

IN THIS ISSUE:

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL: WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY

by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes, Ph.D., and Michael A. Smyer, Ph.D.

Introduction

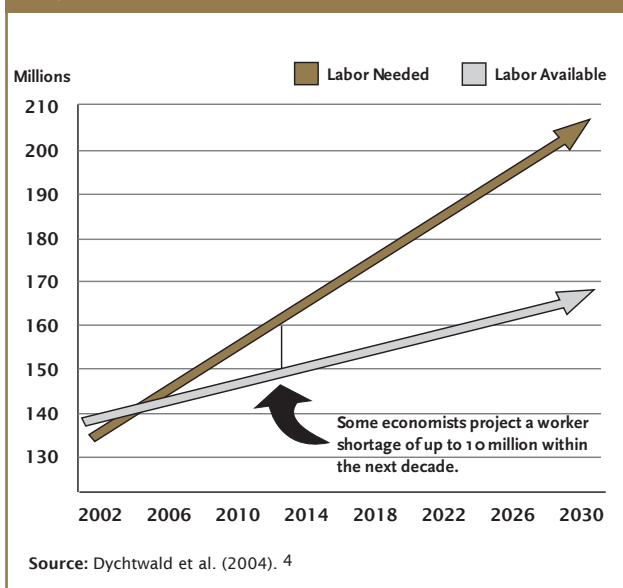
As baby boomers prepare for retirement, managers at the workplace are actively asking: "How will we staff our projects? Who will succeed the baby boomers? Who has the experience and institutional knowledge needed for sustainable success? Are we ready for the graying of the workforce?"

Unless there are changes in migration patterns, fertility trends, or the labor force participation of specific groups of adults, employers across the country could be facing dramatic labor force or "seasoned talent" shortages. This is particularly true in those sectors that are either planning for significant growth or sectors that are already experiencing difficulties attracting and retaining competent workers (such as health care, education, and public services including utilities).¹ As noted by Henretta, "... given a particular level of demand for experienced workers (or workers overall) and holding other factors constant, the exit of the retirement age cohort in 2016 ... will affect employers much more than retirement does today."²

The Employment Policy Foundation reports that the demand for labor in the U.S. will exceed the supply by 2006, with a projected shortage of six million qualified workers by 2012. Furthermore, they predict

that the shortage will continue to increase through the first three decades of the 21st century.³ (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Labor Force Supply and Demand



This Issue Brief discusses opportunities to create flexible workplaces by restructuring jobs and redesigning work so that:

- businesses benefit from the continued contributions of valued employees;
- society benefits from the extended productivity of older workers who choose to remain in the labor force;
- older workers and their families benefit from the increased resilience that can result from continued labor force affiliation.

Projections about labor market shortages reflect assumptions about a number of factors related to changes in the composition and size of the labor force but, as Dychtwald et al. state, "... of most concern is the potentially debilitating mass retirement that threatens to starve many businesses of key talent in the next ten to 15 years." 4 By 2008, 24 million older employees may exit the workforce, potentially leaving 4.6 million jobs unfilled. The highest turnover will be in executive, administrative and managerial occupations, resulting in nearly three million job openings. 5

Therefore, it is not surprising that some employers are beginning to consider steps they might take to encourage older workers to remain in the labor force as one way to adapt to current and anticipated talent shortages. 6

There are distinct opportunities for businesses to retain valued older workers. Surveys consistently find that a majority of workers aged 50-plus indicate a strong preference to work for an extended period of time, often beyond the traditional retirement age of 65.

However, there is often a catch to the willingness of older workers to continue to work. Older workers with sufficient financial resources who can choose whether or not to continue to work may indicate that the decision is contingent on their access to different types of flexible work arrangements. Older workers might seek increased flexibility so that they can explore new types of work experiences, engage in non-work interests, or respond to family obligations.

Several studies have found that older workers who want to participate in the labor force past the traditional retirement age prefer to find work that is not a rigid 9-to-5 job. In fact, research suggests that among those older workers who retire and then decide to work during their "retirement years," a majority (71 percent) report that the reason they "retired" was a desire for more flexibility than their pre-retirement jobs afforded. 7

The problem? Many high quality public and private sector jobs are structured as full-time, full-year positions. Although most older workers appear to want or need to continue to hold meaningful jobs before they decide they are ready for full-time retirement, older workers often find that their choices are limited either to continuing their work at the same place of employment in the same job on a full-time basis or to seeking part-time work elsewhere (usually at or near minimum wage without benefits and oftentimes with little control over their work schedules). In essence, most jobs are mismatched with the competencies, needs, and preferences of older workers. 8

We have invited members of the Center's SENIOR (Sloan Employer Network Informing Organizational Response) Advisors to contribute to this Issue Brief. The comments made by the SENIOR Advisors not only reflect their organizations' strategic interests in issues related to aging and work, but also their personal expertise in different types of workplace flexibility.

SENIOR (Sloan Employer Network Informing Organizational Response) Advisors help the Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility develop partnerships with business leaders and decision-makers at the workplace who can:

- provide advice about questions related to aging and work that are most important to the business community;
- make suggestions about the type of information that is most useful to workplace practitioners;
- recommend strategies for sharing research findings and new ideas about practices with business leaders across the country.

What is a flexible workplace?

The term flexibility can mean very different things to different people. According to the Merriam-Webster Online , flexibility can be:

- characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements <a flexible foreign policy> <a flexible schedule>. ⁹

A flexible workplace, then, might be one that is able to adapt to the new requirements of an aging workforce, meaning that "... the employer redesigns jobs to take advantage of older workers who wish to remain engaged but on terms different from full-time employment." ¹⁰

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which supports the Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility as well as other projects in its Workplace Flexibility Initiative, suggests that "... workplace flexibility must be proportionately fair to employees and employers; and successful flexibility efforts take into account the changing needs of individuals throughout the course of their professional and personal lives." ¹¹

"MIT offers a wide range of flexible options for its employees and provides guidelines to managers and employees to adapt to specific department needs. The University recognizes the importance of institutional knowledge in its retirees, encourages those who are interested to explore work opportunities across MIT, and sees this as a win-win. The retiree is able to access his/her retirement benefits and earn supplemental income, while MIT retains an engaged, highly productive and valued employee."

**Ellen Cushman, Retirement Counselor,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

An important characteristic of a flexible workplace is that it offers employees some choice and at least some decision-making control so that an employee's work situation not only meets business priorities and objectives, but is also a reasonable fit with that person's talents, needs, and preferences. Workplace flexibility cannot be achieved when employees are offered inappropriate choices or choices that are associated with negative trade-offs. Managers who say, "Sure, you can work any schedule you want as

long as you put in your 80 hours a week," miss the point. Similarly, a part-time job is not flexibility if an employee needs and is seeking a full-time position.

A flexible workplace might offer choices with regard to:

- which hours an employee can work (flexible schedules, compressed work weeks);
- the number of hours an employee can work (full-time jobs, part-time jobs, reduced hours work, job shares, phased retirement);
- the places where the employee can work (telework or alternate work locations);
- choices about the tasks assigned to the job (with the potential for work redesign that takes into consideration the older workers' experiences, abilities, and preferences).

The Families and Work Institute Options for Working Flexibly

Notions of a flexible workplace might seem abstract, but the Families and Work Institute has identified 17 different work options for work. Flexibility can mean employees are able to:

- ✓ periodically change starting and quitting times;
- ✓ change starting and quitting times on a daily basis;
- ✓ have control of when they take breaks;
- ✓ have control/choice over which shifts they work;
- ✓ have control over paid and unpaid overtime hours;
- ✓ move from full-time to part-time and back again while remaining in the same position or level;
- ✓ share jobs;
- ✓ work a compressed workweek for at least part of the year;
- ✓ work part of the workweek at home occasionally;
- ✓ work at home or off-site on a regular basis;
- ✓ return to work gradually after childbirth or adoption;
- ✓ take time off for important personal and family needs without loss of pay;
- ✓ phase into retirement;
- ✓ take sabbaticals paid or unpaid of six months or more and return to a comparable job;
- ✓ take time for education/training to improve skills;
- ✓ take extended career breaks for caregiving or other family/personal responsibilities;
- ✓ work part year on an annual basis.

Source: Bond et al. (2005). ¹²

Flexibility: Work Schedules

1. What are some flexible work schedule options?

Flexible schedule options offer workers additional control over the specific hours that they devote to paid work. The option to work on a flexible schedule can be extended to employees working either full- or parttime. Flexible schedules may be fixed (i.e., the employee selects an alternative work schedule but must adhere to that schedule) or varied. Some employers allow limited flexibility in employees' starting and quitting times but require that employees be present at the workplace during "core" work hours. Some older workers might prefer to work before 9 a.m.; others might prefer to work after 5 p.m.; and still others might prefer to compress their work weeks into a four-day week.

"In a late 2004 survey of GSK employees over 50, those who do plan to retire cite more flexibility in working hours as the second most common incentive that would cause them to delay retirement (higher salary being the most commonly mentioned incentive) and 82 percent would like to continue to work within the company."

Annette Bryd, Work/Life Manager, GlaxoSmithKline

2. Why might flexible schedules be important to older workers?

Flexible work schedules can help employees of all ages manage both their work and family responsibilities. Flexible schedules can be appealing to older workers for a range of personal and family reasons. In some cases, having the ability to work a flexible schedule makes it possible for older workers to engage in unpaid (volunteer) community activities. Other older workers prefer flexible schedules because this type of flexibility helps them to manage their caregiving responsibilities, such as providing some assistance to an elderly parent or a spouse with a medical disability.

3. Do older workers have flexible schedules available to them? Do they use them?

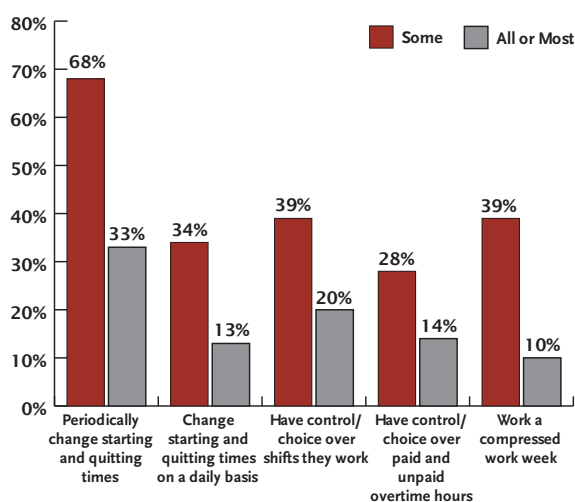
Flexible schedule options are consistently identified as one of the most effective strategies for attracting and retaining older workers. The Conference Board reports that "One-quarter of the (older worker) respondents (to its survey) indicate that they are continuing to work because the company provided them with the

flexibility that they need, and nearly half say that more flexibility would prevent them from retiring." 13 Female older workers, white older workers and exempt older workers are more likely to indicate that the availability of flexible schedule options would encourage them to extend their participation in the labor force more than other groups of older workers. 13 Research suggests that employees' use of flexible schedules also has potential benefits for the workplace, as well as for employees.

Unfortunately, there is a mismatch between the extent of schedule flexibility desired by older workers and the amount actually offered to them. Analyses of the Health and Retirement Study found that only 18 percent of older workers report that they have access to flexible schedules .14

Many companies report that they offer options to their employees to work flexible schedules. For example, according to data from the National Study of Employers conducted by the Families and Work Institute, 68 percent of U.S. workplaces allow some of their employees to periodically change starting and quitting time, and 33 percent report that they allow all or most of their employees to do this. (See Figure 2.)

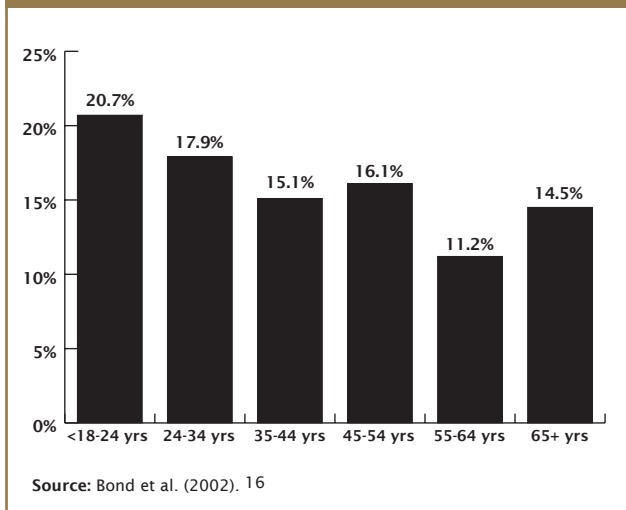
Figure 2: Availability of Flexible Schedules - Percent of Workplaces



Source: Bond et al. (2005). 12

As indicated by Figure 3, older workers may not use some flexible employment options, even if they are available. Business leaders might want to consider why workers in the 55-64 year-old age group use options such as flexible work hours less than employees in other age groups. It is possible that the structure of the jobs assumed by higher percentages of these older workers makes it difficult for them to use flexible schedules “a lot.” Alternatively, these older workers might have concerns that the use of flexible schedules might be perceived as an indication that they are “phasing into retirement” and could make them more vulnerable to downsizing.

Figure 3: Percent of Workforce Using Flexible Schedules “A Lot” by Age



Flexibility: Number of Hours Worked

1. What are the options? Most workplaces have two basic categories for employees’ work hours: full-time and part-time. The definitions of full- and part-time jobs vary from place to place, either by contract or by custom. Typically, the hours for part-time jobs are calculated on a weekly basis, but some employers offer employees work on a part-time basis over the course of a year, making it possible for those employees to work full-time for some months and then not work at all during other months. In some cases, employers and employees view these “reduced hours” arrangements as long-term. In other situations, they are seen as work structures that can be renegotiated from time to time.

Three types of “reduced hours” work most often offered to employees are: part-time positions, job shares, and phased retirement. Although part-time positions and job shares allow employees to work on a “less than fulltime” schedule, they are usually structured in different ways. Part-time jobs are commonly developed as jobs that can be completed in less than 35 hours per week and are often not established as positions that are eligible for benefits. In contrast, job shares are positions that are structured as a full-time job, and the job is “split” between two people who also split the compensation and benefits for that position.

Phased retirement, a special type of part-time work arrangement designed specifically for older workers, is “... any human resources program which allows older workers to reduce their work hours without changing employers and eases the transition into retirement ...” 3

2. Do older workers want to work less? Part-time work options are realistic only if older workers do not need all of the income that comes from working fulltime. Many older Americans set target income goals for their retirement years and then work as much as they need to “close the gap” between anticipated resources and the money needed to support a desired standard of living. Sometimes, this financial calculation results in older Americans seeking parttime employment.

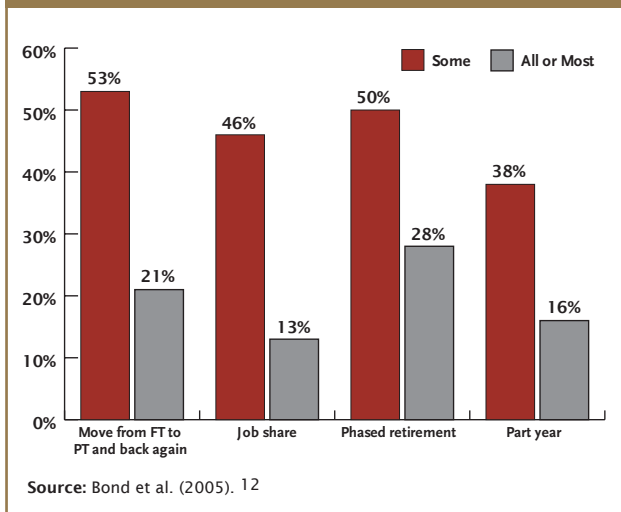
Two of every five of the older worker respondents to a recent Conference Board survey said that they would like to work part-time. This preference was more pronounced among those who plan to retire in the next five years. Women were more likely than men, and white older workers were more likely than those of other races to indicate an interest in part-time work. 13

According to findings of The Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study, a majority (79 percent) of older workers aged 55-74 prefer to remain working, but most of them do not want to work full-time. Furthermore “... nearly half (48 percent) prefer to work significantly fewer hours ...” than they do. 7

Finally, one survey of older workers (50 – 70 years old) found that one-third of the respondents reported they would work longer (i.e., retire later than planned) if offered a phased retirement arrangement. 17

3. What is the picture at the workplace? As indicated in Figure 4, the National Study of Employers found that 53 percent of all organizations report that they allow some employees to move from full- to part-time and back again while remaining in the same position or level, while 21 percent indicated that they allow all or most employees to do this.

Figure 4: Availability of Reduced Hours - Percent of Workplaces



A recent study of U.S. employers with 20 or more employees found:

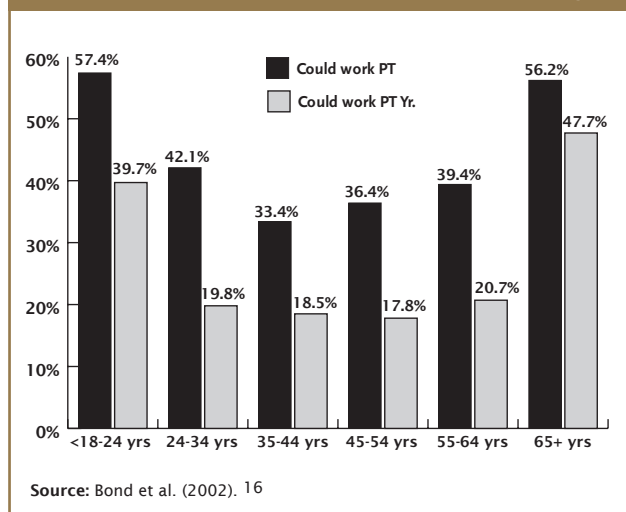
- 73 percent of the workplaces indicated that they would allow older employees to reduce the number of work hours before their “official” retirement. However, only 14 percent report having a formal phased retirement policy that applies to all employees.
- One-third (36 percent) of those employers who said that they allow older employees to reduce their hours before their official retirement indicated that at least one employee had used a phased retirement arrangement in the previous three years.
- Although only 7 percent of the respondents stated that they require that the employee first retire and then return as a part-time worker, 84 percent of these workplaces said they would provide access to the health insurance offered to full-time employees, and 58 percent said that employees would be able to simultaneously draw pension benefits.

- Clerical and professional workers have more access to phased retirement options than managers. 18

Unfortunately, most older workers who want to work a reduced schedule report that this option is not available to them. Analysis of data from the Health and Retirement Study found, “Among current employees, 85 percent of men and 65 percent of women usually work 35 or more hours for 50 or more weeks per year. Of these full-time workers, relatively few say they could reduce their regular work hours on their current job. About three quarters of men and women say it would *not* be possible.” 2

Information gathered by the Families and Work Institute indicates that workers in the 55-64 age bracket are less likely than those 65 years and over to feel that part-time and part-year options are available to them. (See Figure 5). Employers may want to consider whether the structure of jobs assumed by employees in the 55- 64 year age group inadvertently limits options for reduced hours work.

Figure 5: Percent of Workforce that Could Work Part-time or Part-year by Age

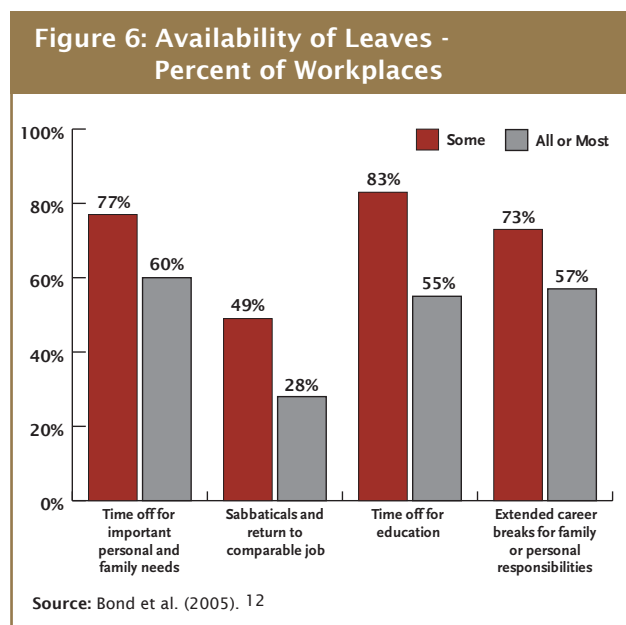


The University of North Carolina established a phased retirement program for full-time tenured faculty who are 50 years of age or older. Since 1998, 455 faculty members have made phased retirement arrangements. This program is rated favorably by the faculty members, with 93 percent of those who used it indicating that they would use it again. 19 Pinnacle West Capital Corporation, Bon Secours Richmond

Health System, SSM Health Care, and St. Mary's Medical Center are among the AARP "Best Companies for Employees Over 50" that offer this option. Two companies offering part-time and/or job share options are Scripps Health and Adecco Employment Services. 20

Flexibility: Exiting and Re-Entering the Labor Force

1. What are the options? Many employers establish mechanisms that enable employees to leave their employment for varying periods of time and then come back to the same (or similar) position. Short-term leaves might include sick time, personal time, or time for "small necessities." Employees might seek leaves for moderate-to longer term for medical reasons, to fulfill family caregiving responsibilities, to pursue education and training (including sabbaticals), or to engage in community service initiatives. (See Figure 6)



Older workers interested in moving in and out of the workforce while maintaining a relationship with the same workplace might seek alternative employer-employee relationships. These relationships might include having the older worker transition to serving as a consultant or contractor or becoming a temporary or project-based worker.

A self-employed consultant or contract worker completes project-based and temporary work assignments. In some cases, the older worker establishes a "client base" whereas others are hired back almost exclusively by their previous employers for a limited number of hours. Some companies have found it to be advantageous to create "temporary pools" comprised of retirees. As long as the relevant IRS regulations are followed (i.e., regarding the number of hours per year a person works at a single workplace, etc.), these alternatives can offer some older workers the flexibility they desire to move in and out of the labor force. Published reports contain references to a number of companies that have established this employment structure for their retirees, including Adecco Employment Services and St. Mary's Medical Center and Hoffman-La Roche. 20; 4. Aerospace Corporation hires its retirees as temporary workers for up to 1,000 hours to meet unanticipated staff needs, compensating its retirees at the rate of their old base salaries. 4

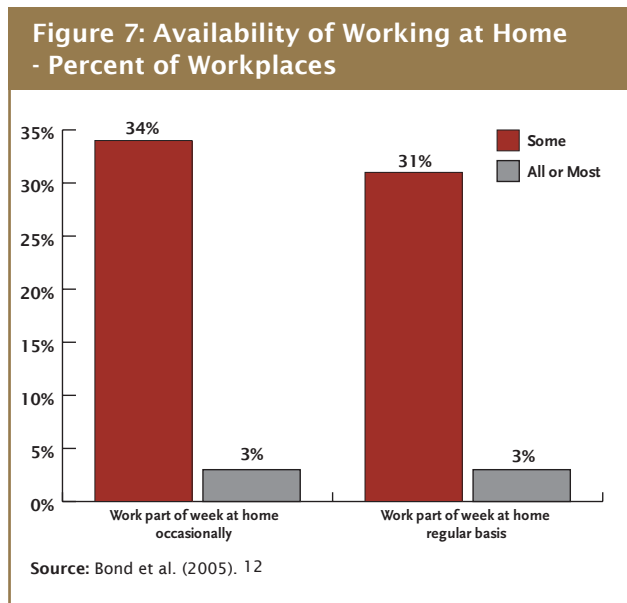
2. Why might short- and long-term leaves be important to older workers? Older workers who have marketable competencies and want to exercise control over when and how much they work might seek options to move in and out of the labor force so that they can pursue either professional interests (such as starting their own businesses or training for a new career), personal interests, or family obligations.

The Conference Board's survey of older workers found that 13 percent of those who had planned to retire in the next 5 years and, 14 percent of those who had not, stated that a sabbatical would keep them from retiring. Exempt employees were more likely to have expressed an interest in sabbaticals than non-exempts. The Conference Board also found that more of the exempt employees who indicated an interest in reducing their hours and working part-time wanted to work either as contractors or consultants (even if that resulted in a loss of benefits). Male older workers (37 percent) were three times as likely as female workers (12 percent) to indicate an interest in working as a consultant. 13

3. What is the picture regarding temporary work? Several companies report that they save money if they hire their own retirees as temporary workers rather than contracting for this service. Cigna sees an advantage in having temporary workers who are familiar with business practices and who may already have relationships with some employees. 4; 13

Flexibility: Alternative Work Locations

1. What are the options? Telework (“telecommuting” or “remote working”) options allow older workers to work at alternative locations, such as their home or a satellite office for some or all of their work hours. About one-third of employers make working at home available as an option for their employees. (See Figure 7).



A few employers have developed policies that allow workers to switch locations, sometimes on a seasonal basis. Borders Group, which includes the Borders retail book stores, has instituted a “passport” program that allows employees to work at more than a single location. This option makes it possible for older workers who reside in one location for some months during the year and another location for the remaining months to maintain steady employment with the company. Home Depot has adopted a similar practice. 6

2. Why might alternative work locations be important to older workers? Working from alternative locations can reduce – and in some cases eliminate – commuting time. When coupled with flexible schedule options, some older workers may find that teleworking enables them to either pursue their personal interests or to more easily meet certain family obligations.

The Conference Board found that exempt older

workers and female older workers expressed more interest in telework than either non-exempt employees and men; furthermore, approximately one-third of older workers indicated that having access to a telework option would delay their transition into retirement. 13

As part of its work/life strategy, Prudential Financial seeks to maximize utilization of flexible work options at the company. About 30 percent of its domestic workforce each month either telecommutes, works remotely, works a compressed schedule, is part-time, or job shares. On its annual employee opinion survey, users of alternative work indicate that they are significantly more satisfied than non-users on 94 percent of the questions – questions that link to employee commitment and retention.

Maureen Corcoran, Vice President, Diversity, Prudential Financial

3. What are the benefits of telework? Employers find that telework options can offer benefits such as decreased costs associated with reduced office space. In addition, teleworkers report higher job satisfaction than those who work at the office on a regular basis. 21

Flexibility to Change Jobs and Careers

1. What options might enable an older worker to consider changing jobs or even careers? Some older workers want to devote their later career years to jobs that either allow them to develop new competencies or ones that are less demanding. These older employees may be interested in making transitions to different jobs within the company. Sometimes, these new jobs are either lateral moves or possibly moves to positions that result in a pay decrease. The option to switch jobs is facilitated by the availability of company-sponsored training that reflects a firm’s commitment to lifelong learning.

Although some older workers want jobs that allow them to use competencies they developed in previous jobs (i.e., “career continuous jobs”), others seek job that make it possible for them explore new careers. In yet other cases, older workers accept jobs that enable them to focus attention on avocational interests (i.e., “discontinuous jobs”).

This distinction between career continuous and career discontinuous jobs is important. Although jobs in either category might be “quality” jobs, many career discontinuous jobs are so-called “bridge jobs.” Typically, older workers try to find bridge jobs that provide supplementary money and benefits (particularly health care benefits) until they have access to sufficient financial resources (including savings accounts, higher levels of social security, and Medicare) for complete retirement.

2. Why do older workers want options to change jobs? Studies suggest that the physical and mental health of older people who work is better than those who are retired on a full-time basis.

3. What is the picture of job changing flexibility at the workplace? AARP has noted that opportunities for training and job transitions are available at The Principal Financial Group and Deere & Company. 20 Deloitte and Touche, a management consulting firm, has also redesigned career paths so that they better

fit with the preferences of some of the firm’s older workers. 4

“Bridge employment includes both part-and fulltime work that may or may not be similar to the work performed prior to retirement and can serve several important functions for individuals, organizations, and society ... bridge employment allows older workers to match their desired and actual levels of workforce participation. Research has linked such a match to increased psychological well-being. It can also allow older workers to pursue different types of jobs or provide a gradual transition from full-time work to full-time retirement, thereby facilitating adaptation and adjustment to full-time retirement. For organizations, bridge employment can allow them to retain the valuable skills and organizational intelligence of their older workers at a reduced cost.”

Adams & Rau, 2004. 22

How ready are US workplaces?

Which factors will “pull” older workers into the workforce and which will “push” them into retirement?

Certainly, a number of personal and family factors affect older workers’ decisions about employment including age, financial stability, physical and mental well-being, and personal and family life situations. However, the level of older workers’ satisfaction with their work and the extent of choice and control also affect the decisions they make about extending their employment or retiring.

Unfortunately, the results of a recent survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (2003) suggest that most employers are not yet ready for the graying of the workforce:

- only 7 percent of the HR respondents indicated that their organizations had developed a plan in anticipation of the large numbers of employees, 55 years and over, expected to retire before 2010;
- more than half (59 percent) do not actively attempt to retain valued older workers; 23
- only 24 percent use flexible schedules as a direct strategy for retaining older workers. 24

Workers of all ages seek some flexibility (even if younger workers might want flexibility for different reasons than their older colleagues). In fact, “... as a general rule, employers find it all but impossible to create benefits specifically for special groups of workers, whether they are older workers, younger workers, or any other specific category of workers.” 15 Therefore, although the adoption and implementation of flexible workplace policies and practices would help employers to address some potentially pressing human resource problems associated with the anticipated retirement of the baby boomers, these same policies and practices could also be an effective human capital investment strategy relevant to workers of all ages.

Why is the Center on Aging & Work focusing on flexible work options for older workers?

The Center on Aging & Work's investigators are examining the extent to which the adoption, implementation, and utilization of flexible work options are related to employers' efforts to:

- recognize the assets of older workers;
- identify the ways that older workers can continue to be productive and effective at the workplace;
- create incentives for older workers to remain in the workforce;
- redesign the organization of some jobs so that job responsibilities are aligned with older workers' assets;
- restructure employment arrangements so that there are options, such as gradually reducing the number of hours worked each week, that are consonant with the preferences of older workers;
- adopt a human capital investment strategy that applies to older workers;
- demonstrate a willingness to support and strengthen the competencies of older workers through training and leadership development opportunities;
- recognize the different career trajectories of older workers, such as lateral moves rather than solely promotions.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to construct a new paradigm for older workers – a paradigm that includes a range of options for older workers to remain in the labor force, return to the labor force, and cycle in and out of the labor force. Workplace flexibility is the 21st century response to a one-size-fits-all way of working. It is also time to update our concept of older workers so that we view them not only as workforce “exiters” but also as workforce “stayers” and, in some situations, workforce “entrants.” Having access to all of these options increases the likelihood that older workers will be able to locate a job that “fits” their priorities and preferences and can offer financial as well as mental health benefits. 22

The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community to prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce. The Center focuses on flexible work options because these are a particularly important element of innovative employer responses to the aging workforce. The studies conducted by the Center are examining employers' adoption of a range of flexible work options, the implementation of them at the workplace, their use by older workers, and their impact on business and older workers.

The Center's multi-disciplinary core research team is comprised of more than 20 social scientists from disciplines including economics, social work, psychology, and sociology. The investigators have strong expertise in the field of aging research. In addition, the Center has a workplace advisory group (SENIOR Advisors) to ensure that the priorities and perspectives of business leaders frame the Center's activities and a Research Advisory Committee that provides advice and consultation on the Center's individual research projects and strategic direction.

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Issue Brief 2: Businesses: How Are They Preparing For the Aging Workforce?

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Issue Brief 4: How Old Are Today's Older Workers?

Research Highlights

Research Highlight 1: Context Matters: Insights About Older Workers From the National Study of the Changing Workforce.

Research Highlight 2: The Diverse Employment Experiences of Older Men and Women in the Workforce.