

Flexibility Equals Productivity

There Are Better Ways to Balance Your Work and Outside Life -- Just Ask Your Boss

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When asked what they want most at work, most women say flexibility -- smart, efficient ways to do a good job both at the office and at home.

As part of Good Morning America's "Mothers Make it Work" series, we're committed to answering the question that so many of you have asked on GMA's Web site and message board: How can we get our employers to help us better balance work and life outside the traditional 9 to 5 model without compromising the quality of or commitment to both?

Often we don't ask for various benefits or accommodations because of fear of rejection. But the good news is that flexibility comes in all shapes and sizes. It doesn't look like one specific thing. There are many options to consider when trying to determine what might work best for you and your company. In fact, all 100 companies on "Working Mother" magazine's list of best companies to work for offer a range of benefits for flexibility.

Compressed Work Week: Some employers -- ranging from retailers and grocery chains to banks -- allow employees to work a compressed work week. Instead of working eight-hour days, five days a week, they'll work four days at 10 hours. This frees up a day a week to focus on personal/family needs or to save on child care costs on that fifth day.

In addition, some employers -- including the federal government -- will allow employees to devise an alternative schedule for start and stop times. If you want to see your child off to school, a woman may elect to come in later. She can put the kids on the bus herself, and save the cost of morning child care. In such a case, she stays later at the office.

This is also great if you live in a city with terrible traffic. Coming in an hour or two later could save you time -- and sanity. By avoiding the rush hour, you'll get to work faster and save that dead time on the road, which you don't get paid for. **Vacation by the Hour:** This really works well for workers paid by the hour. If they miss a shift, their pay is docked. It's also ideal for small businesses because it doesn't cost a penny to implement. For example, you might need to take your child to the doctor. Instead of missing an entire shift, you could take off the hour you need and then return to work. Your vacation time becomes like a debit account --

you deduct the hours you needed to take. This allows you to take care of family matters without losing a day's pay. And it works well for the company because doesn't lose out on a full day of your productivity.

Some companies will allow you to convert unused sick days into vacation days. Most employers only let you use sick days if you, the employee, are sick. If you don't use them, you lose them. This tweak in policy allows moms to use them if children are sick or for doctor's visits, instead of cutting into vacation time. The computer maker Dell gives all its employees -- from factory workers to management -- up to 10 personal business days instead of calling them sick days. This is something that many small businesses I spoke to are willing to do as well. It costs nothing, but is a big help to staff. Concierge services: Sometimes flexibility means giving moms a helping hand. Originally, companies offered access to high-end concierge services to executives as a perk. Now they're beginning to realize that if they help mom out with the chores, she can work longer hours without neglecting her family duties -- services like dog walking, on-site laundry and access to home maintenance gurus are offered. Hospitals throughout the country are starting to do more of this for employees at all levels because a looming shortage of health care workers means longer hours for everyone. This is one step in keeping workers balanced, satisfied and appreciated.

Maternity Leave: The accounting giant Ernst & Young is piloting a program that focuses on pre- and post-maternity counseling and support. The firm will provide a coach to work with the mom before she leaves to have her baby and talk about what life will be like when the baby comes and how she'll be able to manage work when she's ready to return. She's also paired with a mentor internally who's been there and done it successfully. This is especially important since company culture and precedent play a big role in determining success.

This is a brilliant business move because it helps a woman be a whole mom and a whole employee without feeling overwhelmed or guilty. And from the firm's perspective, it lets it keep a valuable employee engaged and committed to returning to work, which is less expensive than losing her entirely. The more we promote these benefits and the more other companies see that the Ernst & Young program may be a gold standard, the more it'll become a reality across the workplace.

Working at Home: It's the dream of moms everywhere -- to work from home!

Telecommuting has grown in popularity. In 1999, only 18 of Fortune's best companies to work for offered telecommuting. Today, 79 do. Some people just do it a day or so a week -- so there are lots of options.

We're also seeing a huge surge in the number of home-based customer service agents, the majority of whom are women. These are hourly, work-from-home employees across the country who take customer service calls for clients like J.Crew, 1-800-Flowers, Office Depot, the major airlines and more. These women set their own hours based on whatever works for them -- averaging about 20 to 25 hours a week. You can earn \$8 to \$15 an hour -- no commuting costs, no fancy business attire. It's the ultimate in flexibility if you have a computer, high-speed Internet access, a land line and a quiet work space.

If you're interested in this type of work, consider applying through the leaders in this industry, including Golden, Alpine Access in Colorado; LiveOps in Palo Alto, Calif.; or Working Solutions in Texas. You don't have to live in these cities to work for these companies. They employ women throughout the country. **What's in it for the employer?** Smart companies do these types of things to keep good employees, and to keep them happy. It's not all altruism -- it makes economic sense too. The average cost of losing an employee is 1.5 times the employee's annual salary because of lost productivity while the position is open, plus the cost of recruiting, hiring and training a replacement. By implementing these programs, employers benefit from increased retention and improved employee satisfaction, which boosts productivity and the bottom line.

Employers like Ernst & Young say their retention rates are currently at historic highs because the company culture embraces flexibility for employees at all levels.

- Approaching your boss. Before you knock on your boss's door, ask yourself honestly if your job performance is good enough to warrant this perk. These flexible benefits are accommodations, not entitlements. The stronger your performance, the better the chance of receiving such perks. If you've been a slacker, you can't walk in and say I want to work from home five days a week. It won't work.
- Think of it as a business proposal. You have to present it in a way that's a win for your boss and for you. How will your department or company benefit from such a program? If high turnover is a problem, this could be a solution. If you're overstressed but great at your job, it behooves your manager to work this out instead of losing you.
- Do your research. If similar companies in your field or location offer flexible benefits, present that as part of your proposal. If other companies offer these benefits, but yours doesn't, it can help you build your case.
- Propose benchmarks. If your employer were to allow you to work from home or use hourly vacation or any of the other programs, how will the success of this benefit be measured?
- Suggest a trial period. You're more likely to get a yes if you say let's try it for three months than if you ask for a permanent change.
- And, of course, have confidence. Change can start with one person and one conversation, but only if you have the courage to speak up for yourself in a confident and persuasive way.