

progressing business

PART B

**Leadership in Designing the
Implementation of Lean Six Sigma**

**Simplification –
Removing Complexity**

**Is Your Organisation
REALLY Flexible?**

Is your organisation REALLY flexible?

Karen Schmidt, Let's Grow!



I am well aware that the question in the title of this article can have two meanings and I deliberately put the word 'really' in capitals to emphasise that point. You can take it to mean 'really' as in 'very flexible' or 'really' as in 'Are we flexible at all?'

Workplace flexibility is a term that has been around for a while now but I don't think most organisations are that flexible. The reality is that if you fit neatly into a little category like 'working mother' they will offer you flexible hours, as long as you don't mind feeling like you are on the career track to nowhere. Senior management in many industries still believe that people who are serious about their careers do not take up workplace flexibility options and there is certainly anecdotal evidence of this.

The real test of any flexibility program is not how many people take it up but how many senior people take it up and how they are viewed as a consequence. Let me give you an example.

I have a large client who has invited me to facilitate their management conference for the last couple of years. Prior to the event I meet with each division's senior manager to go over their contribution and discuss the event.

Last year one of our meetings ran over time and I was advised that my final appointment for the day would have to be rescheduled as the senior manager had to leave to see his child play sport. This comment was made without any negative tone or eye rolling.

This is a workplace that truly believes in flexibility in the form of work/life balance for all. Would it be the same in your workplace or would that manager be seen as not committed to their role?

The other phenomenon we have started to see is younger and childless people wanting flexibility. Formerly only requested by employees with young children, managers are now surprised to find that other people are demanding flexible working arrangements.

A Human Resources Manager has a visit from a young male staff member wanting to renegotiate his working hours from 5

days a week to 4 days. He put forward a well thought out case for why the job could be done in 4 days without affecting customers. When the HR Manager asked why, he responded, 'So I have time for my life'.

As there was no precedent for this type of request in the company policies, the Human Resources Manager had to refer it to the CEO. The response was a definite 'No', and as a result the young staff member eventually left the company, taking with them valuable skills and knowledge.

Some organisations do take the issue seriously and try to put into place flexibility programs, but unfortunately they don't always take into account the real needs of their employees.

The partner of a midsized accounting firm approached me at a conference after my presentation. He was very proud to tell me that his organisation was ahead of its competitors and had already introduced a flexible working hours policy for staff.

When I enquired further and got some details, it turns out that the partner's idea of flexibility was that everyone would have Friday afternoon off. He couldn't understand why the policy had not been greeted with more enthusiasm by his staff.

There have been numerous surveys conducted that demonstrate the benefits of being more flexible:

- *Managing Work Life Balance International in their Most Flexible Australian Workplaces Report* found that 50% of companies polled said productivity had improved and 28% saw a drop in absenteeism after implementing flexible working options.
- A *Chandler and Macleod Survey* found that the employee benefits which candidates consider to be the most important to remain working at a company included flexible work arrangements such as compressed work weeks, flexi-time, time-in-lieu, part-time work or job-share arrangements and a variety of leave entitlements such as parental leave, sick or bereavement leave, flexible annual leave, study leave and unpaid leave.

By not implementing flexibility provisions, organisations are missing out on good employees. It has been cited as one reason for the dramatic increase in the number of people choosing self-employment, so they can take advantage of the flexibility it allows. Other studies have found that many women don't even bother returning to work after maternity

leave because they perceive that talk of flexibility is all talk and no action.

So if the benefits are clear why don't more organisations offer flexible working arrangements for their employees? I've worked in HR and now have many HR managers as clients and as far as I can see it comes down to two issues:

ADMINISTRATION

Creating a good flexibility program will mean more administration but instead of focusing on the extra work, focus on benefits. If you do it right you should have less turnover, fewer performance management issues and less stressed managers. This argument is a bit like the disorganised person who doesn't have time to attend a time management course. If they went, they would be more organised! If organisations offer more flexible working arrangements, their managers will have more productive work teams.

FAIRNESS

I think a lot of managers confuse 'fairness' with 'sameness'. The best explanation I read for this was, 'Would you buy all your children the same Christmas or birthday present?' The answer is no, you would tailor it to their needs. The same is true of workplace flexibility options. If you try to make one size fit all you will end up pleasing no one, making the whole process pointless. The vast majority of employees are more concerned with having a suitable solution that works for them than they are about comparing who got a slightly better 'deal'.

People of all generations are looking for flexibility but there are some differences in why they want it and what it means for each of them. For example:

- Builders might want time off to care for grandchildren or to starting to prepare themselves for retirement
- Baby Boomers might want the flexibility to work on their work/life balance or care for aging parents
- Generation X might have needs around child care responsibilities or further study options
- Gen Y might want to keep exploring their options career-wise or do some travel

So if you recognise that your organisation could be more flexible, you might be starting to think what you could do

differently. Well, here are some ideas I've come across from my reading and research both in Australia and overseas. I won't try to say which company does what because I'm sure there are many organisations using these innovative approaches.

HOURS

Flexible working hours is one area where I feel that government is definitely ahead of private enterprise. Most government departments have operated on the concept of 'core work hours' for a long time, although they are generally only available to lower level employees rather than management. Other programs growing in popularity include the compressed work week and in some cases job-sharing at a senior level.

LOCATION

With the advances in technology, work no longer needs to be done in the workplace. Working from home is a very popular option for many people including those with children as well as those without. The benefits include less time spent commuting, fewer interruptions from colleagues and lower stress levels.

ENVIRONMENT

The office environment is now looking more like a café than a factory, with comfortable chairs and breakout rooms decorated to inspire creativity. People are also bringing their private lives with them, whether it is their child to use the onsite child care facility or their pet sitting under the desk. The latest innovation is care facilities for people with elderly parents who don't want to leave them home alone.

Of course the standard dress code for the average office has certainly become more casual, if not every day then certainly on regular 'casual Fridays'. This doesn't just mean leaving off your tie or forgetting the pantyhose. In some organisations you can turn up in just about whatever you like and even people in frontline, customer facing roles can join in.

LEAVE PROVISIONS

One of the most popular ways to add flexibility is providing a wider range of leave options. Some organisations have even implemented a 'leave bucket'

concept so that people can use their leave entitlements in any combination that suits them. However, most organisations who are offering flexible leave are using less ambitious changes such as:

- Grandparent leave
- Floating cultural day
- Birthday leave
- Community service leave
- Leave to compensate for business travel
- Purchasing extra leave via salary sacrifice
- Take one year paid time off after the completion of 4 years of employment

If you are serious about becoming an employer of choice in your market then you will need to properly address the issue of workplace flexibility before your competitors do.

Karen Schmidt from Let's Grow! is an award winning speaker, workshop leader and facilitator who is on a mission to grow managers into engaging leaders. To book Karen for your next conference or professional development event contact her on 0411 745 430 or visit www.letsgrow.com.au.

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