



FACT SHEET

Workplace Flexibility

Allowing Employees Some Leeway Is Good for Businesses and the Economy

Sarah Jane Glynn and Joanna Venator August 16, 2012

Introduction

Most Americans are working hard to pay their bills and to take care of their families, yet too many employers make it impossible to juggle those work and family obligations. The danger of losing a job or missing a promotion because of illness, pregnancy, or taking care of loved ones when working at companies focused solely on the bottom line leaves too many moms and dads having to choose between their jobs and their families.

About half of all workers on U.S. payrolls today are women.¹ Moreover, the majority of mothers, whether married or single, work outside the home, meaning that in most American families, all of the adults work and there is no full-time stay-at-home caregiver.² This is not just a “women’s issue” since the changing nature of our families impacts men and women, adults and children. Indeed, as our population continues to rapidly age, more and more workers are finding themselves providing elder care to their aging parents as well.³

While our workforce and families have changed dramatically, our nation’s labor standards have not been updated in decades. There are sensible policies that would assist families while simultaneously helping employers’ bottom lines, but both employers and policymakers have been slow to recognize how fundamentally our lives have changed and what needs to be done to make our workplace policies match the way that we live and work today.

In this series we identify five issues facing workers today: paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, workplace flexibility, child care, and the wage gap. As our nation has reached a pivotal moment in history, policymakers will have to decide whether they will take the necessary steps to support hardworking American families or whether they will continue along with the status quo.

Here are the key facts you need to know about the importance of workplace flexibility.

Workplace flexibility

- **Inflexible and unpredictable schedules make it difficult for workers to balance their jobs with family and personal needs.** Almost 30 percent of all Americans report having work schedules with varied daily start and stop times, with 10 percent reporting schedules that fluctuate so much that they cannot predict a typical weekly work schedule.⁴ This is particularly true for low- and middle-income families—nearly 70 percent of low-income workers cannot change their scheduled start or stop time if needed.⁵
- **Only about half (55.9 percent) of workers can alter their schedule or the location where they do their work should they need to.**⁶ The ability to utilize flexible scheduling increases with salary—higher paid workers have more options than low-wage workers. And Latinos are the least likely to have workplace flexibility of any racial or ethnic group. For example, only 44.1 percent of Hispanic workers have the ability to adjust their work schedules when they need to, compared to 53.7 percent of whites, 47.9 percent of African Americans, and 57.6 percent of Asians. The higher a worker’s earnings, the more likely they are to be able to alter the schedule or location of their work. The same pattern holds true for education—workers with a college degree are nearly twice as likely to be able to change their schedule than those with less than a high school degree.
- **Predictable schedules can help workers provide or arrange for proper child and elder care without paying for unnecessary care.** Yet companies often combine inflexible scheduling with a “no fault” absence program, where workers receive points for being late or skipping a shift, and can be fired if they garner enough points. This system puts workers faced with unforeseen emergencies—such as family illness—at a disadvantage.⁷
- **Current workplace policies put an unfair burden on workers’ time.** Low-income workers in hourly positions are often required to have “maximum availability,” where they are able to be scheduled for more hours than they will actually work, in order to be considered full-time workers. To be a full-time employee at Starbucks, for example, workers must be available to be scheduled for a shift for 70 percent of business hours or 80 hours each week.⁸
- **Workers are spending more time at work today than they did a generation ago.** The typical American middle-income family worked an average of 11 more hours per week in 2009 than in 1979.⁹ Around 40 percent of professional men work more than 50 hours per week but 80 percent of these men reported wanting shorter hours.
- **Flexible workplaces are good for businesses and the economy.** Deloitte’s Touche Tshimatsu, a professional services consulting business, estimated that implementing flexible work arrangements in 2003 resulted in savings of \$41.5 million in reduced

turnover costs for their company.¹⁰ Flex programs in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Australia have not caused decreased profits or unmet customer demand, according to a survey of employers who have implemented these programs.¹¹

- **Workplace flexibility programs allow employees to change their work schedules, work locations, or both—making it possible for them to balance their responsibilities at work with family care and other personal needs.** Three-quarters of Americans believe that employers should give workers more flexibility in their work schedule and location.¹² In spite of this overwhelming public support, the Working Families Flexibility Act—which is modeled on current laws in Europe and Australia, would allow employees to request flexibility, and would ensure their requests were considered fairly by their employers—has not been voted on in the House of Representatives or the Senate since it was introduced earlier this year.

The bottom line: Workplace flexibility is essential to employers and employees and their families alike for a stronger and more prosperous society and economy.

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Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table a-1. Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Sex and Age," (Washington, DC: Department of Labor, 2012).
- 2 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 7. Employment Status of Women by Presence and Age of Youngest Child, March 1975-2010," (Washington, DC: Department of Labor, 2011), available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table7-2011.pdf>.
- 3 Kerstin Aumann and others, "The Elder Care Study: Everyday Realities and Wishes for Change" (Washington, DC: Families and Work Institute, 2010).
- 4 Julia R. Henly, H. Luke Shaefer, and Elaine Waxman, "Non-standard Work Schedules: Employer- and Employee-Driven Flexibility in Retail Jobs," *Social Service Review* 80 (609, 616) (2006).
- 5 Jody Heymann, "Inequalities at Work and at Home: Social Class and Gender Divides." In Jody Heymann and Christopher Beem, eds., *Unfinished Work: Building Equality and Democracy in an Era of Working Families* (New York: The New Press, 2005).
- 6 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Table 5. Wage and Salary Workers Who Can Adjust Their Schedule or Location (1) at Their Main Job by Selected Characteristics, 2011 Annual Averages* (Department of Labor, 2012).
- 7 Joan C. Williams and Heather Boushey, "The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict" (Washington: Center for American Progress and Center for WorkLife Law, 2010), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/pdf/threefaces.pdf>.
- 8 Liza Featherstone, "Starbucks Blues: Lean Times and Labor Pains Are Tarnishing the Coffee Giant's Image," *Slate*, October 29, 2008.
- 9 Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heidi Shierholz, "The State of Working America 2008-9 (2009)." In Joan C. Williams and Heather Boushey, eds., *The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict* (Washington: Center for American Progress and Center for WorkLife Law, 2010), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/pdf/threefaces.pdf>.
- 10 Corporate Voices for Working Families, "Innovative Workplace Flexibility Options for Hourly Workers" (Washington, DC: Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2009).
- 11 Antonie Boessenkool and Ariane Hegewisch, "Working Time for Working Families: Europe and the United States" (Washington: American University Washington College of Law, 2004).
- 12 John Halpin and others, "Battle of the Sexes Gives Way to Negotiations." In Heather Boushey and Ann O'Leary, ed., *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*. (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2009).