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WHAT DO MANAGERS REALLY THINK ABOUT FLEXIBILITY?

Stephen Sweet, Ph.D. and Jacquelyn B. James, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Flexible work options—especially those that provide for variations in the time or place of work—are strategies often suggested to enhance employee effectiveness. And yet, like good jobs in general, access to flexible work options is limited and unevenly allocated.

Even when employers adopt formal policies to provide latitude in scheduling or place of work, managers almost always have final approval. Managers can (and commonly do) provide informal access, ignoring policies that may prohibit use of flexible work options (Kelly & Kalev, 2006). Managers also can (and commonly do) use discretion to restrict or penalize access in both implicit and explicit ways, putting flexible work options that are on the books out of employees' reach (Barnett, Gareis, Gordon, & Brennan, 2009; Eaton, 2003). Thus there is little doubt that managerial attitudes toward flexible work arrangements contribute to unevenness in implementation and use.

Given managers' influence on workers' ability to take advantage of flexible work options, what managers really think about flexibility and how firmly they hold their opinions are two questions worth investigating. To answer these questions, we present descriptive findings from a study conducted in collaboration with a large employer in the finance and insurance super-sector. These findings are drawn from surveys conducted in June 2012 of 1,058 managers employed by the subject of our study: Company A (a pseudonym). One in four managers whom we asked to participate in our survey (26.1 percent) joined the study. Prior to data collection, Company A engaged in a variety of strategies both to expand the use of flexible work options and promote the benefits of doing so. Managers were encouraged to value flexibility and were given numerous supports to improve access to these options in their work units. It is important to understand that the attitudes that we report in this brief will not necessarily map onto perspectives of managers operating in other industries or organizations. Nonetheless, the attitudes that exist in Company A provide a window into what managers think about workplace flexibility.

Do managers believe in the benefits of flexible work options?

We considered managers' attitudes toward two types of flexibility: schedule flexibility (when employees work, such as being able to work earlier or later in the day, in compressed workweeks, or on some other schedule) and place flexibility (where people work, such as in a home office or off-site).

As Figure 1 shows, the managers we surveyed expressed a range of attitudes toward three commonly suggested benefits of flexible work:

- Increases motivation
- Improves concentration
- Increases productivity

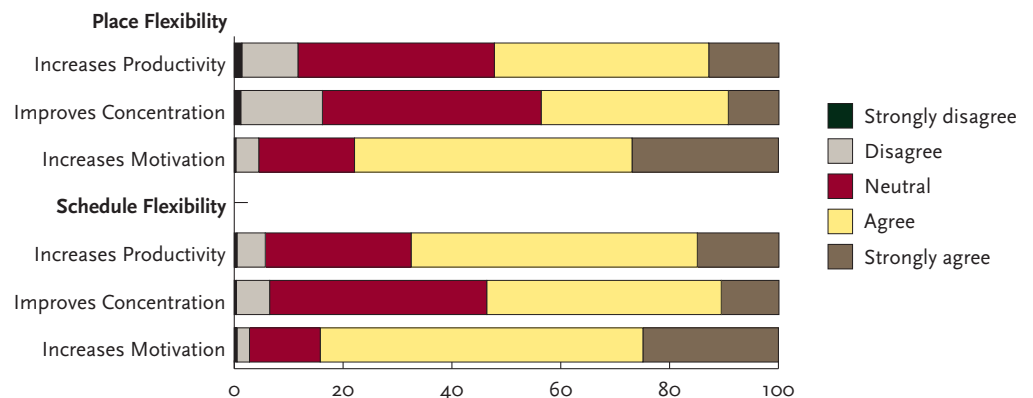
There are two important distinctions to notice in this figure.

First, although managers' attitudes vary widely, the range of opinion runs from strong agreement to neutrality to disagreement. Very few managers (less than 1 percent) disagreed strongly that workplace flexibility promises these three benefits. This is heartening, because dispositions at the extreme ends of the continuum are in all likelihood less malleable. Most managers occupy the middle ground, and are probably open to changing their opinions if presented with compelling evidence.

Second, attitudes toward the three proposed benefits vary similarly for schedule flexibility and place flexibility. Most managers are secure in their expectation that motivation can be enhanced by both schedule and place flexibility. While still trending in a positive direction, confidence that productivity and concentration improve with access to these two options is shakier.

In sum, the figure shows, managers tend to view both schedule and place flexibility work options as beneficial.

Figure 1. Managers' attitudes toward positive outcomes of flexibility



Note: Company A, June 2012. N=1093

Do managers believe that the use of flexible work options increases business risk?

Next we considered attitudes toward five possible negative consequences of workplace flexibility:

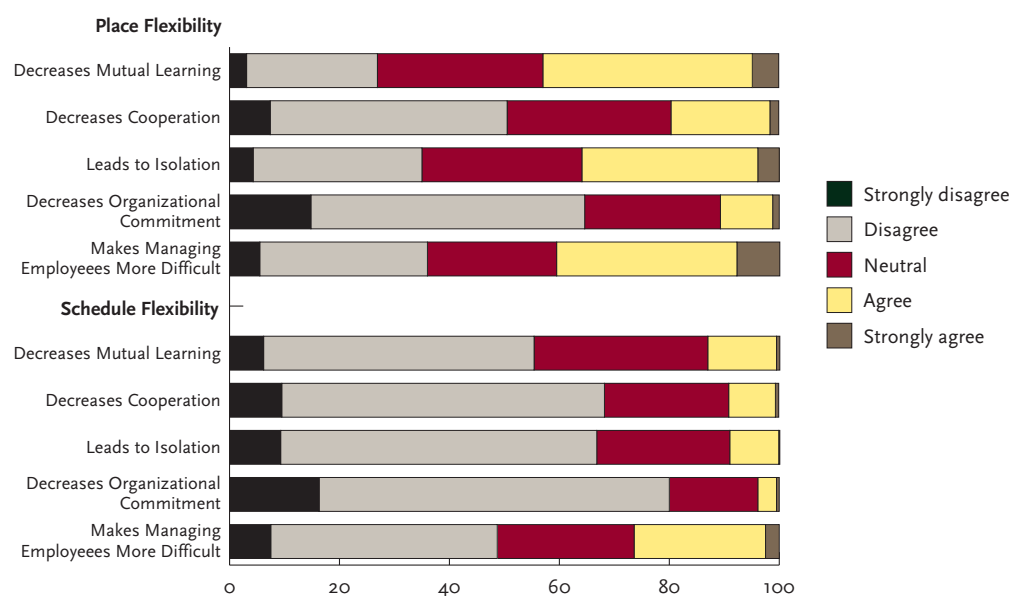
- Makes managing employees more difficult
- Decreases organizational commitment
- Leads to isolation
- Decreases cooperation
- Decreases opportunities for employees to learn from one another (that is, mutual learning)

In this analysis, strong agreement indicates greater skepticism of the merits of flexible work options.

Unlike the perceived benefits of flexible work as noted in Figure 1, the perceived downsides shown in Figure 2 reveal a marked difference between managers' expectations concerning schedule flexibility and place flexibility. On the whole, schedule flexibility is perceived as offering fewer risks than place flexibility. Even so, most managers were neutral or disagreed with assertions that negative outcomes should be expected for either type of flexibility—with one exception. Managers tended to view place flexibility as decreasing mutual learning among employees.

In sum, this figure shows that managers tend to believe that schedule flexibility does not carry great risk for business outcomes, but place flexibility does to some extent.

Figure 2. Managers' attitudes toward negative outcomes of flexibility



Note: Company A, June 2012. N=1093

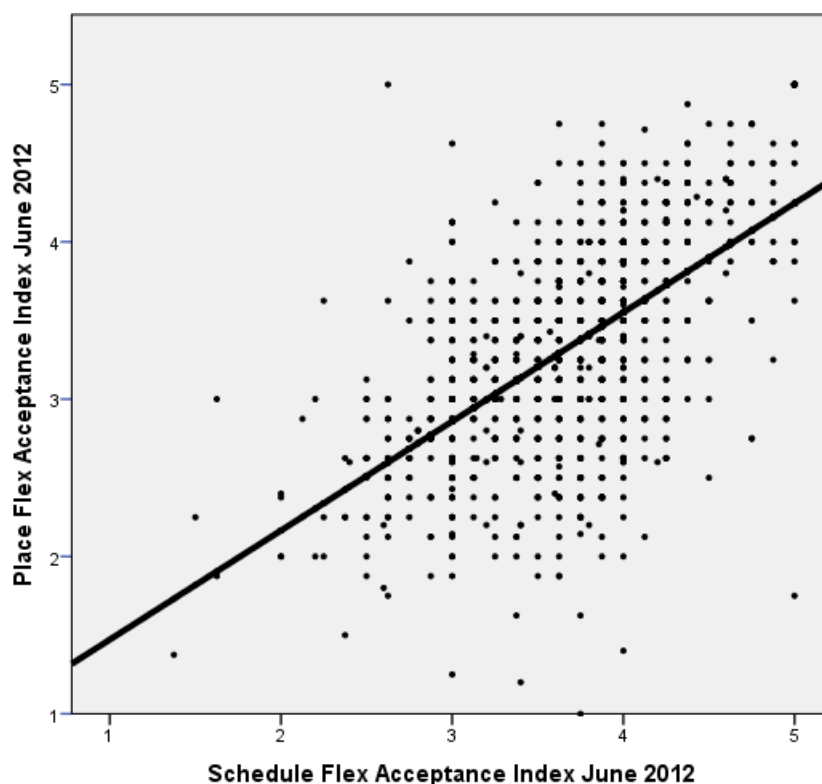
How do attitudes toward schedule flexibility and place flexibility correspond?

Finally, we considered in more depth the correspondence between attitudes toward place flexibility options and schedule flexibility options. Do managers tend to view the benefits and costs of these two types of flexible work arrangements similarly? To answer this question for both place flexibility and schedule flexibility, we averaged the three positive outcomes of flexibility along with the five negative outcomes of flexibility, but “reverse-coded” the negative outcomes, so that higher scores indicate less agreement that a negative outcome could happen. In these calculations, a high average score indicates that a manager believes that flexibility is likely to offer multiple benefits and few costs, whereas a low average score indicates that a manager expects few benefits and multiple costs.

Figure 3 shows that positive attitudes toward the two different types of flexibility tend to go hand in hand. In other words, when managers held positive attitudes toward schedule flexibility, they also tended to have positive attitudes toward place flexibility. This is helpful to know, because for many employees, combining the two options is a path to achieving maximum prospects for work/life fit. For example, a particular employee might wish to begin the work day later than is customary on some days and work at home once or twice a week. A manager who considers either option to be viable would also be likely to view both options in a favorable manner. Conversely, an unfavorable attitude toward place flexibility tends to correspond with a similarly unfavorable attitude toward schedule flexibility.

This may help explain why some employees get little of either type of flexibility, and why others get more of both types.

Figure 3. Relationship of attitudes toward place flexibility and schedule flexibility



Note: Company A, June 2012. N=1093, correlation .518, adjusted R² .337, P<.000

CONCLUSIONS

What do managers think about flexibility? The following conclusions can be drawn from our analyses.

1. Managers hold diverse perspectives on flexible work options.
2. Managers are more likely to hold favorable attitudes than unfavorable attitudes toward flexible work options.
3. Very few managers firmly believe that workplace flexibility will inevitably be detrimental or beneficial, as many have reservations about both its benefits and costs.
4. When managers view one type of flexibility favorably, they are also more likely to view the other type of flexibility favorably, but not necessarily for the same reasons.

Implications for employers

Given that the range of consequences of workplace flexibility has yet to be fully established by research, managers (to some extent) have to operate on faith that increasing access will enhance the work of their supervisees. It is encouraging to observe that managers in Company A were inclined to view workplace flexibility favorably: faith exists. And managers who expressed reservations did not appear to be strongly skeptical.

Our findings suggest that if other employers follow Company A's example in promoting flexible work, they can do so expecting their managers to have generally supportive attitudes. However, because we base our conclusion only on the study of this one organization, the extent of support will probably vary from organization to organization. Because few managers in Company A "strongly agreed" that costs and limited returns are likely consequences of workplace flexibility, we suspect that skeptical managers would change their minds if presented with concrete evidence of positive outcomes.

Our study suggests two tasks for employers who want to make flexible work options consistently available to employees. Employers can support managers whose attitudes toward these options are favorable, by explaining clearly how workplace flexibility may benefit the organization. They can also reverse the opinions of skeptical managers, by presenting concrete evidence of workplace flexibility's successes.

Authors

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