GETTING AHEAD WITH FLEXIBLE WORK:
HOW WE CAN AVOID TAKING TWO STEPS BACKWARDS
Families and Work Institute (FWI) is a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today’s changing workplace, changing family and changing community. Currently our work addresses two major areas: the workforce/workplace and youth development.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to thank the employees who participated in this study and our own families, especially the young ones, who gave us some uninterrupted time to create this report.

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This report is dedicated to the loving memory of James T. (Terry) Bond:

- Our studies have been on target because of the profound research questions you always asked.
- Our studies have been deeper because you never stopped seeking answers.
- Our studies have been compassionate because you cared so much about others.
- Our studies have been respected because of the rigor of your approach.
- Our studies have been newsworthy because you had your fingers on the pulse.

You continue to inspire and enrich our work, every single day!
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“Flattening the curve”—that’s a term that we may never have heard before a few weeks ago, but now it’s profoundly affecting how we live and work. As the national and state governments, employers, and citizens practice “social distancing” (another term that may be new to us), we try to do what we can to reduce the upward trajectory in the spread of the coronavirus, COVID-19 and thus flatten the curve.

The changes to the way we work have been nothing less than seismic. According to our nationally representative data, in 2016 only 5% of employees worked at home. Today, the number has yet to be counted. Employers who may have been hesitant to offer flexible scheduling options have been suddenly required to or chosen to provide this flexibility. Even those who have offered flexibility to their employees have never done so on a wide-spread basis.

Our nationally representative study of US employees provides a unique opportunity to provide all of us with evidence-based information on how best to manage flexibility so that both employees and employers can benefit in unusually challenging times.

**METHODOLOGY**

Building on the U. S. Department of Labor’s 1977 Quality of Employment Survey, the National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) was designed and conducted by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) in 1992, 1997, 2002, 2008 and in 2016, becoming a project of the Society for Human Resource Management in 2016. The NSCW provides a comprehensive look at the lives of employees on and off the job using a large, representative sample of employed people ages 18 and older in the U.S. It provides a unique opportunity to examine under what circumstances can flexible scheduling benefit both employers and employees.
INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this report, we address the following questions:

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: How were employees working flexibly?

1. How many employees had access to working flexibly?
2. How many employees felt they were supported or jeopardized working flexibly...
   - Perceived effectiveness of flexibility
   - Support from supervisors and co-workers for working flexibly
   - Support for healthy lifestyle from job
   - Perceived jeopardy for working flexibly

DURING THE PANDEMIC: What are the implications for us now?

3. How does working flexibility, support for flexibility and for a healthy lifestyle and jeopardy affect...
   - Employee engagement
   - Retention
   - Job satisfaction
   - Overall health
   - Depression
   - Stress
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: HOW WERE EMPLOYEES WORKING FLEXIBLY?

ACCESS TO FLEXIBILITY

There are a variety of ways to offer flexibility beyond working at home. Indeed, before the coronavirus outbreak, only a third (33%) of employees were allowed to work part of their regular hours at home. Less than a quarter (23%) of employees actually worked some or most of their usual work hours from home, and only 5% worked at home full-time, working all of their usual hours at home.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES WITH ACCESS TO FLEXIBILITY

- Able to temporarily change starting and quitting times on short notice when special needs arise: 70%
- Allowed to choose own starting and quitting times within some range of hours: 44%
- Can decide when to take breaks: 44%
- Never required to work paid or unpaid extra or overtime hours with little or no advance notice: 39%
- Allowed to work part of regular paid hours at home: 32%
- Not at all hard to take time off during your work day to take care of personal or family matters: 27%
- Can arrange to work full-time/part-time in your current position if wanted to: 26%
- Work some or most (10-99%) of usual hours at home: 23%
- Work all (100%) of usual hours at home: 5%

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1468-1508)
Before the Pandemic: How Were Employees Working Flexibly?

While the majority of employees (51%) had access to more than one to three types of flexible scheduling options, 8% of employees did not have access to any options. And, only a little more than a quarter (26%) had access to five or more types.

**Figure 2. Number of Flexibility Options Employees Have Access To**

*Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1516)*
PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF FLEXIBILITY

There was room for employers to improve scheduling options for their employees. While the majority of employees (54%) felt their schedule or shift met their needs, only 37% strongly agreed they have the flexibility they need to manage their personal and family responsibilities.

FIGURE 3. PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF FLEXIBILITY

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1486-1507)
BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: HOW WERE EMPLOYEES WORKING FLEXIBLY?

Similarly, there was an opportunity for supervisors and employees to be more supportive of one another around employees’ lives outside of work.

FIGURE 4. PERCEIVED SUPPORT FROM SUPERVISORS AND CO-WORKERS FOR WORKING FLEXIBLY

My supervisor or manager is responsive to my need when I have family or personal business to take care of – for example medical appointments, meeting with child’s teacher, etc. 53%

I feel comfortable bringing up personal or family issues with my supervisor or manager 42%

I have support from coworkers that helps me to manage my work and personal or family life 38%

My supervisor or manager really cares about the effects that work demands have on my personal and family life 36%

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1305-1438)
BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: HOW WERE EMPLOYEES WORKING FLEXIBLY?

Likewise, most employees did not feel their jobs support a healthy lifestyle.

**FIGURE 5. PERCEIVED SUPPORT FOR HEALTHY LIFESTYLE FROM JOB**

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1312-1499)
JEOPARDY FOR WORKING FLEXIBLY

In fact, 2 of 5 employees sense that their futures could have been negatively impacted if they cared too much about their personal lives or took advantage of flexibility options that could help them manage their personal lives.

FIGURE 6. PERCEIVED JEOPARDY FOR WORKING FLEXIBLY

Employees have to choose between advancing in their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives

Employees who ask for time off for personal or family reasons or try to arrange different schedules or hours to meet their personal or family needs are LESS likely to get ahead in their jobs or careers

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce (N=1504-1514)
DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US NOW?

Using NSCW data, we looked at how flexibility, i.e. access to flexibility, perceived effectiveness of flexibility, support from supervisors and co-workers for working flexibly, support for healthy lifestyle from job, and jeopardy for working flexibly relates to various employee outcomes, i.e. employee engagement, job satisfaction, retention, overall health, depression, and stress, while holding personal demographics and other job characteristics constant.²

These analyses have important implication for how we manage this seismic shift in working from home.
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Support for flexibility from supervisor and co-workers and support for healthy lifestyle positively predict employee engagement. These relationships are depicted by a plus (+).

FIGURE 7. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US NOW?

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce
The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
JOB SATISFACTION

Perceived scheduling flexibility, support for flexibility from supervisors and coworkers, and support for healthy lifestyles are positive predictors of high job satisfaction.4 These relationships are depicted by a plus (+).

FIGURE 8. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO JOB SATISFACTION

DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US NOW?

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce

The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
RETENTION

Support for flexibility from supervisor and coworkers, support for healthy lifestyles are positive predictors of retention. These relationships are depicted by a plus (+). Jeopardy, on the other hand, is negatively related, indicating that it may be associated with employees wanting to leave their jobs. This relationship is depicted by a minus (-).

FIGURE 9. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO RETENTION

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce
The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
The “-” sign indicates a negative relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
OVERALL HEALTH

Not surprisingly, a positive predictor of employees reporting overall excellent health is support for a healthy lifestyle. This relationship is depicted by a plus (+).

FIGURE 10. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO OVERALL HEALTH

DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US NOW?

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce
The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
DEPRESSION

Support for a healthy lifestyle is a positive predictor of no signs of depression. This relationship is depicted by a plus (+). 

FIGURE 11. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO DEPRESSION

DURING THE PANDEMIC: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US NOW?

NO SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

Support for healthy lifestyle from job
Support from supervisor and co-workers for working flexibly
Perceived effectiveness of flexibility
Access to flexibility
Jeopardy for working flexibly

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce
The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
STRESS

Perceived flexibility and support for healthy lifestyle are positive predictors of low perceived stress. This positive relationship is depicted by a plus (+). Jeopardy, on the other hand, appears to exacerbate stress. This negative relationship is depicted by a minus (-).

FIGURE 12. HOW WORKING FLEXIBLY RELATES TO STRESS

Source: 2016 SHRM National Study of the Changing Workforce
The “+” sign indicates a positive relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level. The “-” sign indicates a negative relationship significant of at least a 95% confidence level.
The conclusions from these seminal analyses are very clear. Providing access to flexibility—which many employees now have during the pandemic—is a floor; it is necessary but not sufficient. Access, in and of itself, is not related to the important outcomes that employers and employees care about like engagement, job satisfaction, health and well-being. What is more important is:

- Believing that you have the flexibility that you need.

And what is even more important than that are:

- Feeling supported by your supervisor and your co-workers for working flexibly and for living a healthy lifestyle.

Support even outweighs jeopardy!

The lesson from this report is to remember to say “one kind word” to each other as we all trying to manage this unprecedented time. One kind word will go a long way in promoting employees’ productivity, health and well-being.
Part of this study was conducted while the author was a fellow of the Columbia Population Research Center at Columbia University.

For each outcome, we ran a logistic regression with the following as controls: gender, age, personal earnings from work, and whether or not the employee has a partner, is a parent, is college-educated, is white, is a manager/professional, belongs to a union, is hourly versus salaried and works in a service versus a good-producing industry. **Access of flexibility** was defined as the number of flexibility options the employee had access to. Other flexibility variables, i.e. **perceived effectiveness of flexibility, support from supervisor and co-workers for working flexibly, support for healthy lifestyle from job, and jeopardy for working flexibly** were averages of the items for each as shown in early sections of the report, as long as more than half of the questions were answered by the employee.

We updated **Employee Engagement** in order to base it on the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale but with the language slightly modified to be more relevant to American employees. Before creating and implementing the 2016 NSCW, we tested the language modifications in the 2014 employee survey used for the When Work Works award and found that our modifications correlated very strongly with the original language. We use the UWES-9 version of the employee engagement measure that includes the following items in an additive index:

1. At my work, I feel like I have a lot of energy
2. I can continue working for long periods of time
3. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work
4. I am enthusiastic about my job
5. My job inspires me
6. I am proud of the work that I do
7. I feel happy when I am working intensely
8. I am immersed in my work
9. Time flies when I am working

All items are standardized using the population mean and standard deviation. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure is 0.95, a very high score on reliability, compared to 0.65 for the older (2008) measure. We therefore use UWES-9 measure in our analyses going forward.
To create the Job Engagement score, we average all existing items as long as more than half are answered. We divide this measure of engagement into a three-category variable, such that low engagement represents the bottom quartile, the moderate group represents the middle two quartiles, and the high represents the top quartile. Cutoffs are based on weighted data. The high and low groups include the highest and the lowest response at a minimum, and then any additional responses up until but not including 25%.


4 Job Satisfaction in the NSCW is a three-item composite index that includes the following: “All in all, how satisfied are you with your job?” (four-point scale from 1=not satisfied at all to 4=very satisfied), “Knowing what you know now, if you had to decide all over again to take the job you now have, what would you decide?” (1=definitely NOT take job, 2=have second thoughts, 3=take same job again without hesitation) and “If a good friend of yours told you that he or she was interested in working in a job like yours for your employer, what would you tell your friend?” (1=advise against it, 2=have some doubts about recommending it, 3=strongly recommend it). All items are standardized and averaged as long as more than half are answered to create a composite measure. Cronbach’s alpha is 0.82. Consistent with prior work on the NSCW, we convert job satisfaction into a 3-point scale in which the low group represents the bottom quartile, the moderate group represents the middle two quartiles, and the high represents the top quartile. Cutoffs are based on weighted data. The high and low groups include the highest and the lowest response at a minimum, and then any additional responses up until but not including 25%.

5 Retention is measured in the NSCW with a single item “Taking everything into consideration, how likely is it that you will make a genuine effort to find a new job with another employer within the next year?” (1=not at all likely, 2=somewhat likely, 3=very likely).
6 **Excellent overall health** is defined as a response of “excellent” to the perceived current state of overall health.

7 **No signs of depression** refers to a “no” answer to both depression screening questions in the NSCW, “During the past month, have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless” and “During the past month, have you been bothered by little interest or pleasure in doing things”.

8 **Perceived Stress** is an aggregated measure based on questions asked about the frequency of the following stress indicators:
   1. Felt nervous and stressed
   2. Felt unable to control the important things in life
   3. Felt that things were piling up so high that you could not overcome them
   4. Felt confident about your ability to handle personal problems
   5. Felt that things were going your way

   We reverse coded the positive items and standardized them for comparability before aggregating them. **Low Levels of Perceived Stress** is then defined as the lowest 25% of z scores.


9 “One kind word” is a quote from my (Ellen’s) personal friend, Fred Rogers (Mister Rogers). The actual quote is “Imagine what our real neighbors would be like if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person.”