

Five Ways to Provide Flexible Work Experiences to Employees

Published 22 July 2021 - ID G00755613 - 8 min read

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Initiatives: [Employee Experience](#)

As organizations move to a hybrid model of work, HR leaders need to understand how best to provide flexibility to their employees. Read this article to discover the five ways to provide for and improve employees' flexible work experiences.

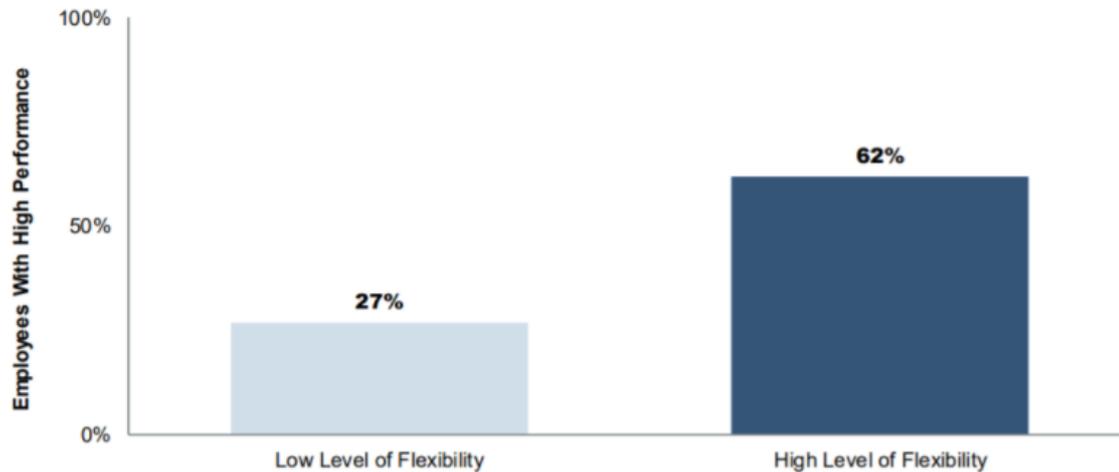
With the rise in flexible work, boundaries between work and life are changing. Work-life balance, which was premised on the clear distinction between work and life, has morphed into life harmonization — where work is interspersed with daily life. Given the relative novelty of large-scale flexible work, it becomes easy for managers and leaders to revert to work practices they use in office settings. This usually involves duplicating office systems/norms, using virtual tools and monitoring employees by having frequent manager-employee check-ins or mandating a certain amount of screen time. However, by doing so, organizations run the risk of having physically and mentally fatigued employees who are “always on” because they are expected to be visible and accessible at all times during their work hours.

Thus, organizations should provide flexible work experiences to their employees — be it through their policies, principles or management styles, to ensure performance in a hybrid environment. Although this might seem counterintuitive, employees who are provided a higher level of flexibility perform better than those with lower levels of flexibility (see Figure 1).¹ This not only busts the long-standing myth of “flexibility reduces productivity,” but also makes the business case for investing in flexibility as the norm, not the exception.

Figure 1: Flexibility Improves Performance

Flexibility Improves Performance

Impact of Flexibility on Performance
Percentage of Employees With High Performance by Level of Flexibility



n = 2,410 hybrid/remote knowledge workers
Source: 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey

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Making flexible work experiences into the norm requires organizations to navigate complex dynamics that require a balancing act between individual, team and business needs. Gartner research proposes a roadmap of five methods for providing flexible work experiences:

1. Provide principles, not just policy, to outline your flexible work approach: Work flexibility, where applicable, is fast becoming a part of every organization's policy as they compete for talent through the pandemic and beyond. However, leaders must be careful that their approach to flexibility is not inherently inflexible. A principles-based approach allows managers to guide their employees on how best to utilize the flexibility being provided to them – while reinforcing the fact that flexibility is a right, not something to be regulated. Schroders, a British investment management company, has a set of 10 principles for flexible working (see Figure 2). Some of its principles include:

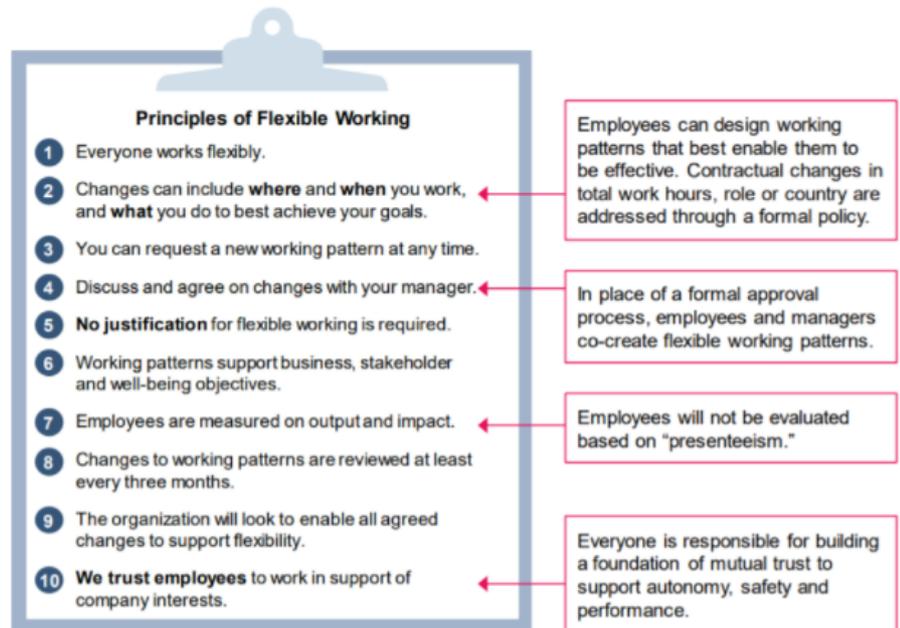
1. Rather than going through a formal approval process, employees can work with their managers to co-create flexible working patterns.
2. Employees are measured based on their output and impact, not on their screen time or "presenteeism."

3. Employees can request a new flexible work pattern anytime.
4. Employees are trusted to make decisions in the best interests of the organization.

Fig 2: Flexible Working Needs Principles, Not Just Policy

Flexible Working Needs Principles, Not Just Policy

Overview of Schroders' Ten Principles of Flexible Working



Source: Adapted From Schroders
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Schroders

Gartner.

Adapted From Schroders

These principles reinforce the fact that work flexibility is not only something in policy, but also in practice. It normalizes employee-driven flexibility and empowers employees to take advantage of flexibility as they see best. Flexibility can be a game-changer for all types of talent populations – such as employees with caregiving responsibilities who struggle to balance personal and professional obligations. Our research indicates there is a 40% increase in high performers when afforded flexibility over “where,” “when” and “how” they work. ² Thus, providing this type of radical flexibility to employees helps them optimize their day and boosts their performance.

2. Equip employees with resources to help them design flexible work patterns: Along with allowing employees to customize their workdays as the norm, organizations need to provide them guidance and resources to help them do so. This is especially important, as it helps employees ensure they are cognizant of team and business needs, while designing their work schedules. Figure 3 shows a flexible working decision framework from Schroders that helps them map out their work days.

Figure 3: Equip Employees, Not Just Managers



Other examples of such resources include:

- Real-life stories of how employees and teams at the organization have designed flexible work patterns that have set them up for success.
- A flexible work FAQ document that answers the most common questions about creating a work schedule that works for employees, their teams and clients.
- Interactive tools that employees can use to design their work schedules, while also having visibility into others' schedules.

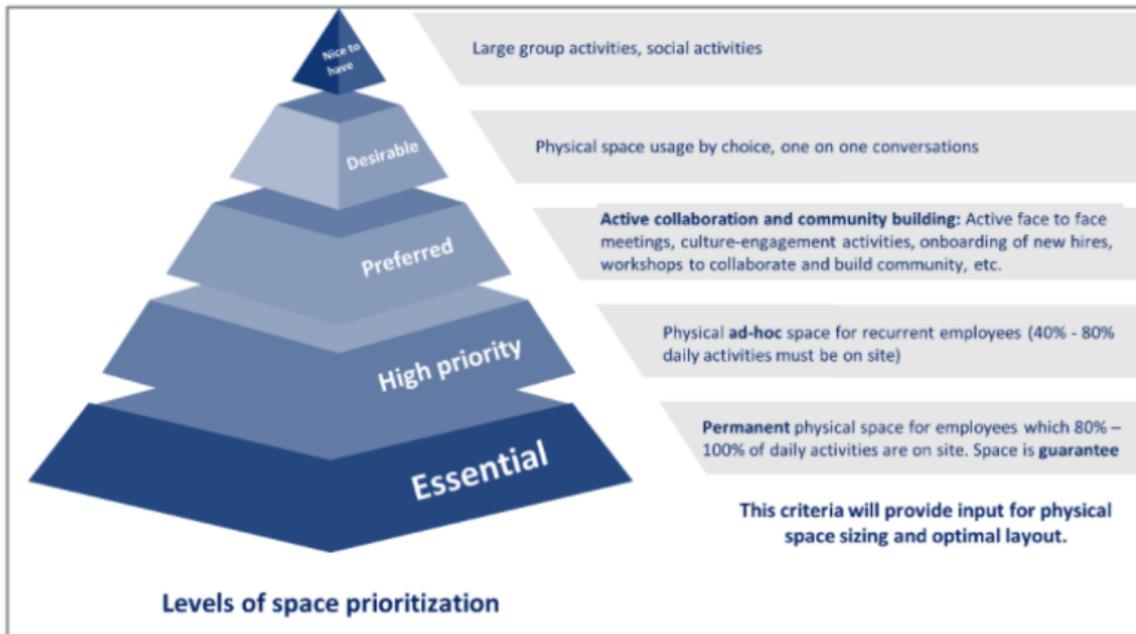
- Conversation guidance on how to work with team members and managers to decide on goals, collaboration time, success measures, etc.

Note: HR leaders must work with their CIOs and IT teams to understand about different tools and technologies that make remote/flexible work successful.

3. Guide employees to prioritize tasks and activities they can perform most effectively in offices: While employees increasingly start working from wherever they feel most comfortable, they are still unsure of how their office space can be used most effectively. Some of the key questions they have include “Should I take this meeting from home or at the office?” “What activities should I prioritize if I go to the office?” or “How do I collaborate with clients best?”. Many organizations are considering mandating a certain number of days in the office. However, this may suggest that flexibility can be quantified. Instead of basing flexibility on a set number of days in office, organizations must provide guidance on the purpose of the office and its value in carrying out work — justifying the commute. They should also create a shared understanding of workspace purposes between employees and key stakeholders. Tigo, a telecommunications company in Luxembourg, created an “Office Space Prioritization Guidance” pyramid, which prioritizes office space from “nice to have” activities at the top to “essential” office activities at the base (see Figure 4).

Fig 4: Tigo's Office Space Prioritization Guidelines

Tigo's Office Space Prioritization Guidance



Source: Adapted from Tigo

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From the figure, it can be seen that, while social gatherings and large group activities are “nice to have” and are given less space preference, employees whose work requires them to be onsite 80-100% of the time are given the top priority. In doing so, Tigo guarantees its employees a workplace conducive to productivity, active collaboration and community building.

4. Determine Flexibility by Tasks, not Roles: Most organizations can easily provide flexibility to their white-collar workers. However, organizations in the manufacturing, healthcare and service provider space have a majority of blue-collar workers for whom flexibility isn't an option. HR leaders often struggle to provide their blue-collar workers with flexibility, which often leads to questions raised over the equality of choices. Rather than classifying jobs as remote or on-site, breaking down each job into a list of its associated activities lets HR leaders provide greater flexibility to all employees and demonstrate the equity of these decisions. This is because every job has certain activities that can be done flexibly. Take, for instance, an IT technician's job. While many of their job activities require being onsite, a few activities like troubleshooting, updating employee information and regulating software updates can be done remotely. Thus, by classifying each job activity into remote and onsite-based, HR leaders and managers can help increase their blue-collar employees' flexibility. Below, Figure 5 provides a list of questions to help them do so.

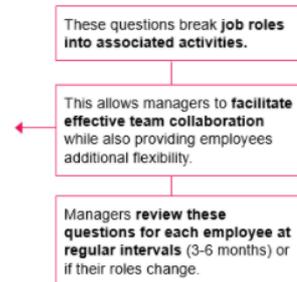
Figure 5: Employee-Manager Discussion Guide

Employee-Manager Discussion Guide

Instructions: Managers can use the questionnaire below to break each employees' job down into a list of associated activities. These questions help managers determine which of employees' activities need to be done in office vs. which can be done remotely.

Activities-Based Discussion Guide For Managers

- 1 What are the different roles that my team performs?
- 2 What are the different activities that these roles entail?
- 3 Which of these activities require employees to come to office, work specific hours or complete work in a defined manner?
- 4 Which of these activities can be performed flexibly?
- 5 How often are office, specific timing or structured activities performed?
- 6 How often are flexible activities performed?
- 7 Which of their current activities can be shifted to flexible activities?
- 8 How many of your team members take part in traditional work activities/ flexible activities?



5. Use Leader Role Modelling: While having flexible-work principles helps employees understand how to make the best use of their flexibility, more often than not, they are hesitant to do so. This is because they don't see this kind of work flexibility being practiced in real life. Take, for example, a manager who encourages their employees to be as flexible as possible, but always works during a fixed period in office. Their employees are naturally going to have doubts about working flexibly while their manager doesn't. This is why it is important for leaders and managers to role model flexibility – where they demonstrate behaviors consistent with the organization's flexible work policies and principles.

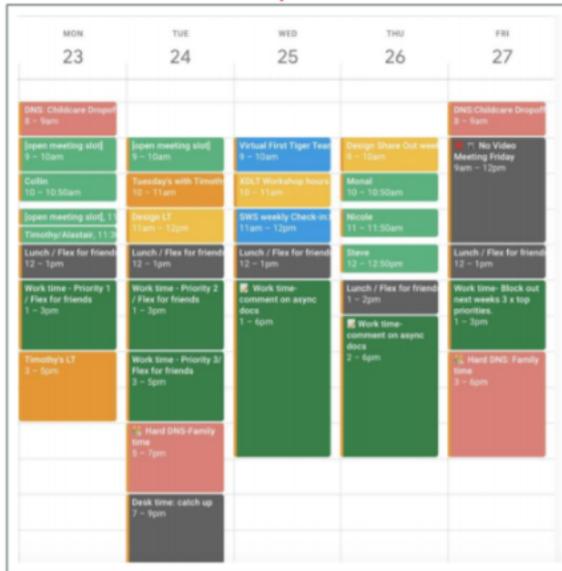
A great example of an organization that does this well is Telstra, an Australian telecommunications company. Realizing that, despite its flexible work policies, flexible work was not widely seen or experienced; it encouraged its leaders to role model flexible work and encourage their teams to try new methods of flexible working arrangements. Leaders who modeled and encouraged new ways of flexible work were recognized on Telstra's internal and external websites. Telstra created soft accountability and peer pressure for its entire senior leader population by showcasing leaders who were doing flexibility well. This resulted in 91% of its workforce agreeing that they were able to access flexible working and balance their work and personal life. Additionally, they were also able to improve employee retention rates.

Another example of a leader role modeling done well is from Dropbox, a U.S.-based cloud storage company. When it shifted to a "virtual-first" environment (i.e., where remote work is the primary experience for all employees), it realized the need for leaders to be explicit about working a truly flexible schedule that accommodated employees' unique needs, while still allowing for collaboration. Figure 6 shows its "virtual first" co-lead, Alastair Simpson, sharing his calendar on an internal blog for employees to model and follow.

Figure 6: Sample Employee-Designed Workweek

Employee-Designed Workweek

Virtual First Co-Lead Alastair Simpson shared his 2021 calendar in an internal blog to role model and guide reset collaboration habits.



Alastair's Advice For Resetting Your Calendar

- 1 Make It Personal:** Block time for personal needs/wants like childcare drop-offs or exercise.
- 2 50 Minute 1:1's:** Build in breathing room between meetings; use this to take notes, clean up action items or prep for what's next.
- 3 No-Video-Meeting Friday:** Use Friday to reboot and combat virtual fatigue.
- 4 Name High-Priority Work Blocks:** Improve your focus on top weekly priorities and help others respect your need for focused work.
- 5 Include Async Work Comment Time:** Include time to solve problems asynchronously first (e.g., email, chat) before meeting.
- 6 Flex For Friends Time:** Institute flexible time for external meetings, interviews, mentorship circles and global or cross-functional partners.

Source: Adapted From Dropbox

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Conclusion: With many organizations going fully remote or hybrid, organizations must learn to adapt their management styles to suit this new way of working. Providing employees flexible work experiences is the way forward. Organizations can provide flexible work experiences by exploring ways to enable employees to choose where, when and how they work, providing flexible work principles, role-modeling flexible work, equipping employees to design their work schedules and helping them prioritize tasks that can be done most effectively at the office. Doing so will not only optimize employee productivity, but will also improve their work-life experience.

Recommended by the Authors

Case Study: Employee-Driven Flexible Working Decisions (Schroders)

The State of Team Collaboration: Remote vs. Hybrid vs. On-site

Tool: Activities-Based Work Flexibility Calculator

Endnotes

¹ 2021 Gartner Hybrid Work Employee Survey

² 2021 Gartner EVP Employee Survey

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