Knowledgebank: ALTERNATIVE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Beyond the actual design of jobs and the use of participation and empowerment, many organizations today are experimenting with a variety of alternative work arrangements. These arrangements are generally intended to enhance employee motivation and performance by giving them more flexibility about how and when they work. Among the
more popular alternative work arrangements are variable work schedules, flexible work schedules, job sharing, and telecommuting.  

Variable Work Schedules

There are many exceptions, of course, but the traditional work schedule in the United States has long been days that start at 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning and end at 5:00 in the evening, five days a week (and of course, managers often work many additional hours outside of these times). Although the exact starting and ending times vary, most companies in other countries have also used a well-defined work schedule. But this schedule makes it difficult to attend to routine personal business-going to the bank, seeing a doctor or dentist for a checkup, having a parent-teacher conference, getting an automobile serviced, and so forth. Employees locked into this work schedule may find it necessary to take a sick or vacation day to handle these activities. On a more psychological level, some people may feel so powerless and constrained by their job schedules that they grow resentful and frustrated.

To help counter these problems, one alternative some businesses use is a compressed work schedule. An employee following a compressed workweek schedule works a full forty-hour week in fewer than the traditional five days. Most typically, this schedule involves working ten hours a day for four days, leaving an extra day off. Another alternative is for employees to work slightly less than ten hours a day but to complete the forty hours by lunchtime on Friday. And a few firms have tried having employees work twelve hours a day for three days, followed by four days off. Firms that have used these forms of compressed workweeks include John Hancock, Atlantic Richfield, and R. J. Reynolds. One problem with this schedule is that if everyone in the organization is off at the same time, the firm may have no one on duty to handle problems or deal with outsiders on the off day. On the other hand, if it staggers days off across the workforce, people who don’t get the more desirable days off (Monday and Friday, for most people) may be jealous or resentful. Another problem is that when employees put in too much time in a single day, they tend to get tired and perform at a lower level later in the day.

A popular schedule some organizations are beginning to use is called a “nine-eighty” schedule. Under this arrangement, an employee works a traditional schedule one week and a compressed schedule the next, getting every other Friday off. That is, they work eighty hours (the equivalent of two weeks of full-time work) in nine days. By alternating the regular and compressed schedules across half of its workforce, the organization is fully staffed at all times and still gives employees two additional full days off each month. Shell Oil and Amoco Chemicals are two of the firms that currently use this schedule.

Flexible Work Schedules

Another promising alternative work arrangement is flexible work schedules, sometimes called flextime. The compressed work schedules discussed above give employees time off during “normal” working hours, but they must still follow a regular and defined schedule on the days they do work. Flextime, however, usually gives employees less say over what days they work but more personal control over when they work on those days.

Figure 5 illustrates how flextime works. The workday is broken down into two categories: flexible time and core time. All employees must be at their workstations during core time, but they can choose their own schedules during flexible time. Thus, one employee may choose to start work early in the morning and leave in mid-afternoon, another to start in the late morning and work until late afternoon, and a third to start early in the morning, take a long lunch break, and work until late afternoon.

The major advantage of this approach, as already noted, is that workers get to tailor their workday to fit their personal needs. A person who needs to visit the dentist in the late afternoon can just start work early. A person who stays out late one night can start work late the next day. And the person who needs to run some errands during lunch can take a longer midday break. On the other hand, flextime is more difficult to manage, because others in the organization may not be sure when a person will be available for meetings other than during the core time. Expenses such as utilities will also be higher, since the organization must remain open for a longer period each day.
Some organizations have experimented with a plan in which workers set their own hours, but then must follow that schedule each day. Others allow workers to modify their own schedule each day. Organizations that have used the flexible work schedule method for arranging work include Control Data Corporation, DuPont, Metropolitan Life, Texaco, and some offices in the U.S. government.

**Job Sharing**

Yet another potentially useful alternative work arrangement is job sharing. In job sharing, two part-time employees share one full-time job. Job sharing may be desirable for people who want to work only part-time or when job markets are tight. For its part, the organization can accommodate the preferences of a broader range of employees and may benefit from the talents of more people. Perhaps the simplest job-sharing arrangement to visualize is that of a receptionist. To share this job, one worker would staff the receptionist’s desk from, say, 8:00 a.m. to noon each day, the office might close from noon to 1:00 p.m., and a second worker would staff the desk from 1:00 in the afternoon until 5:00. To the casual observer or visitor to the office, the fact that two people serve in one job is essentially irrelevant. The responsibilities of the job in the morning and the afternoon are not likely to be interdependent. Thus, the position can easily be broken down into two or perhaps even more components.

Organizations sometimes offer job sharing as a way to entice more workers to the organization. If a particular kind of job is difficult to fill, a job-sharing arrangement might make it more attractive to more people. There are also cost benefits to the organization. Since the employees may only be working part-time, the organization does not have to give them the same benefits that full-time employees receive. The organization can also tap into a wider array of skills when it provides job-sharing arrangements. The firm gets the advantage of the two sets of skills from one job.

Some workers like job sharing because it gives them flexibility and freedom. Certain workers, for example, may only want part-time work. Stepping into a shared job may also give them a chance to work in an organization that otherwise only wants to hire full-time employees. When the job sharer isn’t working, she or he may attend school, take care of the family, or simply enjoy leisure time.

Job sharing does not work for every organization, and it isn’t attractive to all workers, but it has produced enough success stories to suggest that it will be around for a long time. Among the organizations that are particularly committed to job-sharing programs are the Bank of Montreal, United Airlines, and the National School Board Association. Each of these organizations, and dozens more like them, reports that job sharing has become a critically important part of its human resource system. Although job sharing has not been scientifically evaluated, it appears to be a useful alternative to traditional work scheduling.
**Telecommuting**

A relatively new approach to alternative work arrangements is telecommuting—allowing employees to spend part of their time working off-site, usually at home. By using e-mail, computer networks, and other technology, many employees can maintain close contact with their organization and do as much work at home as they could in their office. The increased power and sophistication of modern communication technology is making telecommuting easier and easier.

On the plus side, many employees like telecommuting because it gives them added flexibility. By spending one or two days a week at home, for instance, they have the same kind of flexibility to manage personal activities as is afforded by flextime or compressed schedules. Some employees also feel that they get more work done by staying at home, because they are less likely to be interrupted. Organizations may benefit for several reasons as well: (1) they can reduce absenteeism and turnover, since employees need to take less “formal” time off, and (2) they can save on facilities such as parking space, because fewer people are at work on any given day.

On the other hand, although many employees thrive under this arrangement, others do not. Some grow to feel isolated and miss the social interaction of the workplace. And some people simply lack the self-control and discipline to walk from the breakfast table to their desk and start working. Managers may also encounter coordination difficulties in scheduling meetings and other activities that require face-to-face contact. Still, given the boom in communication technology and the pressures for flexibility, many more organizations will no doubt be using telecommuting in the years to come.

**GOAL SETTING AND MOTIVATION**

Goal setting is a very useful method of enhancing employee performance. From a motivational perspective, a goal is a desirable objective. Goals are used for two purposes in most organizations. First, they provide a useful framework for managing motivation. Managers and employees can set goals for themselves and then work toward them. Thus, if the organization’s goal is to increase sales by 10 percent, a manager can use individual goals to help attain an overall goal. Second, goals are an effective control device; control is monitoring by management of how well the organization is performing. Comparing people’s short-term performances with their goals can be an effective way to monitor the organization’s long-run performance.

Social learning theory perhaps best describes the role and importance of goal setting in organizations. This perspective suggests that feelings of pride or shame about performance are a function of the extent to which people achieve their goals. A person who achieves a goal will be proud of having done so, whereas a person who fails to achieve a goal will feel personal disappointment, and perhaps even shame. People’s

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