

Building a Culture of **FLEXIBILITY** Strategies for Success

By Karen Noble, WFD Consulting



The demographics and values of the workforce are rapidly changing. Are your organization’s work culture, norms and management practices flexible enough to address today’s—and tomorrow’s—workforce changes and business challenges?

Mary works as a senior analyst for a large corporation. From May through October she works from an office on floor 31 of the Northeast division. And from November through April she works from her home in the southern United States. Several floors below Mary, Samantha works an 80-percent schedule granted by her manager shortly after she returned from maternity leave one year ago. Down the hall from Samantha, Mike wants to work remotely, but his boss told him that remote work isn’t possible in his area. In the newly acquired California division, an entire workgroup uses compressed workweeks to address its long commute times while, at corporate headquarters, few workers have formal flexible work options, and the unspoken requirement to work 50 to 60 hours in the office makes flexibility out of the question.

The company’s flexibility policy includes five formal flexible work options and an agreement form to be signed by employees and managers. The policy text encourages managers to support employees’ work-life needs.

Where Does this Organization Fall on the Flexibility Spectrum?

Based on the fairly broad range of flexibility in place across the hypothetical company above, where would you place them on the Flexibility Spectrum shown in Figure 1 on page 68?

If you guessed, “Flexibility Has Many Faces” or “New Ways of Working,” your assessment would be logical given the

number of locations and functions across the organization in which different types of flexibility exist. However, you would be wrong. If you guessed “Policies and Programs in Place,” you would be closer, but still incorrect. You could probably argue that reality lies somewhere between “Individual Accommodations” and “Policies and Programs in Place,” but be careful. If you give this (or your) organization credit for being further along than it deserves, complacency may set in and slow or impede progress toward meaningful positive change.

Why This Diagnosis?

Let’s say we know that no business-oriented flexibility request process and decision-making tool exists in this hypothetical company. This typically means that the decision-making is likely inconsistent, with varying levels of attention paid to business realities and needs. Probably missing are careful analysis, creative thinking and detailed, concrete discussions about how the employees will be able to accomplish all their job tasks using the requested flexible-work options. It’s unlikely that important questions were considered, such as: Can Samantha’s work requirements be reconfigured to enable her to completely cover them without burdening others? Or will she ultimately work just as many hours for less pay? Can Mike work remotely if some out-of-the-box thinking is applied to how his job is done and his performance is measured? What about Mary? Can her work be seasonally reconfigured to be feasible from a different location without detrimentally impacting effectiveness and productivity?

For Mary, Samantha, Mike and even the entire California workgroup, a continent away from the inflexible norms and work practices at the East Coast headquarters, the likelihood is that all of the flexible work options were made in one-off conversations with little or no awareness and/or

use of company policy. Without a standard, required request process, each manager’s attitude and idiosyncratic decision-making process likely played an important role in the final outcome, resulting in inconsistent and inequitable treatment. The requests were most likely triggered by and focused on each employee’s personal reason, rather than on business needs. With no tracking system or measurement process in place, it is impossible to know how many other requests were denied (or never made) because the work environment was not supportive of flexibility. Therefore, despite the existence of a policy “on the books” and a number of flexible work options in some locations, this company is likely stuck in the first stage of the Flexibility Spectrum: “Individual Accommodations.”

How Can an Organization Move Flexibility Toward New Ways of Working?

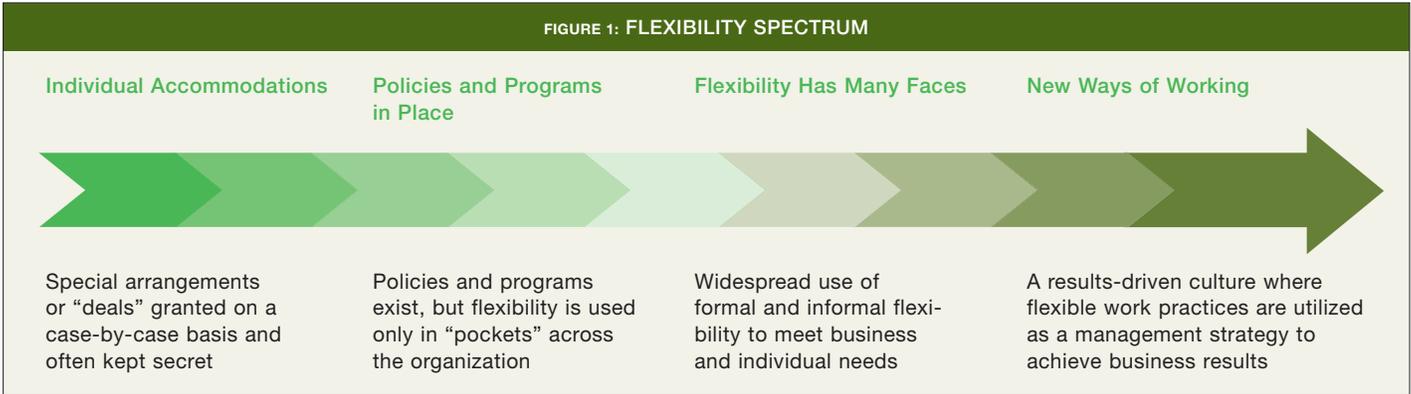
Many organizations measure their progress toward a flexible work culture by whether they can check off activities on a list of goals they associate with implementing flexibility, for example:

- Company policy? *Check.*
- CEO statement of support? *Check.*
- Briefing for managers? *Check.*
- Some flexible-work success stories in the monthly company bulletin? *Check.*
- Policy overview on the company intranet? *Check.*

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ Many organizations measure their progress toward a flexible work culture by whether they can check off activities on a list of goals they associate with implementing flexibility.
- ⇒ It is critical to develop a master plan for flexibility implementation that can be understood and followed by all.
- ⇒ Development of a flexibility strategy should be informed by a clear vision as well as an understanding of external and internal drivers, organizational challenges and potential business outcomes of establishing a flexible work environment.

FIGURE 1: FLEXIBILITY SPECTRUM



Source: WFD Consulting

- Basic flexibility assessment completed? *Check.*
- Multiyear strategic business plan for creating a flexible work culture? *Oops.*
- Head-count policy changed to FTE? *Uh oh.*
- Flexibility positioning language and components that promote a business-based decision-making approach? *Oops.*
- Required use of a flexibility request process to determine how and whether the tasks of the job can be achieved on the proposed option? *Uh oh.*
- Senior- and line-management commitment to taking personal, visible action to support and sustain flexible ways of working? *Let's see ... Nope.*
- A structure that holds managers accountable for using flexible ways of working as a business- and people-management tool? *Darn.*
- Performance management system, reward structure and operating culture aligned and geared to promote evaluation of performance only by results (vs. long hours or face time)? *Missing that too.*
- Employees' personal reasons consistently eliminated from decision-making? Really? *Oops.*

To avoid these and other common potholes on the road to building a flexible work culture, it is critical to develop a framework that can be understood and followed by all. Any organizational change strategy should be embedded into a multiyear approach to promote, expand and sustain change in ways of working, management practices and norms to

achieve business objectives. Building a culture of flexibility requires a strategic change approach. (See Figure 2 on page 70.) Development of a flexibility strategy should be informed by a clear understanding of external and internal drivers and of organizational challenges to creating a flexible work culture, such as face time, impediments to career advancement, workload issues, equity, etc. Here are some critical steps for moving flexibility forward and building a culture of flexibility:

Establish a platform for change to a flexible work culture:

Assess the state of flexibility in your organization, using the Flexibility Spectrum as a guide:

- Supportiveness of the culture and management practices
- Utilization and need/desire
- Organizational barriers
- Business outcomes—current and potential.

Build a long-term change strategy that is structured to promote business goals and outcomes.

Identify and build champions at the senior-management levels:

- Use relevant quantitative and qualitative data (statistics, ROI data, stories, quotes, exit-interview results, etc.), both internal and external.

Establish a robust, business-driven policy and implementation “backbone.”

Use a cross-functional team to:

- Guide development of clear and equitable policies, practices, tools and guidelines.
- Act as change agents who will “seed” the environment and build momentum and buy-in.
- Establish a formalized process to request, track and measure the effectiveness of formal flexible work options.

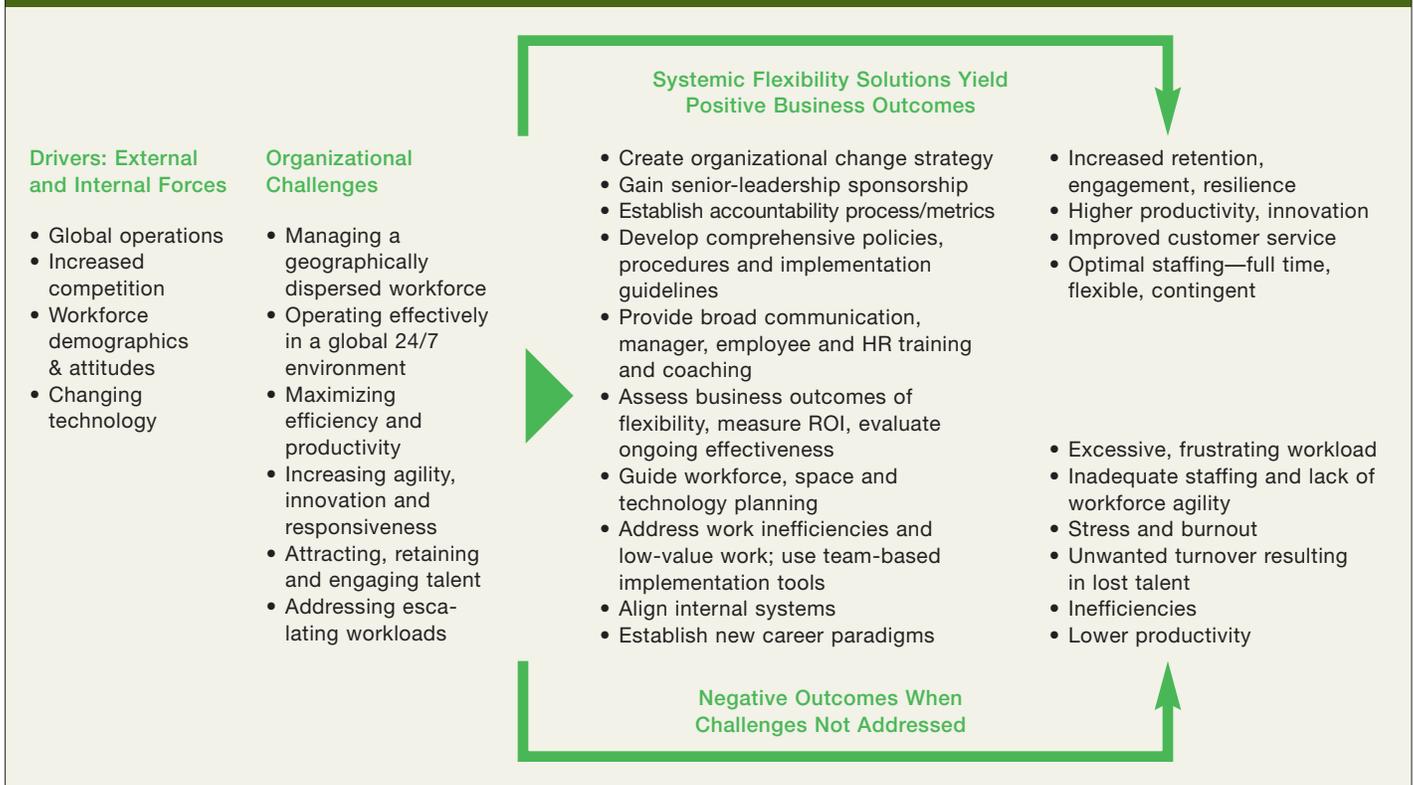
Create organizational buy-in and competence:

- Position flexibility as a business strategy, not personal accommodation or entitlement.
- Develop an effective, multiyear communication strategy.
 - Include a flexibility brand.
 - Target key messages.
 - Use multiple channels and platforms.
 - Reinforce and evolve.
- Provide manager and employee training, tools and online skills reinforcement.
- Coach senior managers to elicit active support and to ensure effective messaging and aligned behaviors.
 - Invest in human resources by creating subject-matter experts among key HR leaders, include line managers, as much as possible.
 - Hold all levels accountable for using best practices and promoting change.

Align management systems with flexible work options:

- Performance management
- Head count

FIGURE 2: BUILDING A CULTURE OF FLEXIBILITY



Source: WFD Consulting

- Benefits/compensation
- Career advancement

Work to ensure that technology strategy addresses distributed work and a dispersed workforce as the norm:

- Lead collaboration between human resources, IT and real estate to create an effective platform for work in the 21st century—anytime and anywhere.

Monitor implementation patterns:

- Implement systems to monitor and track flexible-work use, satisfaction and effectiveness, patterns of management decisions and employee requests.

Identify and measure desired outcomes and business results:

- Measure work-environment supportiveness, not numbers using flexible work.
- Assess management practices and overall supportiveness of the work environment.

Design ongoing evaluation and measurement systems and use them consistently and recalibrate often:

- Determine opportunities for continuous improvement.
- Adjust your strategy accordingly.
- Identify methods to continuously reinforce and improve processes and procedures.
- Hold managers accountable in meaningful ways—reward and recognize.

Conclusion

The momentum to create flexible work environments is growing. But don't get caught in the trap of developing one-off arrangements for each employee based on personal need. By utilizing these tips, your organization will be on the road to developing plans that mutually benefit the employee and the business. And, if you can do only one (albeit complicated) thing: Do whatever it takes to create a work culture in which employees are measured *only* by results and provided

the organizational and manager support to achieve them. WS

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