

flexibility

The extent to which staff believe they can control when, where and how long they work

Workplace flexibility is more than just flexible work policies. It is a sense of trust and respect between employer and employee, a supportive workplace culture, and a sense of control over one's job and working conditions. Organisations with workplace flexibility are more successful at attracting and retaining employees, even if the employees don't use the policies. A sense of control over work is a strong mechanism for managing stress, and is linked to less sick leave, less work-related impairment and higher job commitment.

suggested actions

- **manager attitudes** Encourage and educate supervisors to be accepting and supportive of workers' lives outside work. Changing individual attitudes towards flexibility can be a challenge, but educating supervisors as to the benefits and illustrating their key role may help. Managers and supervisors have a strong influence over whether or not formal workplace flexibility policies are available for use and to whom they are available. The usability of flexibility policies is positively linked to organisational commitment, whereas the mere presence of flexibility policies is not. Informal flexibility, attitude towards flexibility and the acceptance of its use are key to successfully utilising the benefits of workplace flexibility.
- **myth busting** More hours equals higher productivity is not always true. Long hours can have a negative effect on productivity by straining employee engagement and increasing stress levels. Similarly, the mistaken belief in some organisations that part-time employees are less committed and of less value than full-time employees can deter people from requesting part-time hours. Research shows that part-time employees are equally as engaged, but are often less stressed than their full-time colleagues.
- **consistency** Managers might worry about "everyone" wanting flexibility. However, the benefits of workplace flexibility outweigh the costs, as commitment and staff retention can be increased amongst staff generally, but not everyone will require flexibility. Flexibility policies should be applied consistently, particularly within work groups, and promoted to all employees.
- **every employee is different** Individual needs, preferences, and circumstances will reflect the type of flexibility people need. 'Flexibility fit' is a powerful positive predictor of employee engagement. Provide a range of flexibility options, such as *schedule flexibility* – part-time work, flexible work hours, alternative leave arrangements or part year employment; *location flexibility* - working from home or remotely; *flexible job design* - phased retirement, job sharing.
- **promotion of flexible work options** Just knowing that flexible work options are available has potential positive outcomes for all employees such as lower depression, less work/life conflict and lower turnover intention, even if they don't use it. Increasing employee understanding of policies and available resources can positively impact job commitment in the organisation.

case study

Regents Garden is an aged care facility that operates three residences in Western Australia. Their facilities accommodate for independent living through to full high-care. In a recent Voice Survey, staff rated Flexibility as a strength of Regents Garden, scoring in the top quartile across all industries, a rare feat for an organisation in an industry that often struggles with inflexible shift work.

Executive Director Ann McAdam, says the culture at Regents Garden is the key to their flexible workplace success. There is no formal flexible workplace policy, but their culture has grown organically as a response to individual and business needs. "We're not very formal people. When it comes to things like OH&S, we have to be formal. But with flexibility, we probably don't do anything that is greatly different to others, as far as procedural things go." Ann explained that Regents Garden's aim of encouraging residents to be comfortable, happy and live life to the full can only be facilitated by a workplace culture that encourages employees to do the same.

Regents Garden tries to leverage its strengths to meet employee needs where possible. They have 24 hour care, and therefore options for people to work outside of traditional business hours. The majority of staff are hired on a permanent part-time basis and rosters are modified regularly. It is common for supervisors to make an effort to accommodate people's requests for changes to their work hours if possible, even though some types of workplace flexibility, such as working from home, are not an option. They also take advantage of their work environment to accommodate parents who have conflicts between child care and work rosters - employees occasionally bring their children to work where they talk with residents, watch TV or even teach residents how to use a computer.

Regents Garden recognises and accepts that each employee is a whole person, with their own circumstances and responsibilities. They need employees who are loyal and genuinely care for residents in order to achieve success. "Our management values fairness. We try to be approachable from the CEO down. If the situation arises, we can be tough, but above all, we are fair."

useful resources

- www.workandfamily.nsw.gov.au (The NSW Office of Industrial Relations - Work and Family)
- www.workplaceflexibility.com.au (Aequus Partners)
- www.ways2work.business.vic.gov.au (Victorian Action Agenda for Work Family Balance)
- Johnson, A. A., Shannon, L. L. and Richman, A. L. (2008). **Challenging common myths about workplace flexibility: Research notes from the multi-organization database.** Community, Work & Family. 1469-3615, Volume 11, Pages 231 – 242.
- Hill, J., Grzywacz, J. G., Allen, S., Blanchard, V. L., Matz-Costa, C., Shulkin, S. and Pitt-Catsoupes, M. (2008). **Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility.** Community, Work & Family. Volume 11, Issue 2, pages 149 – 163.
- Eaton, S. (2003). **If You Can Use Them: Flexibility Policies, Organizational Commitment, and Perceived Performance.** Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society. Volume 42, Issue 2, pages 145 – 167.