

# Worker flexibility needs more corporate support

The movement toward granting greater flexibility to workers when it comes to where and when they work is being embraced more by employees. In order to capture the potential productivity gains of a more flexible work environment, employers need to do some catch up with their workforce on their commitment to flexibility.

A study by Flex+Strategy Group/Work+Life Fit, Inc., executed with workplace strategy consultant Citrix, identified high levels of employee acceptance of remote and open office working arrangements. Perhaps the most telling takeaway from the study: 9 out of 10 of the 617 workers surveyed said they believe their employer trusts them to do their job well regardless of the where and the when of the work.

The survey also revealed that management has yet to create the training and infrastructure to effectively support this burgeoning trend.

“With the growth of telework and open office environments combined with the ongoing introduction of new technology, work life flexibility is naturally embedded in today's workplaces,” said flexible workplace strategist Cali Williams Yost, CEO, Flex+Strategy Group. “But we’re stuck in the 1990s with outdated work and management practices that, along with lack of training and infrastructure, put recent investments in workplace innovation at risk and could erode the current reservoir of employee goodwill.”

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When the respondents were asked where they did their work, here’s what came back:

- 34 percent from a cube or open office;
- 33 percent from a remote location;
- 28 percent from a private office.

The study found that 61 percent of teleworkers were males, but that women were catching up: In 2013, 29 percent of teleworkers were female, while 39 percent of teleworkers were female in this year’s survey.

Collaboration is a key issue for those managing teams with remote workers, so the survey asked how all employees prefer to communicate with one another. The results are greater than 100 percent because workers use multiple means to interact with one another; percentages represent their “frequent” means:

- 60 percent use email, work documents or spreadsheets;
- 55 percent meet in person;

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- 43 percent use the phone.

The study extracted information by generation, seeking to identify how Gen Y, Gen X and boomers collaborated in their work. The younger folks were more than 10 percent more likely than boomers to prefer to collaborate frequently in person, despite the fact that many worked remotely. Phone meetings were more common among remote workers than office workers.

But employers aren't taking an active role in transitioning employees to tools and resources that could make collaboration among dispersed teams more productive. Eight of 10 employees said they had never used a project management tool, and 66 percent never used video or web conferencing. Employees also said they had no clear guidelines for saving and storing their work, and thus their work was randomly located — never a good practice.

Finally, more than half of workers with flexible options said there was not a formal training program at work to help them decide how to structure their flexible work arrangements.

“Modernizing the workplace is about more than new floorplans, shiny devices and mobility. Clearly we have an unmet need and a huge opportunity for more widespread training and infrastructure that supports flexible work,” Yost said. “Leaders need to capitalize on the current wave of employee optimism and manage to the good that exists in their organizations in order to truly unlock the potential of their business and people.”