



BOSTON COLLEGE
Center for Work & Family
CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT



Career/Life Alliance Services, Inc.



NATIONAL WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, U.S. organizations have rolled out programs and policies designed to provide flexible work arrangements (FWAs) for their employees. These initiatives are often launched with much fanfare and optimism. And indeed, many organizations have benefited from their efforts—realizing improved recruitment and retention, employee engagement, and employee job satisfaction.

But many more are looking for what's next. Often lacking senior leader and/or middle manager support, traditional approaches fall short of delivering the culture change necessary to really improve the lives of employees and business results.

That's because policies alone cannot create a successful workplace flexibility initiative, as demonstrated through numerous studies on workplace flexibility. Academic and corporate research has shown that while workplace flexibility programs are increasingly available, they're not always widely used.

Reasons for low utilization vary from poor communication of flex programs, to lack of support from senior leaders and middle managers, fear of career penalty, and lack of manager skills training to effectively lead flexible teams. (World at Work 2013)

We launched the National Workplace Flexibility Study to test a new approach to building management support and developing the skills managers need to effectively navigate the challenges presented by flexible and distributed teams.

We hypothesized that by providing training, skills development and the introduction of a new strategic planning tool to middle managers, we could help them overcome their resistance to workplace flexibility, improve the functioning and performance of their teams, and begin to change the culture of their organization.

This report reveals the results of these efforts undertaken in three very different sponsor organizations. It provides a framework that organizations can use to improve manager support for workplace flexibility, team alignment, and organizational culture.

“Regardless of how well-designed a company’s approach to workplace flexibility is, if managers aren’t on board and don’t have the skills and attitudes to manage effectively, it will flounder. It’s as simple as that. This study is proof positive that it is possible to properly equip managers, even those who might be resistant, to succeed in leading a flexible team.”

DELTA EMERSON, CHIEF OF STAFF AT RYAN LLC

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY DOES NOT HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON BUSINESS

98% of managers who participated in training and developed a Flex Team Blueprint identified no negative impact of workplace flexibility on their business. In fact, many managers reported improved team communication, team interaction, and even productivity and customer service as a result of participation in the study.

2. ENGAGING MANAGERS IS CRITICAL TO THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

Issuing a policy is only the beginning. Managers need to be trained on how to evaluate requests when given a planning tool to manage the dynamics of a flexible team, and encouraged to share best practices with peers. By following this process, managers become more comfortable with flex as a business strategy. It is now “on the table” for managers and teams who participated in the study rather than being negotiated “under the table.”

3. DEVELOPING A FLEX TEAM BLUEPRINT PROMPTS IMPORTANT DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN MANAGERS AND THEIR TEAMS

After working together as a team to plan how they would communicate, stay connected, ensure performance and embrace technology while working flexibly, managers reported improvements in team functioning and performance. They also reported feeling more comfortable about team members working flexibly and felt more capable of effectively managing the flexible nature of their team.

4. EMPLOYEES BENEFIT FROM MANAGER TRAINING AND SUPPORT, TOO

Even though employees did not directly participate in training and support activities, their perceptions about flexibility and manager/organizational support for worklife improved. This may be the result of more open discussion of flex in the process of building a blueprint, and/or because of shifts in manager attitudes.

5. NOT ONLY DID THE PROCESS IMPROVE MANAGERS' FEELINGS ABOUT WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY, IT LED TO PERCEIVED IMPROVEMENTS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Both employees and managers reported improvements, not only regarding workplace flexibility related concerns, but on other indicators of organizational culture as well, like face time, 24/7 availability, time pressure, expectation of work outside of office hours, and priority placed on work.

The process of providing training, a planning tool and ongoing manager support can serve as a model for any organization interested in using workplace flexibility as a catalyst for broader organizational culture change and team alignment.

APPROACH

The goal of the study was to measure the impact of manager training, skills development and the introduction of a new strategic planning tool on manager and employees attitudes about workplace flexibility. Specifically, we wanted to answer the following questions:

1. Would managers rethink their attitudes toward workplace flexibility if a) flex was repositioned as a business strategy, and b) they were given a tool to discuss their concerns and expectations openly with their team and reach agreement on a plan forward?
2. Could managers overcome their concerns about the negative impact of flex on their teams and on their own workload if they could hear from their peers about what was working and not working, and openly explore their concerns in a confidential environment?
3. If managers were trained on how to effectively manage flexible teams, would it “trickle down” to positively impact employee perceptions of manager/organizational support for flex?
4. Would the study activities lead to improved performance of these teams?
5. Would managers invest the time in completing a blueprint, even if they didn’t think there were issues to be addressed or were concerned about the time investment?

SPONSOR ORGANIZATIONS

Three organizations sponsored the study: Ryan LLC, MedImmune, and Minnesota Department of Transportation. Each organization selected up to three departments to participate in the study, ranging from human resources to finance to land management and more.

Participating organizations had varying levels of experience with workplace flexibility. One of the organizations had been recognized as an award-winning flexible workplace, having implemented their approach several years prior to the study. Another organization launched their flex program right before the study, and the third had a flex policy in place for a number of years before their participation in the study. While many of their employees were already working flexibly, this organization hadn’t actively communicated about their flex options for many years.

A total of 181 managers from the US (98%) and Canada (2%) were involved in the study and 414 of their direct reports participated in the survey process. Many more employees were involved in the blueprint development process with their managers.



Organization: **Ryan LLC**
Founded: **1991**
Number of Employees: **1600**
Headquarters: **Dallas, Texas**
Ownership: **Privately Held**
Industry: **Global Tax Services Firm**
Organizational Presence: **Global**
Website: **www.ryan.com**



Organization: **MedImmune**
Founded: **1988**
Number of Employees: **2500**
Headquarters: **Gaithersburg, Maryland**
Ownership: **Subsidiary of AstraZeneca Publicly Held**
Industry: **Pharmaceutical**
Organizational Presence: **Global**
Website: **www.medimmune.com**



Organization: **Minnesota Department of Transportation**
Founded: **1898**
Number of Employees: **4838**
Headquarters: **St. Paul, MN**
Industry: **State and Local Government**
Organizational Presence: **State of MN**
Website: **www.dot.state.mn.us**

METHODOLOGY

The study period lasted about three months for each team that was studied, as measured from the completion of the pre-survey to the launch of the post-survey. The study was divided into six phases.

Phase 1: Pre-Survey & Focus Groups

The pre-survey measured manager and employee attitudes about workplace flexibility to establish a baseline. Focus groups with managers enabled researchers to delve more deeply into key issues raised in the survey.

Phase 2: Manager Training

In half-day workshops, managers were trained on skills and best practices for leading flexible, virtual and dispersed teams and were introduced to a planning tool called a Flex Team Blueprint that they would be asked to complete post-training.

Phase 3: Flex Team Blueprint

Managers worked with their team to establish a plan for how they would work together while working flexibly. They had four weeks to complete it.

Phase 4: Support Activities

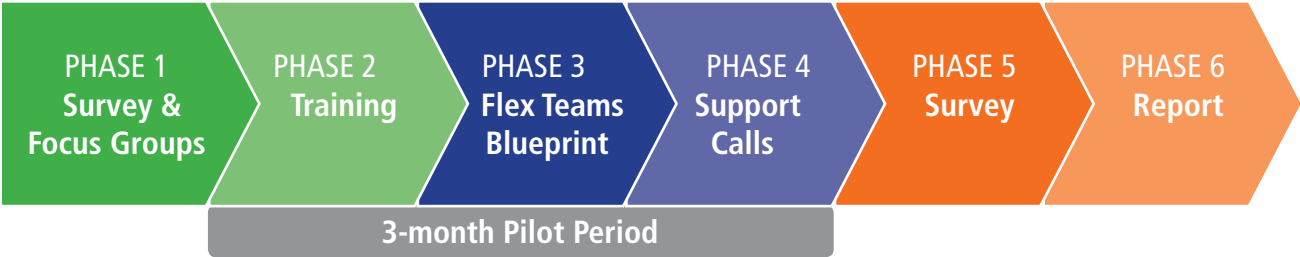
Researchers hosted web-conferences and conference calls after training to coach managers on completing their blueprints, share best practices, and establish a community of support. Weekly emails were sent to training participants to reinforce key training topics.

Phase 5: Post-Survey

A second survey was launched about three months after the initial survey to measure changes in attitudes and experiences of both managers and employees.

Phase 6: Reports

Each sponsor received reports on their pre-survey and focus group results; on the results of the study for their organization; and their results compared to the aggregated results of all three sponsor companies.



Phase 1: PRE-SURVEY & FOCUS GROUPS

Managers and employees were surveyed in order to measure their current attitudes toward flexibility. This pre-survey was designed to gather baseline responses from both managers and employees related to the following topics:

- Employee experience with flexible work options
- Manager experience with flexible work options
- Employee concerns about workplace flexibility
- Manager concerns about workplace flexibility
- Use of flexible work options
- Organizational culture and support for flexible work
- Manager support
- Features and attitudes about the job (includes job satisfaction and commitment, job pressures, job withdrawal intentions)
- Demographic information (age, gender, marital status, family caregiver status, number of hours worked per week, tenure a organization)

A total of 595 responses, including 181 managers, were collected in the pre-survey across the three organizations.

To better understand concerns expressed in the survey, managers from across the pilot groups were invited to participate in a focus group. Of those surveyed, 93 managers participated in focus groups that were facilitated by the research team. Some focus groups were conducted in-person, while others were hosted via web conference. Informed consent was obtained from focus group participants. Focus group information and pre-survey data were analyzed for each company and used to ensure the subsequent training would address identified needs.

Phase 2: TRAINING

Supervisors, managers and directors were invited to attend a half-day workshop to learn best practices, improve their skills and be introduced to the Flex Team Blueprint tool. The workshop, Working as a Flex Team, was primarily delivered in-person, but also via web-conference to those working on dispersed teams. The format was interactive to balance the need for managers to openly discuss their concerns, experiences and best practices, with acquiring new skills. The following topics were covered in the workshop:

- 1. FLEX TEAM AGREEMENT** Managers were encouraged to document the values and behaviors they believed were critical to their team in order for everyone to feel confident that they were aligned around expectations and that work was getting done.
- 2. COMMUNICATION & TEAM-BUILDING TACTICS** Communication can easily break down on flexible and dispersed teams, so best practices were shared with managers who were encouraged to reinvest time and attention in team-building.
- 3. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES** In order to move away from face time expectations, managers were introduced to new tools to monitor and track performance, set goals and hold team members accountable.
- 4. CULTURE MAP** This exercise encouraged managers to consider team activities that were site-based and change them to be inclusive of team members working flexibly.

5. **TECHNOLOGY OPTIMIZATION** Managers were introduced to new ideas and best practices for utilizing their current technology. The emphasis was less on the practical aspects of how to host a web meeting, for example, but on creative ways to use technology to improve team functioning.
6. **SUCCESS MEASURES** Managers were asked to identify a team goal that would help them measure the “business” impact of the blueprint tool and the shift to more flexible ways of working.
7. **FLEX TEAM BLUEPRINT** Managers were introduced to this planning tool and given a template to use to complete it.

Phase 3: FLEX TEAM BLUEPRINT

Following the workshop, managers were asked to create a blueprint for their team. The goal was to encourage managers to open up a dialogue with team members on the areas covered in the training. Completing each section of the blueprint would engage everyone on their team to agree on a set of “group norms” that would govern how they worked together.

Managers were invited to complete their blueprint with options to match their leadership style. They could:

- A. Draft the blueprint first and then bring it to their team to get input before finalizing it, or
- B. Gather suggestions from team members first and then adjust it to meet their expectations before finalizing it.

Managers were asked to complete their blueprint within a month of the training. Once finalized, they were encouraged to regularly and actively refer to it—engaging the team to review and revise it regularly.

Phase 4: SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

After training was completed, researchers hosted a series of activities designed to coach managers on completing their blueprint and integrate training concepts into their daily management practices. Activities included:

- **FLEX TEAM BLUEPRINT CHECK-IN CALL (TWO WEEKS POST TRAINING):** The purpose of this call was to review their progress on the blueprint, answer questions, and discuss any concerns that had arisen since training.
- **WHERE ARE YOU ON THE FLEXIBLE MANAGER SCALE? (SIX WEEKS POST TRAINING):** This call was designed to help managers measure their own attitudes and behaviors regarding flexibility. They received a guide on flexible management practices and engaged in a discussion about how they were using their newly acquired management competencies.
- **BEST PRACTICE SHARING (TWELVE WEEKS POST TRAINING):** Managers were invited to share three or four best practices they’d implemented since training and their impact on the team.

Throughout the post-training period, managers received weekly reinforcement emails to remind them of key training topics. These were brief, encouraging emails that included a best practice tip and motivational statement.

Phase 5: POST-SURVEY

The post-survey was sent to all of the managers and employees who received the pre-survey. It included the same questions as the pre-survey, plus additional questions to enable researchers to gather feedback on study activities.

Additional question categories included:

- Feedback on manager training and support activities
- Impact of the Flex Team Blueprint
- Desire for future training and supports
- General feedback on participation in the study

A total of 408 responses were collected, including 121 managers, across the three organizations.

“By getting the team together to work on the blueprint, it opened lines of communication between members. It caused everyone to think about how we communicate and reminded us to stop every so often and plan a fun team activity out of the office to improve morale and working relationships.”

MANAGER

RESULTS

1. Managers who completed a blueprint experienced improvements in their team's performance and functioning

Managers reported that by developing a Flex Team Blueprint, they achieved the following results:

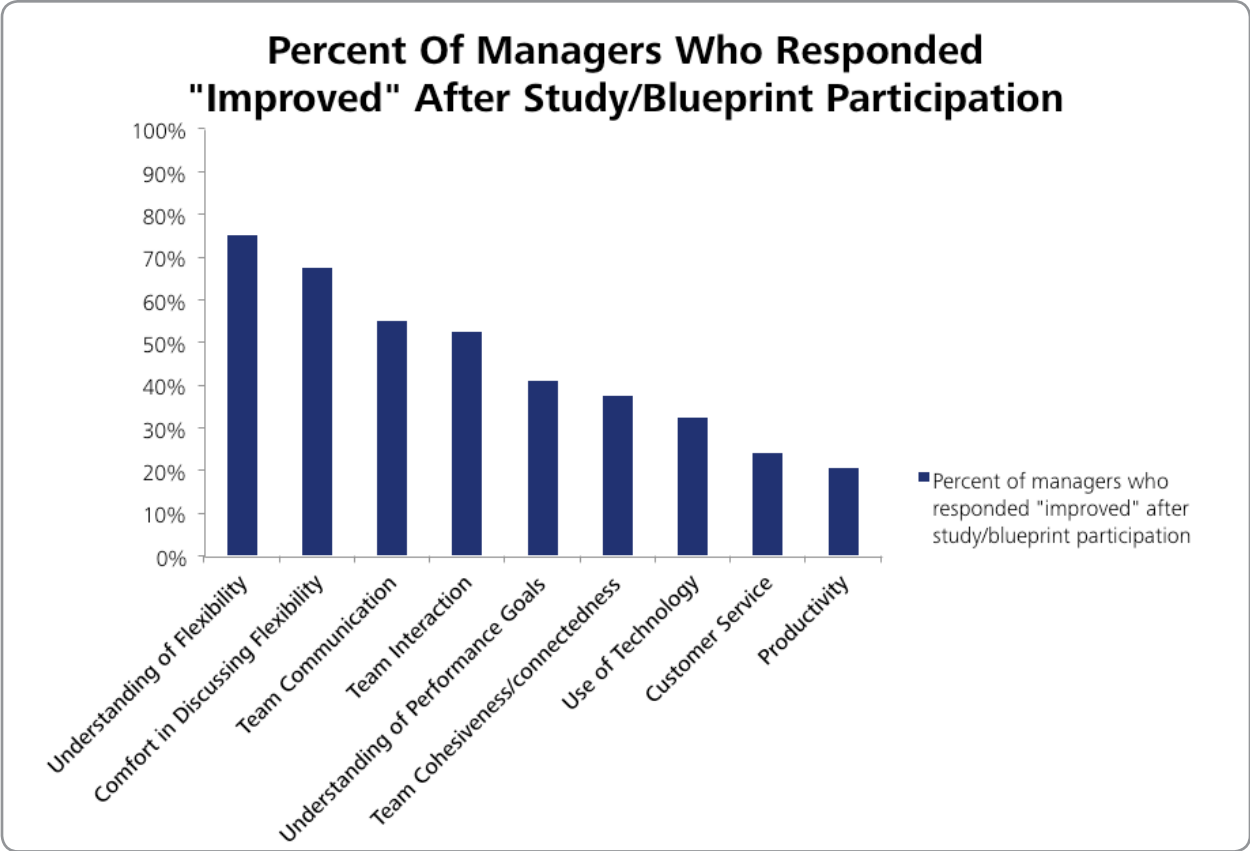
- Understanding of flex improved – 75%
- Comfort discussing flex improved – 68%
- Team interaction improved – 53%
- Team communication improved – 55%
- Understanding of performance goals improved – 41%
- Customer service improved – 24%
- Productivity improved – 20%

Participation rates varied considerably by organization, but were higher in organizations where clear expectations for completion of the flex team blueprint were set. Overall, 57% of managers completed a blueprint, but in organizations where completing a blueprint was considered “mandatory,” the completion rate jumped to 94%.

*Percentages represent the number of managers agreeing with those statements.

“Great tool to initiate discussion and achieve a focused commitment on the activity of flex. It has allowed it to be routine in the way that we work because we thought of the pitfalls early. And, as the manager, I was able to make some very clear boundaries relative to client service delivery.”

MANAGER



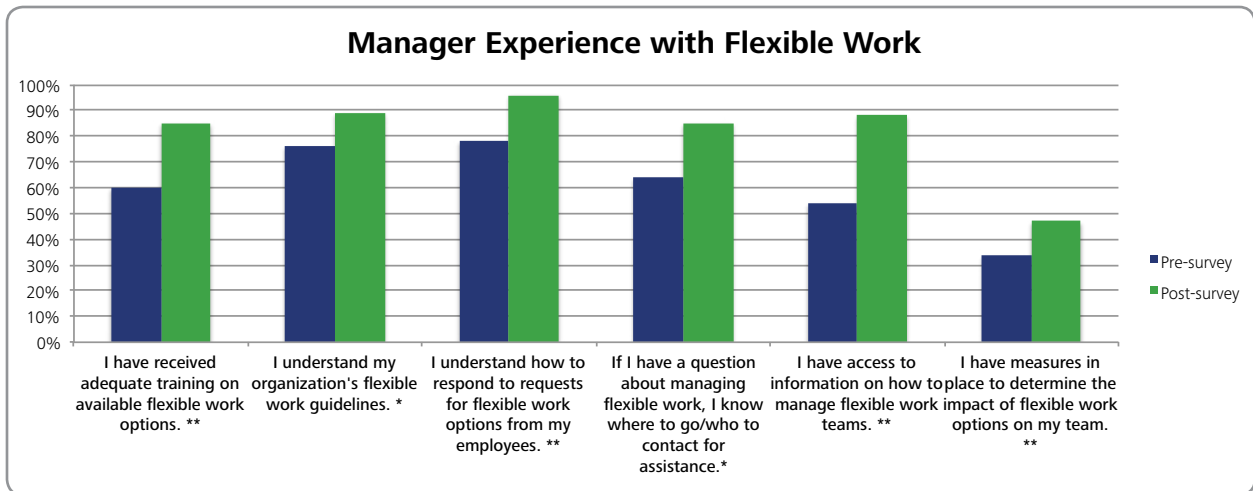
2. Managers felt better equipped to lead flexible teams

By the end of the study, managers felt better equipped to lead flexible teams and more confident that flex could work for their group.

- I have received adequate training from my organization on flexible work options - from 60% up to 85%
- I understand my organization’s flexible work guidelines - from 76% up to 89%
- I understand how to respond to flexible work requests from employees - from 78% up to 96%
- If I have a question about flexible work, I know where to go - from 64% up to 85%
- I have access to information on how to manage flexible work teams - from 54% up to 88%
- I have measures in place to determine the impact of flexible work options on my team - from 34% up to 47% (There is still considerable room for improvement here, but managers made significant progress on setting measurable goals with their teams.)

“Creating a blueprint lays down the guidelines and defines when a flexible schedule is plausible and how it benefits the employee.”

MANAGER



Note: Statistical significance is influenced by factors such as the number of responses and deviation from the mean. Percentage changes are not indicative of statistical significance.

In addition to these statistically significant results, we saw positive movement in other areas as well:

- I have been successful in having members of my team work flexibly - from 80% up to 88%
- I believe that work in my business unit can be completed effectively with employees using flexible work options - from 88% up to 93%

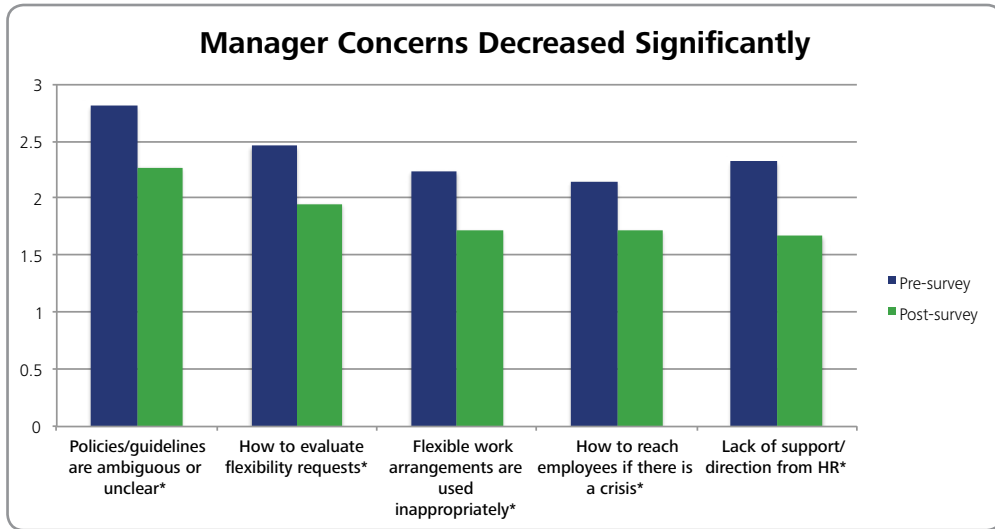
3. Managers' concerns about flexible work decreased

Managers reported a number of concerns about flexibility during the pre-survey and focus group phases of the study. By participating in the study process, managers' concerns decreased in the following areas:

- Policies/guidelines are ambiguous or unclear, decreased 19%
- Concerns over how to evaluate flexibility requests, decreased 21%
- Flexible work arrangements are used inappropriately, decreased 23%
- Concerns over how to reach employees if there is a crisis, decreased 20%
- Lack of support/direction from HR, decreased 28%

“As a team, we laid out a plan of core available hours and open communication that would allow each team member to be at the office or home while still allowing execution of project objectives.”

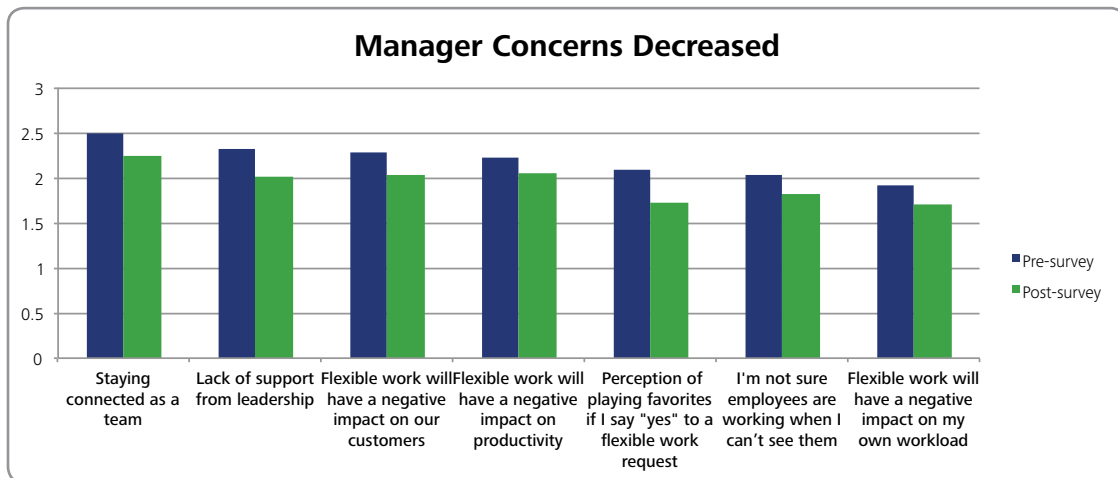
MANAGER



* $P < .01$ (Concerns were ranked on a sliding scale from 1-5 with 1 representing no concern and 5 representing a high level of concern.)

While not statistically significant, we also observed decreases in the following manager concerns:

- Concern over staying connected as a team, decreased 10%
- Lack of support from leadership, decreased 13%
- Flexible work will have a negative impact on our customers, decreased 11%
- Flexible work will have a negative impact on productivity, decreased 8%
- Perception of playing favorites if I say “yes” to a flexible work request, decreased 17%
- I’m not sure employees are working when I can’t see them, decreased 11%
- Flexible work will have a negative impact on my own workload, decreased 12%



4. Employees felt they had better access to flexibility

By the end of the study, employees felt more comfortable requesting flexibility even though: a) the participating organizations' policies didn't change during the course of the study, and b) employees did not participate directly in the study interventions. We hypothesize that their shift in beliefs may have been due to a) increased manager awareness and comfort in dealing with flexibility issues, and b) employee involvement in the development of flex team blueprints which encouraged managers to discuss flexibility with their teams.

Several significant changes were observed:

- I believe my manager would be supportive if I requested a flexible work arrangement, increased from 76% to 79%
- I don't believe I have access to flexible work options, decreased from 10% to 7%
- I can't use flexible work options because "face time" is too important, decreased from 16% to 10%



* $P < .01$

While not statistically significant, the following changes were also promising, considering that employees were not directly involved in the intervention

- I understand my organization's flexible work guidelines, increased from 74% to 79%
- I am concerned that if I use flexible work options it will have a negative effect on my career, decreased from 20% to 15%

“This work philosophy has made balancing my home-life and work-life bearable. I am able to come in early and leave early so I have time with my family in the evenings. I feel no resistance or backlash from management to do this. I really enjoy my job and because I am able to participate in a flexible work environment, I truly value my job more.”

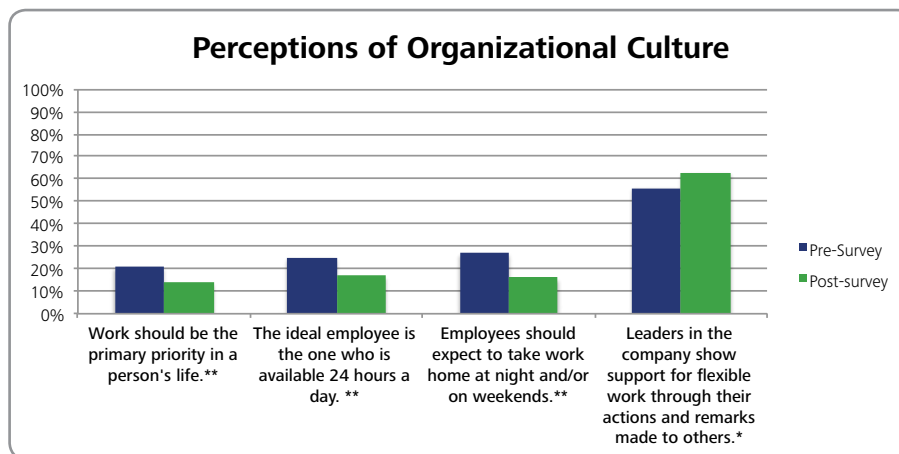
EMPLOYEE

5. Both managers and employees felt the organization became more supportive of worklife

Managers and employees were asked to respond to questions related to organizational culture in the pre and post pilot surveys. Several of these responses demonstrated significant changes at the conclusion of the pilot. Taken together, these responses indicate an improvement in the perceptions that organizational culture is supportive of employees' worklife integration.

- Work should be the primary priority in a person's life, decreased from 21% to 14%
- The ideal employee is the one who is available 24 hours a day, decreased from 25% to 17%
- Employees should expect to take work home at night and/or on weekends, decreased from 27% to 16%
- Leaders in the company show support for flexible work through their actions and remarks made to others, increased from 56% to 63%

Similarly, job pressure reports decreased among both managers and employees. In particular, reports that "I am constantly working against the pressure of time" decreased significantly from 45% to 36%.



**P<.001 *P<.01

6. Strategies to improve communication and team-building were the most valuable training topics to managers

- Communication and Team-Building Strategies, 80%
- Building a Flex Team Agreement/Blueprint, 77%
- Managing Performance, 72%
- Measuring Success, 65%

*Represents percentage of managers who rated these topics "highly" or "somewhat" valuable.

“Flexibility has been a major factor in my job satisfaction. I would be much more likely to seek alternative employment if flexibility was not an option.”

EMPLOYEE

IMPROVE THE CULTURE OF FLEXIBILITY

Taking a targeted approach to preparing managers to lead flexible teams is an important step toward changing a culture, but not the final step. In addition to preparing managers, it is imperative to reach out to all levels of the organization, including human resources, senior leadership, and employees.

We recommend outlining expectations and providing opportunities for everyone in the organization to talk openly about workplace flexibility as a business strategy. The goal should be to have workplace flexibility considered as a tool to optimize talent management in a high-performance organization, not just a “program” to be implemented under the direction of HR.

Human Resource Professionals

Human resource leaders play a key role in ensuring ongoing, post-training success by providing the kind of ongoing supports managers ranked as most helpful. Support activities should include best practice sharing sessions, newsletter articles, and informal lunch sessions. Practically speaking, this means incorporating “how to” advice for managers into an ongoing communication strategy that provides regular education around flexibility and alternative work programs.

HR should integrate flex teams training into existing manager development programs, so that all new managers are given the opportunity to learn the skills required to successfully lead flexible teams.

Additionally, HR can foster culture change by facilitating the Flex Team Blueprint process for all teams. Study results show this tool has the potential to facilitate team collaboration and performance.

Senior Leaders

Employees and managers look to senior leadership to set the tone and promote culture in an organization. In the same way that employee perceptions of flex culture improved after manager training, manager perceptions could also shift with a demonstrated increase in support from senior leaders.

Advise senior leaders to discuss and encourage the use of regular flexibility with partners across the organization, making it a regular topic of discussion with their teams. Senior leaders who are not already comfortable with flexibility as a strategic initiative could hold regular listening sessions with HR, managers, and employees.

And, senior leaders are encouraged to utilize flexibility within their own leadership teams. By modeling flexible behavior, leadership conveys support for the program and creates a culture in which employees (and managers) are less likely to fear there will be negative implications for working flexibly.

Employees

In this study, managers placed high value on the Best Practices Sharing Call and the Flex Blueprint Support Call. Employees should be provided the same opportunities for information sharing and mentoring.

Employees currently working a successful flexible schedule should share their stories, including how they are staying connected to their team and the positive impact flexibility has on their productivity and well-being. Likewise, employees could benefit from worklife coaching or mentoring calls, particularly when they are navigating significant life and career transitions.

Taking a broad approach to integrating workplace flexibility that encompasses all levels of the organization will a) increase understanding and comfort with flexibility; b) decrease concerns and myths that have been associated with flexibility; and c) ensure successful culture change across the organization.

“I view the addition of the workplace flexibility program at my company as a great asset, both to the business and to the employees. The implementation of such a program is an example of how companies can provide a mutually beneficial workplace environment. I think that our participation in this Study has been a needed driver to bring management on board. It also provides employees with reassurance of the positive outlook the company has for this type of program.”

EMPLOYEE

RESEARCHERS



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Boston College Center for Work & Family

Founded in 1990, the Boston College Center for Work & Family is a global leader in helping organizations create effective workplaces that support and develop healthy and productive employees. Find us on the web at www.bc.edu/cwf and on Twitter @BCCWF

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Career/Life Alliance Services

Founded in 1987, Career/Life Alliance Services, Inc. is an organization dedicated to the development and integration of work-life and workplace flexibility solutions. Find us on the web at www.clalliance.com and on Twitter @kjkacher

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Life Meets Work Inc.

Life Meets Work is a workforce innovation consultancy, offering workplace strategy that improves team effectiveness and furthers talent-based business objectives around flexible and remote teams. Online at www.lifemeetswork.com and on Twitter @lifemeetswork

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