

Introduction

This is an evaluation of the Maxiflex pilot program, an alternative work schedule, covering nine staffs in the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) during fiscal year 2000-2001.

Maxiflex is defined as a flexible work schedule that contains core hours on **fewer** than ten workdays in the biweekly pay period and in which a full time employee has a basic work requirement of 80 hours in the biweekly pay period. Also, an employee may vary the number of hours worked on a given workday or the number of hours each week within the limits established for the organization.

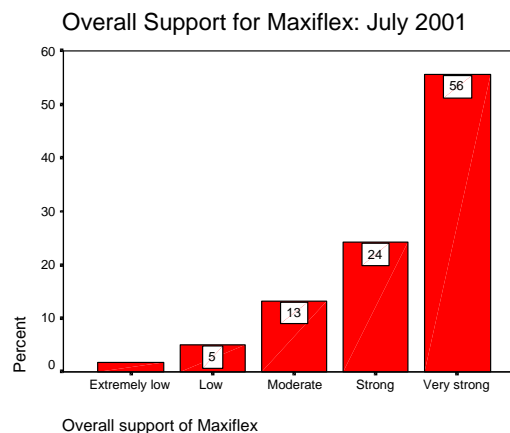
Purpose

This evaluation describes the features used in the pilot and assesses possible impacts on employees and clients. The evaluation questions addressed how Maxiflex affected employee work and morale and customer service, what issues have arisen around specific features of the program and how these should be addressed in expanding the program to the other staffs. The methods for the evaluation included interviews, electronic surveys, literature review, review of use in other agencies, and study of time and attendance reports of pilot participants.

Strong Support

There is strong support for Maxiflex from all levels of staff. It is clear from the participation rates in Maxiflex and the response to survey questions on support for Maxiflex that most supervisors and employees are highly enthusiastic about Maxiflex.

The graph below illustrates the support (93%) for Maxiflex from the July 2001 electronic survey.



Responses were similar for all job categories and pilot locations unless noted.

The major strengths of Maxiflex from the literature review, survey and pilot experience include the following:

- Balanced work and personal time,
- Improved employee morale,
- Improved productivity,
- Improved job satisfaction,
- Greater communication and cooperation among staff,
- Reduced use of leave,
- Reduced absenteeism and unscheduled absences,
- Improved employee retention and recruitment,
- Reduced commuting time,
- Reduced stress.

Overall, employees feel that the flexibility offered has resulted in improvements in both the work environment and their personal lives.

Background

Responding to requests from staff and issues in employee turnover, the FSIS Human Resources Division (HRD) identified the need for a more flexible work schedule to balance changing workplace and family needs. To meet these needs, HRD began trial use of the Maxiflex program. (See Appendix A for the origins of flexible work schedules). Because of increased interest in flexibility in work scheduling, HRD made the pilot available to eight other programs: the District Offices in Alameda and Chicago, the Civil Rights Division, the Executive Management Staff, the Financial Management Division, the Food Safety Education Staff, the Workforce Transition Management Staff and the Office of Policy, Program Development and Evaluation. Each organization selected a representative or formed a task force to determine the specific features and develop guidelines for their Maxiflex plan within FSIS guidelines. By February 2001, all eight staffs completed Maxiflex training and began the six-month pilot.

Methodology

This evaluation used several methods for data collection including review of pilot plans and features, review of literature and use of Maxiflex by other agencies, interviews with supervisors, electronic surveys of employees early and later in the pilot period, and study of time and attendance (T&A) reports by employees during the pilot. The initial March 2001 survey asked respondents to anticipate how Maxiflex would affect them personally and aspects of their work. In the follow-up July 2001 survey, respondents rated its actual influence on them and their office. The

response to the initial electronic survey was 72% (353); the rate for the follow-up survey in July was 65% (313 responses).

Both electronic surveys had strong responses from supervisory and nonsupervisory personnel. Individual items were analyzed for significant differences in response by job category, pilot and participation in Maxiflex. Unless noted, these subgroup responses were similar to the overall response.

The survey data were supplemented with over 20 interviews with supervisors to provide a comparison of supervisor and employee views early in the pilot process.

On both surveys over one-third of the respondents provided additional comments. On the initial survey about half the comments were negative and half were positive, with the most frequent comments on paperwork, flexibility of features, concern with features and management support. On the follow-up survey, 60% of the open-ended comments were positive, with the most common comments on the flexibility of features, supervision, morale and paperwork.

An interim report appeared in the Thursday Report summarizing the findings of the March survey and supervisor interviews.

Recommendations/Findings

Make Maxiflex available to all FSIS staff where possible.

- A majority of the respondents (67%) felt Maxiflex should be applicable to all of FSIS.

- A typical comment: “Maxiflex is a great tool for providing flexibility in setting your own time to complete your work. It gives the employees more control over their own schedule; however, it does involve more coordination to ensure proper coverage within the district office. I do recommend implementation within all of the agency.”
- Maxiflex was available to all pilot staff and a majority supported it. The exceptions to this trend were Alameda and the Civil Rights Division where fewer staff elected to participate and overall support tended to be lower. The number of overall pilot participants increased from 64% to 75% from March to July, with only two respondents to the July survey reporting that they had tried Maxiflex and then dropped it.
- Survey responses and the literature both emphasized the role of Maxiflex in balancing family and work roles. As an example: “I like being able to attend appointments, meetings, programs and field trips for my son’s class and not have to take annual leave, but instead make up the time and work over the rest of the pay period.”
- The most common reasons for selecting Maxiflex were meeting personal needs, flexibility, and the ability to earn credit hours. The most common reasons for not choosing were satisfaction with current schedule, and not wanting to sign in and out and complete additional forms.
- The most popular features anticipated and used by participants were flexible hours, earning credit hours, and recording leave in fractional increments. A typical comment was “I LOVE being able to take leave, especially sick leave, in quarter hour increments. It enables me to make more efficient use of my accumulated leave for doctor's appointments during the work day.”
- Most Maxiflex participants kept the same or a similar schedule with gliding features. Two-thirds of the participants felt that they were using all the flexibility it allows.
- Most survey respondents supported the variations in features available in the pilots although there were comments about specific features not being available, resulting in declining morale. As an example, “I was very much looking forward to using the Maxiflex program to work ten hour days. Since this is not allowable in our office, the Maxiflex Program has had a negative impact on the staff, since we received training and then were not able to use the full extent of the Maxiflex Program. It is demoralizing.”

Provide individual staffs with the flexibility to adapt the features to their program needs within FSIS broad guidelines.

- There was some variation in features among the pilots – especially in the core hours and flexible time bands. (See Appendix B). In most cases, supervisors were supportive of the variations and felt these variations met specific program needs. In some cases they placed additional limits on features within their own offices.
- If adopted agency wide, these issues of balancing office needs with employee expectations must be addressed. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

maintains a Maxiflex program with broad outlines for flexible bands and core hours that may be used as a model. Individual managers determine the basic work requirements for their section and can adapt these guidelines to meet service and program demands. Other features such as credit hours and travel are limited by legislation.

Record and transmit employee schedule and time and attendance sheets electronically.

- The initial supervisor interviews and employee survey found that T&A reporting and burdensome paperwork were the biggest concerns – extra time spent by staff and responsibility for their accuracy. Suggestions included automation using electronic and consolidated forms. HRD developed their own modified forms to simplify and automate record keeping. In addition, the Automated Information Systems Division is participating in a pilot of automated timekeeping technology using a scanning system that replaces manual sign-in and sign-out sheets and electronically generates T&A reports. Under this system, final verification and submission of the T&A's each pay period are streamlined for the timekeeper and supervisor. Eventually, it will be possible to submit T&A's to the Financial Processing Center electronically instead of by mail. If successful, it is likely that the technology from this pilot will be made available to additional offices.

Encourage supervisors and employees to address concerns about accountability and supervision with communication via

- ◆ *regular periodic meetings,*
- ◆ *review of work load and products,*
- ◆ *use of Outlook calendar or other posted schedules for information on staff availability.*

- Effective communication remains key to successful Maxiflex implementation. There were concerns about office coverage and communication among staff. To address these concerns supervisors asked staff to work together in planning their schedules to ensure adequate office and phone coverage using such techniques as coordinating the office and individual calendars, E-mail, staff discussions about schedules, and guidelines for informing supervisors of schedule changes.
- All supervisors were pleased that Maxiflex offered the opportunity to reward employees for extra work done. Many also commented on the increased trust Maxiflex placed on staff and its empowering effect. A typical comment: "Maxiflex encourages trust between the supervisor and the employees. I had expected the opposite."
- Employee comments on the survey stressed the importance of supervisor and management support in ensuring the success of Maxiflex. In several of the pilots the lack of support by the manager has discouraged staff from enrolling in Maxiflex or using some of its features. Respondents perceived their supervisor's support for Maxiflex to be lower than the overall response.

- As an example: “Maxiflex still comes down to your supervisor’s take on it. Basically, supervisors who use it will allow you to use all the benefits of it. Supervisors who do not use it can make Maxiflex scheduling challenging. There needs to be some fairness to it. Why should those on Maxiflex be penalized because their supervisor chooses to car pool?”
- The following comment provides a supervisor’s take on the issues: “As a supervisor, I believe that Maxiflex has exacerbated an existing problem of frequent unscheduled absences rather than helping alleviate it. I don't think this means Maxiflex is a bad thing. It is a reflection on the individuals themselves and offers less incentive for them to take coming to work seriously on any given day since they can make up the time. I am prepared to take some of these people off the schedule and, in fact, have just issued a memo to that effect to my entire staff.”
- From another respondent: “The issues about which managers complain are problems that are separate from Maxiflex and probably have been going on for quite some time. Maxiflex forces supervisors to do what they are paid to do, SUPERVISE. If the managers don’t want to deal with performance issues, then they should step down from their positions. It is not fair to the majority of employees who accept their responsibilities head-on and follow the Maxiflex guidelines.”
- To summarize, “Maxiflex should be instituted agency-wide. If there are any problems with the implementation, those

problems should be addressed but Maxiflex should not be ended due to poor supervision or accountability.”

Permit travel and regular work on Sunday. This would require legislative change.

- Respondents to the survey suggested changes in features such as core hours, eight holiday hours, weekend, and travel options.

Coordinate Maxiflex with Flexiplace.

- Respondents to the survey provided comments on the need to combine Maxiflex features with Flexiplace provisions. Maxiflex scheduling provisions should mesh with accommodations for Flexiplace, and coordinated as in the FDA program which permits those participating in Flexiplace to participate the Maxiflex schedule and earn credit time. (See Reference 11).

Provide additional training or published Q & A on time keeping, credit hours, recording fractional leave increments and travel.

- Principal concerns were increased paperwork, office coverage and issues of supervision.

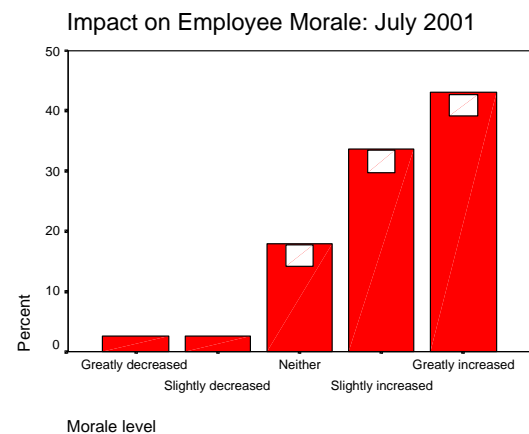
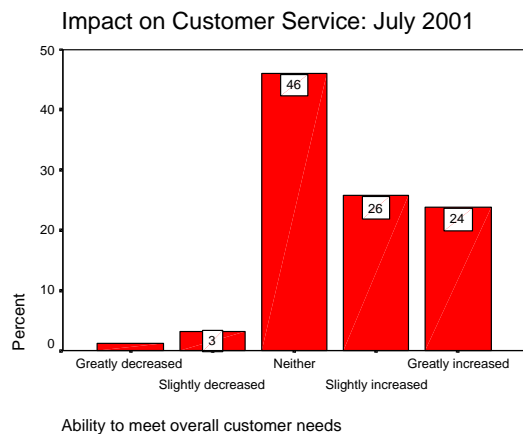
Impact of Maxiflex

It was not possible to assess the actual impact on work quality; however, respondents to the survey were asked to provide their own ratings of its impacts.

- Most respondents (94%) to the initial survey felt that customer service would not be adversely affected and that staff

accessibility and the ability to schedule meetings would not change although several expressed concerns about this.

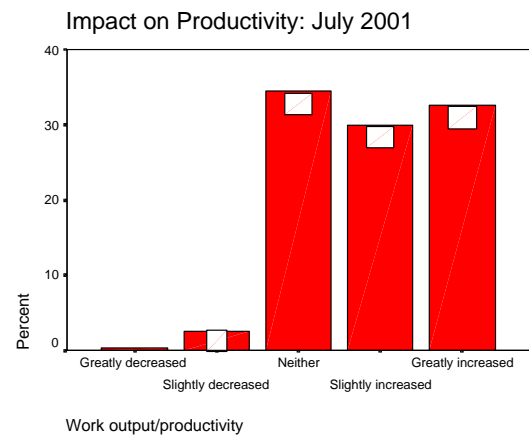
Seventy-seven percent of the respondents reported an increase in morale.



- Follow-up findings confirmed this trend with 50% actually seeing an increase in the ability to meet overall customer needs.

- In addition two-thirds of the respondents said that job satisfaction increased.

Staffs were asked a number of more specific questions about customer service on the follow-up survey such as the ability to meet needs of the general public, other agencies, outside groups and needs within the agency. The responses to these specific concerns were similar to the overall with a larger response of no change for the public, outside groups and other agencies.



- Most respondents (90%) said staff accessibility and the ability to schedule meetings with staff had not decreased.
- Supervisors, employees and the literature support the finding that employee morale improves with Maxiflex and that it is an attractive perk to attract new employees and retain experienced ones. From the literature: “When people have more control over their time they’re happier and more productive.” (See Reference 4).

- Likewise, 63% of respondents reported that productivity had increased.
- Forty-nine percent of the respondents said that their use of leave had decreased during the pilot. Of those who said they used less leave, they used credit hours instead of annual leave and were able to schedule personal appointments during non-work hours. Other options included use of glide times and longer lunch for errands.

Conclusion

A majority of survey respondents feel Maxiflex should be extended to all of FSIS. Like FDA, individual programs can adapt the broad outlines of the program to meet individual needs.

The concerns identified in the pilot with increased paperwork, office coverage, supervision and support can be addressed with increased communication between supervisors and employees, automation of the time and attendance process and other recommendations.

**For further information contact
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APPENDIX A**Origins of Flexible Work Schedules**

The concept of flexible work schedules is not new, nor is it untested. Flexible work schedules were first introduced in Germany in 1967 as a means of relieving commuting problems. Shortly thereafter, employers in Switzerland began to offer flexible schedules to attract women with family responsibilities into the labor force. The Hewlett-Packard Company was the first company to introduce flextime in the United States in 1972. Since then, the number of private-sector workers taking advantage of flexible schedules or some form of compressed workweek in the United States has grown relatively slowly because of the rigid overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Primarily in response to the heavy rush hour traffic congestion around Washington, D.C., Congress enacted in 1978 the Federal Employees Flexible and Compressed Work Schedules Act as a trial program. For the first time, federal workers were able to arrange alternative work schedules to meet their families' needs and to reduce commuting time. The "trial" was so successful—in that agencies saw increases in productivity and decreases in tardiness and absenteeism that Congress reauthorized the program in 1982 and made it permanent in 1985.

APPENDIX B

Table of Pilot Feature Variations

<i>Feature</i>	Alameda	Chicago	Civil Rights Division	Executive Management Staff	Financial Management Division	Food Safety Education Staff	Human Resources Division¹	Office of Policy, Program Development and Evaluation
<i>Core Hours²</i>	Tues-Thurs: 8-11 1-3	Mon-Wed: 9-11 2-3	Mon-Fri: 9-3	Tues and Thurs: 10-3	Tues-Thurs: 9-11 1-3:30	Thurs: 8:30-10	Tues and Thurs: 9-11 1-3	Wed: 10-11
<i>Flexible Bands³</i>								
Monday	5-6	6-9 11-1 3-6	6-9 3-6	6-6	6-6	all	6-6	5-11
Tuesday	5-8 3-6	6-9 11-1 3-6	6-9 3-6	6-10 3-6	6-9 11-1 3:30-6	all	6-9 3:30-6	5-11
Wednesday	5-6	6-9 11-1 3-6	6-9 3-6	6-6	6-6	all	6-6	5-10 11-11
Thursday	5-8 3-6	6-6	6-9 3-6	6-10 3-6	6-9 11-1 3:30-6	10 am - 8:30 am	6-9 3:30-6	5-11
Friday	5-6	6-6	6-9 3-6	6-6	6-6	all	6-6	5-11
Saturday	5-6	none	none	none	none	all	6-6	5-11
<i>Glide Hours/Day⁴</i>	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	2

¹ The Workforce Transition Management Staff used the same schedule as the Human Resources Division.

² Core Hours: Time during the workday, workweek, or pay period when an employee is required to be present for work or in an approved leave status.

³ Flexible Time Bands/Flexible Hours: Time when an employee covered by a flexible work schedule may schedule regular (noncredit) work hours in addition to core hours.

⁴ Glide: Flexibility in scheduled arrival and departure time without prior approval.

Appendix B, Continued

Graph of General Range of Flexible Bands

