

Manager attitudes on flexible work are changeable, researcher finds

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Many managers are skeptical about the idea of allowing flexible work arrangements for their employees. However, a new study shows that managers develop greater interest in supporting flexible work if they are strategically exposed to its value, and sociologist Stephen Sweet says his findings could give a boost to family-responsive employment practices.

"When [managers](#) gain experience with workers operating with flexible schedules, they tend to increase their confidence that schedule flexibility has positive effects on [team performance](#) and [work](#)-group behavior," says Sweet. "Even managers who are initially opposed to the idea can change their mind if they believe that their peers support such arrangements as beneficial to their organization."

Sweet is an associate professor of sociology at Ithaca College and a visiting scholar at the Center on Aging & Work at Boston College. Published in the journal *Community, Work & Family*, his research was coauthored by Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Jacqueline James from Boston College.

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) have yet to be widely implemented in the United States, in part because of limited support from managers. Those who oppose the idea may believe that allowing employees to work from a home office or on a flexible schedule may impede worker productivity and commitment, team performance and the sharing of knowledge.

"Our interest is in thinking about how to expand support for [flexible work](#), primarily because it can help workers manage the many demands they have off the job," says Sweet. "But freeing up time for an [employee](#) to handle their family affairs can also free up energy for them to be more effective on the job. And if an employee can work from home, that frees up expensive office space."

The study followed a group of managers at a large financial services company over the course of a year, conducting baseline and follow-up surveys on their attitudes toward FWAs. Eight months into the study, half of the managers were shown a report that said other managers in the company tended to support flexibility within the organization. Managers who received the customized report developed more positive attitudes towards flexibility and tended to expand FWAs in their own work units.

"Some managers have a jaundiced view of flexible work arrangements because they think it will make their own work harder and is not in their career interest," says Sweet. "Our research indicates that if a company has an effective communications strategy, where it can explain to managers not only in an abstract way that flexible work options are beneficial, but that their peers support these policies, it can transform manager sentiments toward embracing FWAs.

"If managers can be supportive and if employees can show that these arrangements are appropriate from a business perspective, that can justify manager support for flexible work practices. In addition, the study showed that when managers believed that such [support](#) would benefit their own performance reviews, they developed a more positive stance on the value of flexible work."

More information: Stephen Sweet et al. Manager attitudes concerning flexible work arrangements: fixed or changeable?, *Community, Work & Family* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/13668803.2016.1271311](https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2016.1271311)

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