Creating 6 Flex-Work Policies for Employees with Different Needs

By Liz Kislik
November 3, 2021

Editor's Note: SHRM has partnered with Harvard Business Review (https://hbr.org/) to bring you relevant articles on key HR topics and strategies.

As those groups that were able to work remotely during the pandemic navigate their returns to the workplace, one thing is clear and consistent: Whatever any organization is doing, you can be sure that at least a handful of people want or need something else.

Some leaders are requiring everyone to return to office. Others are finding savings in real estate reductions and efficiencies in keeping people out of the office. Some employees can’t wait to go back while others want the continuing flexibility of working from home.

It’s tough to satisfy everyone. These six practical, real-world approaches will help you treat your people as the individuals they are without creating a chaotic mess of confusing, arbitrary exceptions.

Start One-on-One to Understand Real Employee Needs.

We might assume (a full 18 months into the pandemic experience) that we’re familiar with what our team members want and how they function best. But people change their minds, or want different things as their circumstances change. So before structuring schedules or work formats, take steps to learn about employees’ current situations in terms of physical work locations and scheduling and gauge their satisfaction with work assignments and career trajectory. Questions to ask include:

- How well has your team been working together?
- Do you have access to the decision-makers you need?
- How well have you been able to arrange cross-functional collaborations?
- Are there tools, information or other kinds of support that would help you perform better?
- How comfortable do you feel about your current work situation?

You won’t be able to satisfy every preference, but when employees trust that you have their best interests in mind, the likelihood of improved retention, productivity and innovation increases.

Avoid Overemphasizing Self-Care in Your Messaging.

It’s great to encourage people to take care of themselves: to work out, sleep and meditate, get massages and strengthen their boundaries between work and personal time. But if you put too much focus on their personal responsibility for feeling better and not enough on structural reforms to provide more realistic assignments, support and development, it will look like you’re externalizing the negative impact of work problems into your employees’ lives. That comes across as not only unfair, but counterproductive. First, make a point of helping employees with whatever challenges they’re facing, then only emphasize what they can do for themselves after you’ve already demonstrated some investment in their well-being.
Ensure Alignment with Your Own Employer Branding.

If you have a history and culture that treats employees as crucial stakeholders, they’ll expect you to give significant consideration to their preferences and needs. If you’ve always talked about “being like a family,” now’s the time to make that promise real and take care of all your “family members” by accommodating individual needs for schedule adjustments and even modifications to responsibilities when people are under particular duress. If you’ve emphasized that your employees are your most important asset, be sure that you’ve provided resources and communicated about how people can use them to ensure theirs and their families’ well-being. This might include providing access to or references or financial support for childcare, eldercare or mental health services during what continues to be a difficult period.

Learn What Your People Have Missed About Being Together.

Facilitator and conflict resolution strategist Priya Parker suggests asking what employees missed most about their colleagues and which reasons to be together they hungered for during the pandemic. Focus on these as the core of a regrouping strategy to help secure commitments to be physically present and to deliver significant value, helping to reassure employees that it’s worth it to be on-premises. Similarly, recognize which former physical gatherings employees were relieved not to have to attend — for example, the most unproductive or unpleasant standing meetings — and do not reconvene them. Instead, rely on the new solutions you found while people were required to work from home.

Be Willing to Suspend Your Pre-Pandemic Rules and Precedents.

Before the pandemic, many organizations ensured that individual accommodations for personal needs were few and typically invoked only for specific kinds of short-term or drastic crises that were clearly understood and fairly standardized: a death in the family, a car accident, etc. Accommodating today’s range of employee needs, including mental health days, caring for ailing family members or children who can’t attend school or even self-care, requires being open to hearing about and addressing more varied situations, often of a kind that neither human resources nor company leadership have dealt with before.

Try this test question when an employee asks for a flexible arrangement: Would you have permitted the arrangement pre-pandemic if it was for a transitional period while they were dealing with a personal health or family crisis? If you would have accommodated “whatever they needed” for six weeks or more, then test the way they want to work for those same six weeks. Make clear that if problems occur during the test period, some adjustment will be necessary, and also invite the employee to inform you promptly — and without repercussions — if the experiment isn’t working out the way they expected.

Don’t Mistake Physical Presence for Loyalty.

Many leaders once believed that employees speaking openly about wanting to protect or support themselves or their families was a sign that they might not be fully committed to their leaders, teams, organizations or missions. Employees’ extraordinary dedication during the pandemic should have put that belief to rest. Today, leaders who are unwilling to accept employees’ commitments to the rest of their lives...
will have a significantly harder time holding on to staff. Whether they work on-premises or remotely, employees who feel supported in doing what's right for their own lives are likely to feel even more strongly about their commitment to their organization, rather than suffering from ongoing ambivalence, fear or resentment — all of which are likely to have a negative impact on their work relationships and output.

This tailored approach will be challenging and time-consuming in the beginning, but it's significantly less costly than watching your investment in critical staff walk out the door or not being able to attract the specific talent you need. In the long-term, most employees will observe how well the organization adapts to theirs and their colleagues' needs and will end up gravitating to the most popular and effective programs and solutions. Eventually, true exceptions will come up only rarely.

Liz Kislik helps organizations from the Fortune 500 to national nonprofits and family-run businesses solve their thorniest problems. She has taught at NYU and Hofstra University, and recently spoke at TEDxBaylorSchool (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I-AOBzG9KU). You can receive her free guide, How to Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts in the Workplace (http://lizkislik.com/resolve-conflict/), on her website.

This article is reprinted from Harvard Business Review with permission. ©2021. All rights reserved.