

Alternative Work Schedules

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Alternative Work Schedules

Is the traditional 9 to 5, 40-hour work week going extinct? Not exactly, but whether it's requested by employees, instituted by organizations, or simply evolving out of technological connectedness, alternative work schedules are on the rise in North America. This month's newsletter focuses on three key ways alternative work schedules being put into practice: the Work-Share (Service Canada) program, employee job sharing, and telecommuting.

Work-Share 2009 (Service Canada)

Service Canada (www.servicecanada.gc.ca) has launched 'Work-Share 2009'. This is an adjustment program designed to help employers and workers avoid temporary layoffs due to reduced business activity during this recession. This program provides income support to employees eligible for Employment Insurance benefits who work a temporarily reduced work-week. Work-Sharing Agreements must be agreed upon by both the employee and the employer, and must be approved by Service Canada.

Employers and employees must meet certain criteria to qualify. For instance, employers must have been a year-round business in Canada for at least two years, show that reducing hours is unavoidable and unexpected, and that the work shortage is temporary. They must also demonstrate (through a recovery plan) how the business will be maintained for the duration of the agreement, and how it will return to normal working hours as the economy strengthens. Qualified employees must be "core staff" (year-round permanent full-time or part-time employees), and be eligible to receive regular Employment Insurance benefits.

According to a recent report, the number of Canadian workers who have signed up for the federal job-sharing program as an alternative to layoffs has soared dramatically in just eight months - up more than six fold. 5,827 work-sharing deals are now in place, which affects 165,104 employees across the country (Globe and Mail: Sept. 29, 2009). Considering that 300,000 jobs have been lost since January of this year, participation in the Work-Share program is quite significant.

Job Sharing

Job sharing is an alternative work arrangement in which two employees voluntarily share the responsibilities of one full-time job, and receive salary and benefits on a pro-rated basis. Job sharing has become increasingly popular in a number of North American organizations. In 2009, a survey of 286 managers and HR professionals revealed that 43% of Canadian employers plan to provide flexible work arrangements in the coming year. And of that 43%, 31% plan to offer job sharing (CareerBuilder).

Job sharing can provide terrific benefits to both employers and employees. Many employees seek out alternative work schedules to improve work-life balance, whether it's an employee returning to work from parental leave, or perhaps, someone who is easing into retirement. Once this balance is achieved, employee stress decreases and energy at work increases. Employers may find that employees who participate in job sharing demonstrate more enthusiasm for their work, are more productive, and have greater commitment to the organization.

It's also important to consider, however, the challenges of job sharing. For employees, they may find it more difficult to advance in their careers, as there may be less opportunity for training. In addition, they may find that they receive less recognition as a 'serious career person'. Employers and managers must increase communication to ensure that information and processes run seamlessly between co-sharing employees. And in some instances, employers may need to mediate potential work space difficulties, or personal conflicts between co-sharers.

About n-gen

We have worked with 10 of the 14 Canadian Fortune 500 companies, as selected by Forbes magazine in 2008.

We have trained over 8000 people through our various workshops.

We have delivered keynote presentations to more than 18,000 individuals.

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Telecommuting

Even more popular than job sharing is telecommuting, a flexible work arrangement which allows employees to work at home via communication technologies such as email, live messenger programs, internet meetings, and teleconferences. According to a 2008 survey, 25% of Canadian organizations offered telecommuting in 2007, and that number grew to 40% the following year (World at Work). In addition, a 2008 poll of 100 employers revealed that 70% said that it is common for their employees to work off-site (Office Team).

Like job sharing, telecommuting is a work arrangement that can aid employees in achieving a desired work-life balance. As revealed in a 2008 global survey of nearly 90,000 workers (including 5,000 in Canada), the ability to balance work and personal life is the most critical factor in employees' decisions to stay with their jobs (Towers Perrin). Senior leaders have also acknowledged that this is an important aspect in recruiting talent. A 2008 poll of 270 CFOs from Canadian companies, found that 20% thought telecommuting and flexible work schedules are the top draw for potential employees (Robert Half International).

Telecommuting offers a number of benefits, the most obvious being a reduction in office overhead costs. Another key benefit is increased employee productivity. Without having to commute, and with fewer interruptions, employees are able to get more done in their work day. Telecommuting also broadens the labour pool since geographical limitations, to a certain extent, are alleviated.

For telecommuting to remain mutually beneficial for employers and employees, it's important to keep in mind some potential pitfalls. For some employees, they may feel 'out of the loop' or even 'invisible' working at home. Employers must reassure employees that their work is visible, even if they are not. Another common pitfall for telecommuters is a tendency to overwork. Living and working in the same space can make it challenging to turn work off at the end of the day. It's crucial for telecommuting employees to set regular working hours, so that they don't lose the work-life balance they were likely hoping to achieve by working from home. For some employees, a lack of social interaction and face-to-face communication can be difficult to adjust to. It's important to schedule regular touch points with remote team members and plan for quarterly or annual live meetings if possible.

Interested in Learning More about Alternative Work Schedules?

Join us for our live webinar on Thursday October 29th, from 1-2pm EST, where we will continue exploring this topic. We will discuss how alternative work schedules appeal to the four generations.

Does your organization offer job-sharing or telecommuting? What challenges have you faced in implementing alternative work schedules? Has your organization utilized the Work-Share 2009 program? We would like to hear from you! If you would like to share your experiences to help contribute to the webinar discussion, please contact Tracy Yan at tyan@ngenperformance.com. All examples will remain anonymous.

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