

The Advantages (and Hidden Pitfalls) of Flex Work Schedules

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Many workers prefer a flexible schedule, but watch out for resentment from those still clocking nine to five.



There's a familiar phrase in organizational consulting that might ring true for anyone who's ever loathed a boss: People don't quit companies, they quit their managers. But for those who haven't recently slammed the door on a micromanaging superior, there remains the possibility of establishing a work schedule that grants more autonomy (and maybe even fewer hours that overlap with the overbearing boss).

According to a new survey from the consulting and staffing agency Robert Half, 41% of managers in the US are allowing staff to set their own hours. The survey comes amid a national conversation arising from changing attitudes toward work, as various organizations try to address worker demands for better work-life balance. Greater scheduling flexibility may sound like a reimagining of the workplace spawned by the turmoil of 2020, but in fact, it isn't such a new idea. Its advantages—and drawbacks—have been discussed for quite a while.

Good boss (bad boss): The survey queried more than 2,800 senior managers and 1,000 workers in the US. Though the results might induce a fit of envy for those working on stricter schedules, career and workplace expert Lindsey Pollak told HR Brew that this arrangement “has always happened.”

“The idea of managers being flexible is not new. But I would say the parameters with which they can work are much wider,” she explained.

A manager who allows this paradigm, for example, is going to exercise their “judgment as a leader to make exceptions to rules,” she noted. Given the broad range of contingencies that can affect anyone at any time, managers who broker flexible arrangements know “it never is the case that every rule applies to every person every day,” Pollak said. “Life happens.”

When flexibility pulls a muscle. The flip side of the coin, Pollak cautions, could ultimately be resentment among coworkers. “If you and I are doing the exact same job, but I have a boss who is not flexible, I might have a very different situation from you,” Pollak explained. That can create an atmosphere of inequity, where workers have different obligations for when to be “at work,” even if they do the same job. That dynamic, she noted, is “challenging in terms of employee retention.”

Not one-size-fits-all: Any HR manager navigating this internal resentment can tackle the issue by establishing minimums for time spent in the office, Pollak said. Allowing everyone on a team to understand baseline expectations can help set a tone and keep everyone on the same page. “Beyond that, it’s a matter of employees deciding whether they can accept the particular manager that they’re given,” Pollack said, or if they search for something else that fits their needs.