

Workplace Redesign

Flexibility, customization can help employers meet their bottom line

Contributed by Jacquelyn Flowers

Would you be shocked to hear that for every dollar you spend creating a more flexible and accommodating work environment, you'd get \$3.60 back? The proof is there, and a report by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy confirms it.

"The traditional job does not necessarily fit with everyone's work life, with everyone's skills and capabilities, and with everyone's need for flexibility in the workplace," said Lisa Cuozzo, director of program operations for TransCen, Inc., where she is also a project manager for the Maryland Customized Employment Partnership.

Flexibility is "a powerful strategic tool for expanding recruitment pools, both geographically and to include people who face barriers into the workplace," said Linda Roundtree, president of Roundtree Consulting LLC, a firm specializing in the design and implementation of work-life initiatives.

Roundtree, Cuozzo, and Michael Williams of the Department of Labor discussed the successes and challenges of workplace redesign at a recent Webinar sponsored by BPW Foundation and the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau.

Redefining flexibility

Many organizations have experimented with flex time and telecommuting, but flexibility is about more than relaxing the 9 to 5 workday or allowing employees to work from home.

"I'd like to encourage you to think of a much broader range of flexibility that affects all aspects of organizing when, where, and how work gets done,"

Roundtree said, "and that's also an option for every person no matter what job they hold in the organization."

Only 10% of people who are eligible to telework in a given month actually do, according to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

Along with flexible hours, Roundtree discussed several ways that organizations have used flexibility to successfully redesign how they get work done:

Amount of hours worked, such as job sharing or "flex year" options. Dow Corning adjusted their compressed work weeks for working parents who wanted their schedules to better coordinate with their children's school and vacation schedules.

Place of work, including working from home, from a satellite or community location, or from a hotel. "Other employees might be 'road warriors' who just come into the workplace and make a reservation for a workspace for the day," said Roundtree. Jet Blue has used virtual reservation offices in employees' homes, and McKesson Health Solutions realized a savings of \$1 million directly related to their work-at-home program for 600 registered nurses who provide telephonic disease management services.

Management of time, such as teleconference planning, or carving out quiet time or meeting-free time.

Organization of career, which enables the employee to adapt flexibility differently throughout their career. At consulting firm Accenture, employees self-fund sabbaticals and then step off their career paths at their discretion. CVS Pharmacy recruits



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older workers who split their time between homes they have in the north and the south, enabling them to work from different locations at different times of the year. And Ernst & Young’s program supporting employees who have children with special needs includes a parents’ network, seminars and an online message board, and comprehensive health care that covers special therapies.

“Workplace flexibility is also most effective when it involves the team in finding the new ways to get the job done,” said Roundtree. “Flexibility then moves beyond being an under-the-radar accommodation for a few highly regarded employees, and it becomes a team-directed work redesign effort.”

Job customization

Thirty percent of people entering the workforce today will become disabled, according to the Council for Disability Awareness. A disability can happen to anyone, said Lisa Cuzzo, and customization is an important tool in mitigating the impact of such life changing events on both the employer and the employee.

“Customized employment is a flexible blend of strategy, services, and support, which is designed to increase employment options not only for job seekers with disabilities, but job seekers with complex needs,” said Cuzzo. “What we’ve learned is that by customizing employment situations and job descriptions for people with complex needs,” she added, “retention rates and the bottom line greatly improve - a little creativity goes a long way.”

33.2 million – the total number of people in the United States of working age with disabilities, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Cuzzo discussed several types of customization, including job carving and task reassignment. “Job carving is where an existing job description may be modified and contain one or more but not all of the tasks from an original job description,” said Cuzzo. “So think about your job and how many times you say, ‘Oh, if I just had an assistant for a half of an hour, this could get done, and then I could really do the work that I’m getting paid to do.’”

Task reassignment is another form of customization that typically takes the form of new job creation. Cuzzo

recalled a task reassignment initiative at the Veteran’s Administration (VA) in Washington, D.C., where paralegals were spending a large portion of their day going to retrieve legal files from a central location. The VA created a new position to focus solely on preparation of these files so that paralegals could focus on other important tasks.

“This is a fabulous way to incorporate a cadre of people that may not have the technical skills to do a great piece of the job, but truly have the skills to do maybe a supportive piece of the job that then allows other people within the organization to get more of their work done more efficiently,” said Cuzzo.

The range of options for organizations looking to redesign their workplace for better efficiency and productivity is unlimited, said Michael Williams. “You know the old saying there is more than one way to skin a cat, and with workplace flexibility there are plenty of ways to get the job done,” Williams added.

Online tools and resources

www.dol.gov/odepl/

U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy’s web site covers a full range of topics, including customization, with information for workers, employers, researchers, service providers and partners and veterans.

www.gilgordon.com

Gil Gordon Associates created this web site to serve as a resource for information about telecommuting, telework, virtual offices and related topics.

www.we-inc.org

Visit the Women Entrepreneurs, Inc. web site to download a copy of the Flex Options Program guide. Flex Options is a national workplace flexibility project developed by the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau.

Share your own resource

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