like they have to be constantly available," she said.

Asked to identify barriers to giving staff the flexibility

they need, employees and managers disagreed. More than three-quarters of the managers saw the nature of the work as a barrier, while only 37% of the employees agreed. Managers also were more likely than employees to identify workload and access to technology as limiting factors. But employees were more than twice as likely to identify cultural barriers.

Percent Citing Cultural Barriers to Flexibility

| <i>Perspective</i> | <i>Employees</i> | <i>Managers</i> |
|--|------------------|-----------------|
| Equate face time w/productivity/commitment | 26% | 12% |
| Flex not an accepted part of the culture | 12 | 4 |
| Emphasis on hours worked, not outcomes | 9 | 4 |

Staff also mentioned career advancement and the times meetings were scheduled. About 20% of both groups saw barriers in the need to be available to co-workers and the attitudes of higher-ups.

Managers expressed concern about how to maintain control, know what employees are doing and make sure the work got done. They felt that they were getting mixed messages on encouraging self-care *vs.* getting more work out of their staff.

Employees worried about penalties for using flexibility and said they had no recourse when their flex requests were denied. They were concerned that "work from anywhere" means "work from everywhere," with no way to leave work behind at the end of the day.

Surveys revealed a desire for solid flex structures:

- A formal, well-defined vision
- Clear-cut policies and guidelines
- Access to written processes and tools
- Focus on outcomes, not face-time
- Metrics to track impact of flexibility
- Better use of technology for support
- Clear eligibility criteria
- Training for consistent understanding
- Clear roles and expectations
- Fewer, shorter, better-timed meetings

Harvard has made progress along on the flexibility scale. It's currently in the third stage, with widespread use to meet individual needs. It's still working on tying flexibility to business results and changing the campus culture.

Cultural change means linking flexibility to other strategic priorities like sustainability and reduced office space. It means portraying flexibility as rigorous, not soft, and departmental initiatives as leadership, not eccentricity.

It means managing expectations—everyone will win—and addressing perceptions of entitlement. Everyone is special and deserves special arrangements. All the work is essential and as such, trumps everything.

Work ethic in the flexible 21st century culture means motivation and passion, not just working harder to accomplish more with less. The values of a healthy workplace will be matched by ways of working that support well-being.

Higher education will benefit from flexibility that gives employees the control and autonomy to thrive in their work. ■

—SGC

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