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Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4381>

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Chestnut Hill, MA: [Sloan Work and Family Research Network], 2005

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Workplace Flexibility Case Study
Sojourner House and Flexible Schedules
by Ken Giglio

Company: Sojourner House (www.sojourner-house.org)

Company profile: Sojourner House is a non-profit domestic violence services agency located in Providence, Rhode Island. Founded in 1976 by Brown University students, Sojourner House has served the needs of more than 50,000 individuals. The organization has 19 full-time employees and three part-time workers at its three locations.

Program profile: As a provider of services to victims of abuse, Sojourner House works hard to level the relationship between its employees and its clients. The organization's executive director, Betty Bailey, feels the need to do the same thing for her staff. Toward that goal, she has instituted a workplace flexibility policy at Sojourner House, addressing employee requests for flexibility on a case-by-case basis. Since Sojourner House needs to keep its shelter staffed 24 hours a day, it's not possible for some employees to vary their work schedules. But for those for whom it is possible, Bailey is open to requests. She says that non-profit workers tend to be passionate, committed workers for whom burnout is often a problem. One answer, she has found, is to allow workers the ability to change the hours they work as well as the number of hours they work.

The Challenge: Prior to adopting a flexibility policy, Sojourner House was struggling with employee burnout, which tends to be a problem in the non-profit services world. Because workers dedicate themselves to their jobs with great passion, they often find themselves at greater risk of career fatigue. As a result, Sojourner House was seeing unacceptably high rates of employee turnover, which it wanted to address.

Benefits to employees: Employees are given more direct control over their own hours and scheduling, which leads to a greater feeling of being in the driver's seat with regards to their work and personal lives. The goal, according to Sojourner House, is to help its entire work force feel like leaders, not followers. This provides them with increased responsibility and accountability. On a more practical level, employees are simply better able to arrange their lives – both inside and outside of work – helping them to worry less and be more effective.

Benefits to employer: Retention is a key benefit for Sojourner House. By reducing the potential for burnout, workers tend to be more satisfied in their jobs for longer periods of time. That leads to more experienced, wiser employees. Sojourner House has also found that by allowing workers more flexibility in their schedules, it has been able to retain a more diverse staff, which is significant given the diverse background of the clients it serves.

Lessons Learned: Executive Director Betty Bailey says if the manager of another company or non-profit asked her about implementing workplace flexibility she would tell

them to “Do it now.” She says you’ll see the benefits of flexibility in time – maybe sooner.

Personal profile: Monica Niquette is the officer manager at Sojourner House, where she has worked for 5 years. After becoming pregnant, Monica decided she wanted to change her 40-hour work week into a 35-hour work week, a request that Sojourner House embraced. It means that Monica works generally from 10 am to 5 pm, allowing her more time to relax or get herself ready in the morning. She is also better able to schedule doctor’s appointments before coming to work. Monica also realizes that she is more effective and less worn out at work. The bottom line is that she is able to get done in seven hours what she used to take eight hours a day to do. “It’s made it a lot more relaxing,” says Monica. “When I was working eight hours a day, I was totally exhausted, and I wasn’t as effective at doing the work. Now, coming in at 10 am, I can relax or even sleep in in the morning, helping me feel personally more relaxed. Flexibility is a big part of the reason why I choose to stay at Sojourner.”

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