Flexibility in the workplace: More important for parents than non-parents?

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TODAY'S WORKPLACE
Over the past 50 years, there has been a considerable change in the way parents – especially mothers - are spending their time. Today, mothers are spending more time outside the home engaging in paid work. In 1965, mothers spent on average eight hours engaged in paid work, but by 2011, this number jumped to 21 hours\(^1\). With almost two-thirds of mothers (63%) saying that they would prefer to participate part or full-time in the workforce, it's not surprising that in 60% of today's households both parents work outside the home\(^1\).

In today's busy society, increasing demands are being placed on everyone, and parents likely feel even more pressure. Today's parents are encouraged to enroll their children in multiple sports, groups, or clubs, to volunteer, to actively participate in their child's education, all while cooking creative and nutritious meals, keeping a clean house, and paying the bills. Not surprisingly, parents report feeling the strain – 56% of mothers and 50% of fathers report that balancing work and life is challenging\(^1\).

WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY
More and more companies are recognizing that people have busy lives outside their work, and that employees need job flexibility. By offering job flexibility, employees are able to choose when, where and for how long they engage in work\(^2\).

Over the years, the workplace has become more fluid; Before the 1980s, very few companies offered flexibility in the workplace. In the 1980s, a shift began where some companies started offering flexible start and stop times\(^3\). Today, many companies are offering flexible work schedules by allowing their employees to choose their start and end times, reduce or compress their hours, or work from home. At Unilever, for example,
flexibility is central to their working style – as long as the work gets done, employees can work anytime from anywhere.

When done right, job flexibility can be beneficial to both the employee and the employer. For example, greater workplace flexibility has been linked to more workplace engagement\(^4\), expected retention, greater productivity and effectiveness, greater levels of resilience, and higher levels of job satisfaction\(^5,6\). Mental health benefits are also apparent; the use of flexible schedule has been linked to lower stress and burnout\(^7\).

**WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AMONG PARENTS**

While a fluid work schedule might be beneficial to all employees, given the additional demands placed on parents, flexibility might be especially beneficial to parents with children living in the home. By allowing parents to set their own hours, or work from home, they may be happier and more satisfied. Why? It allows them to work around their child's schedule, more easily attend appointments or events, or care for a sick child.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The role of flexibility in job satisfaction, workplace stress and anxiety, and perceptions of work-life balance among parents with children living at home and non-parents was explored. We were also interested in how opportunities for flexibility might relate to workplace gratitude and resilience. To this end, over 450 employees answered a variety of questions in these domains. To examine workplace flexibility, we asked people to list the five things they were grateful for at work, and looked at how valuing workplace flexibility correlates to our other variables of interest.

**FINDINGS: WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AMONG PARENTS AND NON-PARENTS**

Among parents with children at home *only*, employees who placed a greater value on workplace flexibility were:

- more satisfied with their job \((r(162) = .16, p=.04)\)
- less anxious about their jobs \((r(162) = -.16, p=.05)\)
- less apt to see work-life balance as a cause of stress \((r(161) = -.19, p=.02)\)
- more grateful at work \((r(161) = .19, p=.02)\)
- more resilient \((r(162) = .15, p=.05)\)

However, among people without children, flexibility *didn’t* play a role in their satisfaction, anxiety, perceptions of work-life balance, gratitude or resilience \((rs < -.07, ps > .29)\).
Interestingly, flexibility was equally important in predicting these outcomes for both men and women. While it might be hypothesized that flexibility would be more important for women, it appears that in today's modern society, flexibility benefits both men and women.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Offering flexibility to employees who are also parents may be one avenue to healthier, happier employees.

Employees who recognize the value of workplace flexibility tend to experience fewer negative emotions, such as workplace anxiety. Among parents, those who valued flexibility at work were less likely to see the work-life balance as a source of stress – possibly because they were actually able to better manage their work and home life. Given the negative implications of workplace stress - it's been associated with poorer health, fatigue, absenteeism – employers should be actively looking for ways to reduce stress and inspire flourishing among employees.

Employees valuing flexibility also felt more satisfied with their work, which likely contributes to additional positive outcomes; high job satisfaction is linked to engagement, loyalty, productivity, employee turnover, and profitability. Clearly, it's worth making changes that can increase job satisfaction among employees.

Perhaps not surprisingly, greater workplace gratitude was felt among parents with job flexibility; these individuals stated that there were many aspects of their job they were grateful for. Why does this matter? Research has shown that grateful people tend to be happier and more open to new ideas. They also tend to be higher in traits characteristic of a good team player; they're better at perspective taking, more agreeable and more forgiving.

Greater resilience – the ability to “bounce back” from adversity - was associated with flexibility. The ability to control one's schedule might afford an employee a sense of psychological control over our environment, prompting greater resilience. Flexibility also contributes to a feeling that if need be, schedules can easily be re-arranged – likely to be especially reassuring to parents. Resilience is very important in the workplace; employees with higher resilience are more committed to their job, see stress as invigorating and feel better equipped to make tough decisions. If employers can help foster a sense of resilience in their employees who are parents by offering flexibility, it's a win-win situation.

Overall, flexibility appears to greatly benefit employees who are parents. There are many ways to create a flexible work environment – flexible start and stop times, job sharing, reduced hours, compressed hours, working from home – and the key is to find the one that
benefits both the employee and the employee. Of course, we are certainly not advocating that non-parents should not be offered workplace flexibility. There are many reasons that flexibility in the workplace could be beneficial for non-parents – the ability to work whenever from wherever is certainly enticing. Rather simply that, for parents, flexibility is more strongly linked to workplace outcomes.

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Citations


