

# Flex It: Making Workplace Flexibility Work

January 2009

## Dear Readers,

It's time to rethink the rules of engagement between American companies and their employees.

The promise of a lifetime career with a single company has become a dim and distant memory. The "standard" 9-to-5 workweek is fast becoming a dinosaur. Twenty-four/seven technology access and the demand for alternative arrangements have turned far-flung locations into annexes of our offices and turned hours once reserved for sleeping and eating into potential chunks of a workday. The one-size-fits-all model of working no longer seems to apply. Its decline has given rise to many models—flextime, part-time, the virtual worker, jobshares, project-based professionals—to name a few. Employees are, increasingly, rewriting the employment contract to suit their own purposes.

Here's the great news for leaders and business owners: this shift presents an enormous opportunity for organizations to transform, renewing the commitment between companies and their people. On-Ramps fundamentally believes that companies that embrace workforce flexibility will lead the way and win the war for talent. Our research and work demonstrate, time and again, that flexibility is the best form of non-monetary compensation available. We started this business when talent was in short supply and the economy was thriving. We are now living in a different world—the economy has turned and we are experiencing what is likely the worst financial crisis of our times; nevertheless, we still believe that flexibility is relevant, and even crucial, for employers to consider. By thinking differently about how people work, companies can develop a productive and engaged workforce while creating a nimble and cost-effective organization.

The concept of On-Ramps isn't just a business proposition. Core to our foundation is our commitment to flexibility in practice, not just in theory. Since founding the company, we have hired people to work remotely, to work part-time, and to work full-time, in each case meeting both the business' and the employee's needs. One of our senior leaders is a former academic who left management consulting because she wanted time to write and the flexibility to govern her own schedule. Our tremendously competent administrative team is entirely comprised of stay-at-home parents who set their own hours, and their loyalty and enthusiasm are daily reminders of the importance of flexibility to retaining key people. Because we practice what we preach, we are also familiar with the challenges that creating and honoring flexible arrangements present.

# on-ramps

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Through our work, we have come to know some extraordinary organizations and leaders who have overcome these challenges and created flexible ways of working that attract some of the best talent and create results-driven, productive, and loyal teams of employees; we have witnessed countless examples of creative, imaginative work arrangements. We've been actively engaged with those who are at the front lines of this movement and we are here to report back what we've seen and heard.

To better understand what “flexibility” means in practice, and what it can do for organizations, we interviewed twenty-two senior leaders from exemplary companies in six industries—financial services, management consulting, media and hightech, pharmaceuticals, energy, and nonprofit. We wanted to understand why they used flexibility, the ways they were using it, and, most importantly, how they were making it work.<sup>1</sup> This paper describes what we learned.

One final note. We opened each interview with a personal question: “Has flexibility been a driver in your career?” The responses we heard, from women as well as men, were overwhelmingly affirmative. To name just a few examples:

- We heard about a woman who learned to split her job with another colleague after the birth of her first child
- We spoke to a man who moved from investment banking to internal operations to spend more time with his teenage children
- We heard an appreciative woman describe how she decided not to leave management consulting because her firm carved out a part-time role designed specifically for her

We believe these stories are indicative of how much people value flexibility—in its many varied forms—and how increasingly prevalent these types of working arrangements are becoming in today's workplace.

We'd like to open this paper with a hearty thanks to all these people who helped inform our thinking by sharing their stories. We'd also like to ask you some questions. How has flexibility been a driver for you thus far in your career? Have you been creative or bold about crafting a schedule or way of engaging that helped you find that elusive and intangible thing: an alignment between your professional ambitions and your personal passions? If so, please tell us about it! We're always eager to hear more stories. If not, please keep reading...you never know what you might discover.

The On-Ramps Partners:

Sarah Grayson  
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<sup>1</sup> For further detail on the mix of companies we interviewed, see Appendix 1.

## What is workplace flexibility?

Workplace flexibility means different things to different people. When we started this research, we defined flexibility as the employee's ownership over some of the decisions about how, when and where work gets done—e.g., the location of work, the time work gets done, the number of hours per day, the number of total hours per week. However, as we learned in our research, successful flexibility arrangements are often about much more than working remotely, or working a reduced workweek. At their best and most innovative, flexibility arrangements are programs thoughtfully designed with an eye toward helping people manage the demands of a challenging job and a rich personal life, and helping companies prioritize results over face time.

Some of these programs focused on helping people in intense, full-time jobs recharge and sustain their commitment. Many companies now encourage sabbaticals, both paid and unpaid; others offer various types of internships and externships that allow employees to take breaks from their day-to-day work and recalibrate. Some for-profit companies we interviewed offered service internships that allow employees to step away from their jobs to work in cause-driven organizations. A Top-Tier Management Consulting Firm, for example, pays its graduate hires to work at nonprofits during the summer after graduation, before joining the firm. This experience gives grads a chance to pursue interests that might lie outside of the boundaries of client work at the firm, with the added benefit of helping them gain realworld professional experience before

### Flexibility isn't just for moms.

*It's time for flexibility to move out of the "pink ghetto." All too often, workplace flexibility is designated a "women's issue" as if working moms are the only ones who want more autonomy in how, when and where their work gets done. This designation is incorrect, and can marginalize both men and women whose family arrangements don't fit the conventional norm, as well as other adults who aren't parents but have life needs that demand flexible work arrangements—aging parents, compromised health, creative pursuits, even passionate hobbies.*

*Regardless of gender, age or life stage, the full spectrum of employees value workplace flexibility.*

*Baby Boomers total over 76 million people. By 2010, they will make up more than half of the U.S. workforce.<sup>2</sup> What would companies do if they all retired, en masse? It would be a crisis for American industry. The good news is, many Boomers seem hesitant to turn in their office keys. Many are inquiring about, and experimenting with, alternatives that will keep them in the game—phased retirement, part-time work, and project-based work.*

*The Gen Xers, commonly defined as those born between 1965 and 1982, also want flexibility—and are often willing to leave a current employer to find it. In "The NeXt Revolution," Charlotte and Laura Shelton point out that 51% of Gen Xers would leave their current employers for the chance to telecommute and 61% of Gen X women would leave their current jobs in they were offered more flexible hours.<sup>3</sup>*

*Millenials, typically classified as those born between 1982 and 2000, have grown up with an entirely new relationship with technology. Virtual interfaces including Facebook, instant messaging, and mobile technology are the norm for this group and have created different expectations about mobility and flexibility. For example, 21.4 million of the roughly 80 million millenials are on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> One can imagine how this experience will shape how this group thinks about how, when and where they work.*

they even set foot in the door. Another Top-Tier Strategy Consulting Firm offers a "10 and 2" program, giving consultants the option to work for 10 months and take 2 months of unpaid leave.

We also found organizations addressing employees' flexibility needs by simply providing people with more control and autonomy over their schedules. Employees who can address their key nonwork commitments without asking for

permission (e.g. attending a child's play, going to the gym, attending a continuing education class) tend to feel respected, and to honor this respect with a focus on results. Based on our interviews, we have broadened the definition to include the ability to take breaks from the workforce (e.g. employer-supported sabbaticals or unpaid leaves of absence) and the ability to manage personal needs throughout the workday.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Standards, USDL 05-2276

<sup>3</sup> [http://money.cnn.com/2006/01/17/news/companies/bestcos\\_genx/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2006/01/17/news/companies/bestcos_genx/index.htm)

<sup>4</sup> "Marketing to Millenials" Business Week, August 22, 2008

Flexibility came about because employees began asking, and in some cases demanding, a different way to work that allowed them more control over their time. For us, workplace flexibility is any program or arrangement that effectively addresses these employees' needs, while recognizing and respecting employers' needs to get the work done.

## Why flexibility? Why now?

Workplace flexibility is frequently cited as an effective, inexpensive way to boost employee morale and engagement. But flexibility isn't just about making your employees happy. While increased engagement is one of the clear benefits, many companies are finding that flexible arrangements increase productivity and loyalty as well. Companies that have introduced flexibility in the form of work-at-home programs, flextime, or creating a "results-only work environment" all report significant improvements in productivity and retention. In fact, in an AMA study of 352 HR executives, flexible schedules ranked as a more effective tool than pay-for-performance bonuses, stock options or bonuses.<sup>5</sup>

However, flexibility shouldn't only be thought of as an employee benefit. It can also support key business strategies, such as reducing costs. In our current economic climate, many organizations are turning to workplace flexibility—particularly telecommuting—to trim budgets and create more nimble organizations. An International Financial Services Institution undertook a cost-savings initiative focused on reducing real estate

costs. The company closed its headquarters building in a major urban city in the United States, replacing it with reduced office space in the surrounding suburbs. Knowing that this would cause significant concern and potential attrition among staff, the leaders of the initiative developed a comprehensive program focused on enabling remote work. They invested in the technology necessary to make this happen, developed a comprehensive communication strategy and internal branding, and equipped managers with the tools they would need to manage remote staff effectively. The program received extremely positive employee feedback and radically reduced the expected rates of attrition. Furthermore, since the company is no longer tied to as many long-term commercial leases and has created a group of remote workers, it is set up to respond to future cost

## The benefits of flexibility:

1

**Engaged, productive  
and loyal workforce**

2

**Cost savings**

3

**Attraction of  
top talent**

4

**A "greener"  
workplace**

### When it comes to flexibility, the trend is up.

"Ten years from now, people will look back and say, 'Remember when we went to the office everyday?'" — HR executive, international financial services institution

*The American workplace is changing. Technology enables access. People desire freedom and flexibility. The notion of coming to an office every day solely for the sake of showing one's face is becoming, to many, a ridiculous concept. Most Americans still have specific hours they are required to be at work, but do they need to be spent at an office? Increased technology means on average workers spend 45 hours a week at work, but describe 16 of those hours as "unproductive," according to a study by Microsoft.<sup>6</sup> America Online and Salary.com, in turn, determined that workers actually work a total of three days a week, wasting the other two.<sup>7</sup> Technology access has enabled more and more people to work virtually and in many ways has changed the way most Americans do their work. This, coupled with a company's ability to reduce costs by increasing remote work and to broaden its available talent pool, will lead more and more organizations to "go virtual." This trend will further push the concept of workplace flexibility in that many people will not have a "workplace."*

<sup>5</sup> Benko and Weisberg, Mass Career Customization, 2007

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2005/mar05/03-15threeproductivedayspr.mspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.cnet.com/stop-reading-this-headline-and-get-back-to-work/2100-1022-3-5783552.html>

pressures more quickly and with increased bottom-line savings.

In tough times, when hiring permanent employees is not an option, flexibility can bring some of the best talent to the table to fill in the gaps on a temporary project basis. A Major Insurance Provider, pressed to cut costs, decided to ask all employees in the call center to propose their ideal reduced-work schedule. For some, it took the form of a few days off each week; for others, reduced hours each day; for others, large chunks of time off during the holidays. This allowed the organization to avoid layoffs, with all of the attendant loss of morale, and to instead increase loyalty by soliciting input from its entire team while tackling the problem.

Telecommuting can also be used to recruit workers from low-cost regions to work for organizations in higher-cost ones, and to hire top talent from a national pool. Leaders at a Premier Charter School Network describe an organization that is truly virtual—its people work in multiple locations, often in places where the organization does not have offices. This framework has allowed the non-profit to radically increase the quantity and quality of its candidates for open positions, without being constrained by the individuals' geographical preferences. Furthermore, the organization has been able, in multiple cases, to avoid relocation expenses, and has turned up some highly valued employees, attracting top talent who place a premium on the ability to work from home.

Similarly, many organizations are beginning to make the link between flexibility and the green movement.

### **It's what employees really want.**

*Companies that are offering flexibility haven't just hit upon a winning idea: they're giving employees what they want. A Catalyst survey from 2004 found 28% of women would like to work a compressed workweek, 23% would like to telecommute or work from home, and 39% would like the opportunity to take a leave. But 24% of men too would like a compressed workweek, 15% would like to work from home, and 32% would like the ability to take a leave or sabbatical.<sup>11</sup> A national Radcliffe poll said 4 out of 5 men aged 20 to 39 said having a work schedule that allowed them time with their family would be preferable to earning a higher salary or having a more prestigious or challenging job.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a 2004 study by the Families and Work Institute found that 72% of employees at organizations with high levels of flexibility plan to remain with their employers for the next year, compared to 49% of employees at organizations with low levels. Similarly, 67% of employees at organizations with high levels of flexibility report high levels of job satisfaction, compared to 23% of employees at organizations with low levels.<sup>13</sup>*

*It is clear that employees across gender and generations want flexibility. This is evident not only in what employees say that they want, but also in their expressed satisfaction with flexibility on the job.*

As gas prices rose in the first half of 2008, municipalities all over the U.S. began considering or implementing a four day, forty-hour workweek to reduce energy costs.<sup>8</sup> In states from Utah to California, increasing blocs of city and county government workers are shifting to a mandatory four-day workweek.<sup>9</sup> Rex Facer, an assistant professor at Brigham Young University whose research team is studying the four-day concept, estimates that about one-sixth of U.S. cities with populations above 25,000 offer employees a four-day week. His projection is based on the team's continuing survey of 150 human resource directors in cities.

Aaron Newton, a land planner and environmentalist, wrote on the energy blog The Oil Drum recently: "The idea of a shorter workweek

is not a new one to anyone old enough to have lived through the energy shocks of the 1970's. It should be fairly obvious to anyone interested in conserving oil that reducing the number of daily commutes per week would reduce the overall demand for oil. There are about 133 million workers in America. Around 80% of them get to work by driving alone in a car. The average commute covers about 16 miles each way... If workers used their cars 20% less often to drive to work, they would see a reduction in the frequency of oil changes, tune ups and the purchase of new tires just to name a few savings."<sup>10</sup>

While no organization we spoke with is making the four day workweek mandatory, many of them are offering telecommuting

<sup>8</sup> <http://postcarboncities.net/node/3128>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-06-30-four-day\\_N.html](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-06-30-four-day_N.html)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.theoil drum.com/tag/shortened\\_work\\_week](http://www.theoil drum.com/tag/shortened_work_week)

<sup>11</sup> Catalyst, *Women and Men in U.S. Corporate Leadership: Same Workplace, Different Realities?* June 2004

<sup>12</sup> *The End of Work As We Know It*, iUniverse, 2002, By Flexible Resources Inc. Nadine Mockler, Laurie Young, Arlene Matthews

<sup>13</sup> James T. Bond, Ellen Galinsky, and E. Jeffrey Hill, *When Work Works:*

*A Status Report on Workplace Flexibility*, Families and Work Institute, 2004

more broadly to help employees save on energy costs and to do their part to protect the environment, and they are publicizing these efforts both internally and externally. As a senior leader at a Regional Energy Company put it, “As stewards of the environment, we want to cut down on people on the road. This helps our people and is important to our mission and our reputation.”

So if organizations that find ways to offer their employees flexibility reap all of these benefits, why aren't more companies joining the flexible movement? If more and more employees are speaking up and asking for flexible arrangements, why isn't every company responding affirmatively? In many organizations, there is still resistance. For companies that have little to no experience with flexibility, fundamentally changing the way they think about work can be daunting, even threatening. Other organizations cite a concern that working part-time or working remotely is just an excuse to work less, and that offering flexible arrangements will simply result in lost productivity. Finally, the last reason organizations commonly cite for resisting flexibility is the complexity of creating and managing flexible programs.

These concerns are real and valid. While workplace flexibility can deliver numerous benefits, it can be difficult to implement and even harder to sustain. Fortunately, through our work and research we have come to know organizations that have overcome these challenges and made flexibility a part of their cultures. We believe their stories have something to teach us all about how to make flexibility truly work.

## How to make flexibility work.

Implementing flexible work programs that deliver or support positive business results requires a deliberate and focused effort to create a “flexibility muscle”—a robust internal capability to deliver effective flexible work programs. In our interviews, we learned about many best-in-class organizations that are building this muscle and making flexibility work. Below, we outline five innovative best practices: compelling ways that

inventive organizations are making flexibility work within their context and cultures.

Are you part of a large company, trying to shift a culture to become more flexible? Are you part of a small company, looking to craft principles that will engage a handful of mission-critical employees? Regardless of scale or context, there are some common issues that you are most likely grappling with— and the lessons described below are applicable across the spectrum of flexibility.

### How to raise the bar even higher.

*In our research, we found how leading organizations are transforming common practices into best practices. Here are five guidelines for reframing your approach.*

#### Common

- 1 **Make a unique solution for each case**
- 2 **Treat flexible programs as employee assistance programs**
- 3 **Trust your managers to do a good job**
- 4 **Use blackberry to address remote needs**
- 5 **Design flexible programs based on external input/experts**

#### Best

- 1 **Create clear and consistent guidelines, then refine as you go**
- 2 **Build a culture of flexibility**
- 3 **Give your managers what they need**
- 4 **Create robust, seamless technological support**
- 5 **Listen to your people**

# 1. Create clear and consistent guidelines, then refine as you go.

Here is one of the most paradoxical and interesting things we learned about workplace flexibility: It depends on rules! Stated differently: Flexibility is most effective not when there is an absence of rules about how people should work, but when there are good, structured and transparent policies, thoughtfully constructed and consistently implemented.

When we began our interviews, many leaders we spoke with were quick to point out that flexibility went well beyond a formal menu of offerings spelled out in policy guides. According to these leaders, it was their companies' flexible cultures, rather than policies they'd written down on paper, that kept their people happy. Nevertheless, when we probed deeper, we kept making the same discovery: even, and especially, in cases where informal flexibility is the norm, guidelines matter the most. To make informal flexibility really work, spelling out what is expected on all sides is critical.

Effective guidelines describe the behaviors that are necessary to support productivity and efficiency under a flexible work arrangement and address fundamental questions such as "what is expected of the employee?", "what is expected of the manager?" and "how will employee and manager need to behave differently with the new arrangement?" Whether you are part of a large multinational organization or a small, growing company, guidelines should be documented, communicated and updated over time. Guidelines also serve the purpose of setting minimum norms

for behavior so that if a flexible work arrangement is not working, managers and employees have a framework for discussion and action.

## Example 1a

*A Major Insurance Provider provides detailed guidelines for telecommuting and credits these guidelines with managers being at ease with remote work. Included in the guidelines are the need to have a telephone touch-point with a manager daily, to set office hours for your staff, to have childcare in place at all times, and to have the right technology in place to be secure and accessible. These guidelines are communicated to anyone working remotely and are available to employees through multiple channels.*

## Example 1b

*A Social and Economic Development Consulting Firm had an informal practice of people working remotely. Because the firm was small, the partners did not feel the need to develop extensive policies around flexible work arrangements. However, they did recognize the need for guidelines for telecommuting, so that teams knew what to expect of each other. The firm outlined expectations, including the need to provide at least 24 hours written notice when working remotely and to be accessible when out of the office. While this was a small and easy change to make, it made a big difference in people's ability to work productively on teams.*

Flexible work arrangements do not only affect the individual taking advantage of them; often they impact an entire team. It is

important to be cognizant of how the arrangement will affect the team as a whole, and to communicate and be consistent. One leader suggested involving the entire team in the decision-making at the outset. Another suggested rolling out the arrangement as a pilot and adjusting it after an initial, experimental phase. All of the leaders we spoke with emphasized the need for the individuals to communicate on a regular, ongoing basis about logistics such as when and where they are working and how that might impact work flow.

## Example 1c

*When introducing a flexible work arrangement, the head of Human Resources at a Regional Energy Company had her team vote on whether or not it should be piloted. After voting to pilot the program, they then voted on whether or not the arrangement was working effectively. Because of members' abilities to have their voices heard, each team member felt she had a say in the matter, thus increasing employee buy-in and minimizing the resentment that in many cases has historically been associated with flexible work arrangements.*

## Example 1d

*The Chief Marketing Officer of a Biopharmaceutical Company was working remotely and took time to make sure his team was comfortable with the arrangement. He gave his entire team weekly status updates on his work, and called and emailed regularly. The daily conversations he engaged in with his team members were extremely effective in ensuring that he was both available and up to speed, despite not being physically in the office. ■*

## 2. Build a culture of flexibility.

Regardless of the size of your organization or the breadth of your flexible program, it is critical to communicate openly and regularly about the program. In order to do this effectively, you need to create the right language for employees to use and be sure you have visible support from the very top of the organization.

One of the biggest challenges to gaining support for flexible work programs inside an organization can be negative perceptions and assumptions carried by individuals. Executives worry whether they are getting the best return-on-investment with employees; managers worry about whether employees working flexibly are productive; and front-line employees question why some employees get to work flexibly while others do not. To counteract these doubts, it is important to communicate not only the requirements and guidelines around working flexibly, but also to share success stories. Furthermore, once you have communicated the message, communicate it again and again. Organizations that have launched successful flexibility programs—both in terms of participation numbers and business results—have been diligent about sharing success stories at all levels and through multiple channels.

### Example 2a

*An Investment/Commercial Bank recently profiled a manager within its commercial bank who works from home and encourages his staff to do the same. The presentation included pictures of the manager, his*

*family, and his team. It also highlighted how the business benefits directly from the arrangement. This presentation was featured on the company's intranet homepage and utilized in various training sessions. In addition, the bank highlights success stories in their company newsletter and hosts online panel discussions featuring business leaders from different areas of the bank sharing their perspectives on why flexibility helps their respective business. All of this has contributed to an impressive participation rate for the bank. As of 2007, 16% of employees participated in some type of flexible work arrangement.*

### Example 2b

*An International Financial Services Institution launched a major flexible work initiative focused on reducing real estate costs by eliminating offices for more than half of its employees. In turn, people were expected to work remotely or from one of the company's new shared work spaces. Initially employees were concerned and upset about losing their offices, but with extensive internal advertising and communication, employees realized the benefits of the arrangement and now view this cost-savings initiative as an employee win.*

### Example 2c

*A Leading National Magazine Publisher created a training module for managers focused on dispelling assumptions and fears about flexible work arrangements and developing good communication practices. In the sessions, managers are first asked to discuss the value of flexible work arrangements*

*and any associated fears, and then they problem-solve to address these fears. Facilitators introduce supporting technologies and guidelines to support the managers, but equally important is the opportunity for managers to learn from each other and discuss real-world examples and stories.*

In order to support open communication, leaders need to be sure employees are speaking the same language. In almost all of our conversations, we heard that the term “work-life balance” is outdated. First and foremost, “work-life balance” seems to imply a win-lose situation, where an increase on one side of the scale necessarily throws the other side off kilter. Also objectionable is the idea that there is a single perfect state to strive toward, when in fact the right mix of work and outside pursuits is always shifting and trade-offs are often necessary. The leaders we spoke with preferred language that was more evocative of a dynamic, win-win solution and, importantly, reflected their own organizations' unique cultures. Once that language is defined, it is critical to use it consistently and frequently to make it familiar and energizing for the organization.

### Example 2d

*An International Investment Bank is in the beginning stages of rebranding flexibility from “work-life balance” to “working smarter.” In an organization where many employees expect and are expected to work long hours, the notion of work-life balance falls flat. However, the idea of “working smarter” resonates with leadership and employees, all of whom value efficiency and intelligence.*

*An example of “working smarter” would be taking a few hours during the day, while a project is being reviewed by team members, to go to the gym or see children, before returning to work a long night.*

#### Example 2e

*At a National Education Non-Profit, where flexible work is the norm, the term “work-life balance” failed to reflect the goals of the flexible programs or the culture of the organization. The leaders of this non-profit wanted language that would capture the results-oriented nature of the culture and the committed, hard-working ethic of its employees. Also, in an organization where people are motivated by mission as well as career path, leaders wanted to reference this opportunity for work-life alignment in describing their work-life philosophy. After considerable thought, the organization adopted the phrase “personal and professional alignment.” This language not only better describes the rationale for offering flexible programs, but resonates with the mission-driven and results-oriented nature of the organization.*

As with all initiatives, in order for flexibility to work, it is necessary to have the support and buy-in of senior leadership and management. In addition, we found that organizations that made flexibility work have leaders who have done more than sign new policies—they’ve visibly participated in flexible work arrangements themselves.

#### Example 2f

*A National School Leadership Non-Profit introduced “half-day Fridays” during the summer*

*months, but initially found that the majority of employees were still working on Friday afternoons, even though they were eager for a break. Consequently, the senior leadership of the organization decided to refrain from sending emails on Friday afternoons. This visible cue allowed the rest of the team to follow suit and take advantage of the new policy, which in turn, greatly improved employee morale and overall productivity.*

#### Example 2g

*The head of a Premier Charter School Network often works virtually, which has set an example for the rest of the organization. Though this leader is still committed to attending in-person meetings and comes to the office whenever necessary, his use of virtual work has made the rest of the organization feel increasingly comfortable with remote work and has reinforced the organization’s commitment to results over facetime. His visible participation has set the tone for a culture that supports flexibility.*

### **3. Give your managers what they need.**

Even with the best guidelines and communication strategies, flexible work arrangements will fail to deliver results if managers are not equipped to manage them. Managing flexible arrangements includes facilitating the request for a flexible work arrangement, managing an employee’s work under the arrangement, and managing an employee’s career progression and performance. Organizations that have excelled at making flexible work arrangements

deliver results for both the business and the individual have implemented some type of training for their managers.

#### Example 3a

*An Investment/Commercial Bank developed work-life “standards of excellence” describing ten key managerial behaviors needed to effectively manage flexibility. The behaviors came from a study, conducted by the work-life group, focused on observing high-performing managers with people working flexibly on their teams. The work-life group codified these behaviors into a set of standards that could then be used by managers to improve team performance and employee morale. The tool was introduced to managers across the organization and helped to improve employee retention. As an HR executive at an International Financial Services Institution said, “People don’t leave organizations, they leave managers.”*

#### Example 3b

*A Global Pharmaceutical Company launched an e-learning program for managers as part of an effort to increase telecommuting to reduce real estate costs. The e-learning program focused first on challenging assumptions about what it means to be effective at work. The program also provided practical tips for how to work with virtual teams, and finally focused on how to measure results with employees. Leaders recognized that if managers learned to assess performance through measurable results as opposed to face-time, they would feel empowered to let employees work from home.*

### Example 3c

*A Top-Tier Strategy Consulting Firm uses a project dashboard to track sustainability on all engagements. The dashboard includes hours worked but also more qualitative measures such as how consultants perceive the value they are adding and the impact they are having with clients in addition to how sustainable the work is for the long term. This dashboard allows managers to systematically gather data from team members and provides transparency into managerial practices. ■*

## 4. Create seamless technology support.

Depending on the scale and size of both the organization and flexible work program, technology may play a large or small role in success. In all cases, however, it makes sense to determine how and if technology can increase employee productivity, particularly in regards to telecommuting. Organizations that implement far-reaching telecommuting programs have utilized technologies such as Soft Phones (software programs that allow calls to be made over the Internet from one's computer outside of the office without tying up the VOIP lines in the office), Net Meetings (applications that allow groups to teleconference using the Internet), and in some cases, collaboration tools such as Smart Boards which allow people to communicate on white boards in separate offices.

### Example 4a

*A Leading National Magazine Publisher uses Soft Phones for all of their employees who telecommute. The phones*

*allow employees to use their computers as phones and create a seamless experience for anyone calling the employee—co-worker or customer. An International Financial Services Institution also used Soft Phones to support the rollout of a major remote work initiative, affecting over 50% of its staff.*

In larger organizations, self-service models used to request flexibility put the onus on employees to build the business case for flexibility and can enable need-blind requests—another key trend among best-practice employers. The mandated consistency that comes with an automated request system ensures that managers make decisions on who gets flexibility based on the business need as opposed to the reason for the request.

### Example 4b

*Two Major Financial Services Institutions use self-service models to allow their employees to request flexible work arrangements by building a business case for the arrangement, but without having to give a reason for the request. This takes the burden off of managers, who no longer have to subjectively decide which of their employees' needs for flexibility are the most pressing, and allows the managers to focus on the viability of the requests for flexibility from the businesses' perspectives. The self-service tool also allows the organizations to post and publicize guidelines and to gather metrics on who is taking advantage of flexibility. ■*

## 5. Listen to your people.

It is critical to craft an approach to flexibility that meets the real needs of your employees, rather than putting structures in place based on assumptions and simply expecting them to work. It is therefore critical to ask your staff a set of relevant, thoughtful questions—and take heed of the answer—before getting started. Programs based on the needs of employees are much more likely to succeed. Furthermore, employees who have bought into a program can serve as the best spokespeople and teachers when it comes to working flexibly. Employees telecommuting for the first time, exploring working part-time, or discovering what it's like to be a working mother can benefit greatly from learning from co-workers who have traveled the same paths. Setting up employee networks, mentoring programs, and resource-sharing forums such as “lunch and learns” can provide valuable and cost-effective support for employees working flexibly. These forums can also provide an ongoing process of dialogue and feedback that allows you to refine flexible programs and ensure that they continue to meet employee needs.

### Example 5a

*A Major Investment Bank recognized the challenges faced by many new mothers learning to balance the needs of a child at home and a serious job and decided to implement a maternity mentoring program. This program pairs expecting mothers with women who have already had children while at the bank so that the “veteran” mom can mentor and advise the new mom. While there are many*

external resources available on being a new mother, none of these can speak to the specific experience of being a working mother at this company. The maternity mentoring program provides this information at little to no cost to the organization. The program has gotten great feedback from new mothers and, interestingly, from veteran mothers, who are also grateful and excited to share their perspectives and knowledge. In addition, a High Profile New Media and Technology Firm offers classes and information sessions for new parents, in many cases taught by employees. A “baby shower” is an information session outlining what will happen when employees are on leave and during their return.

#### Example 5b

At a Global Healthcare Company, employees organized an informal “part-time network” to support people working flexibly. This was not a top-down initiative or an HR-led program; rather, people who were working part-time recognized the need for better tools and information-sharing and organized the group themselves. As one leader described, “There were a number of people interested in working on a part-time basis. They banded together and formalized as one of our employee networks. The part-time network was a grassroots movement.” This group develops information toolkits, coaches employees working part-time or contemplating moving to a part-time schedule, and hosts training programs such as “lunch and learns.” While this group does not take the place of trained managers and

HR leaders who are also instrumental in implementing effective flexible programs, it provides unique and valuable support to the organization.

Don't just ask once. Create an ongoing process of dialogue and feedback so that whatever flexible arrangements are in place can continue to meet the needs of employees.

#### Example 5c

At a Global Financial Information Company, Baby Boomers were enlisted to participate in employee training as a way to impart key information throughout the organization and ensure critical knowledge transfer. The Baby Boomers were especially qualified to conduct this training based on their extensive knowledge of the organization's business and clients. This has led to both increased engagement with alumni of the company in addition to saving on external vendor training.

#### Example 5d

A Global Media Conglomerate initiated a program focused on improving managerial leadership. A key piece of this initiative is a mentoring program that has helped senior leaders learn how to motivate their employees. As a part of mentoring discussions, senior mentors learn from their more junior mentees about what motivates them and a key theme that emerged is the desire for more flexibility. Managers are in turn more likely to offer flexibility since their mentees are the ones requesting it and sharing perspectives. As a leader in the organization described, people are having “aha moments” as a result of this mentoring program. ■

## Now what?

These are times of uncertainty and no one is sure what lies ahead for the movement towards more flexible workplaces. It is clear, however, that American workers want a different relationship with their employers. Employers that respond thoughtfully to this request and not only offer flexibility but manage it carefully, will be at the forefront of the movement to create a new way of working.

Our aspiration has been to share these organizations' stories to offer some food for thought. Whether you are bringing flexibility to your organization for the first time, or are looking for ways to improve an already thriving culture of flexibility, we hope that our practical guidelines will help support your flexible endeavors. This is the end of our paper, but it's hardly the last word on this movement! Please keep in touch with us—we would like to help. This is an open and ongoing dialogue, and we look forward to learning from you.

### Summary of best practices

#### **Create clear and consistent guidelines, then refine as you go.**

- *Create and share guidelines*
- *Involve teams in decision-making*

#### **Build a culture of flexibility.**

- *Talk about what's working*
- *Create a shared language that everyone can get behind*
- *Demand visible participation and support from senior leaders*

#### **Give your managers what they need.**

- *Be sure managers have the tools and know-how they need to manage employees working flexibly*
- *Invest in training and knowledge sharing*

#### **Create seamless technological support.**

- *Assess the technological needs of all flexible programs or arrangements*
- *Ensure the right tools are in place to support flexibility and productivity*

#### **Listen to your people.**

- *Build a program based on expressed needs, not assumptions*
- *Create a channel for open dialogue so that employees can learn from each other—and you can learn from them*
- *Allow your employees to act as internal champions for flexibility*

## **Appendix I: List of Organizations Interviewed**

### **Financial Services**

International Investment Bank  
Investment/Commercial Bank  
Major Investment Bank  
International Financial Services Institution  
Major Insurance Provider  
Global Financial Information Company

### **Consulting**

Social and Economic Development Consulting Firm  
Top-Tier Management Consulting Firm  
Top-Tier Strategy Consulting Firm  
Premier Global Consulting Firm

### **Energy**

Regional Energy Company

### **Media**

Leading National Magazine Publisher  
Global Media Conglomerate  
High-Profile New Media and Technology Company

### **Nonprofit**

Premier Charter School Network  
National Education Non-Profit  
National School Leadership Non-Profit

### **Pharmaceutical/Healthcare**

Biopharmaceutical Company  
Global Pharmaceutical Company  
Global Healthcare Company