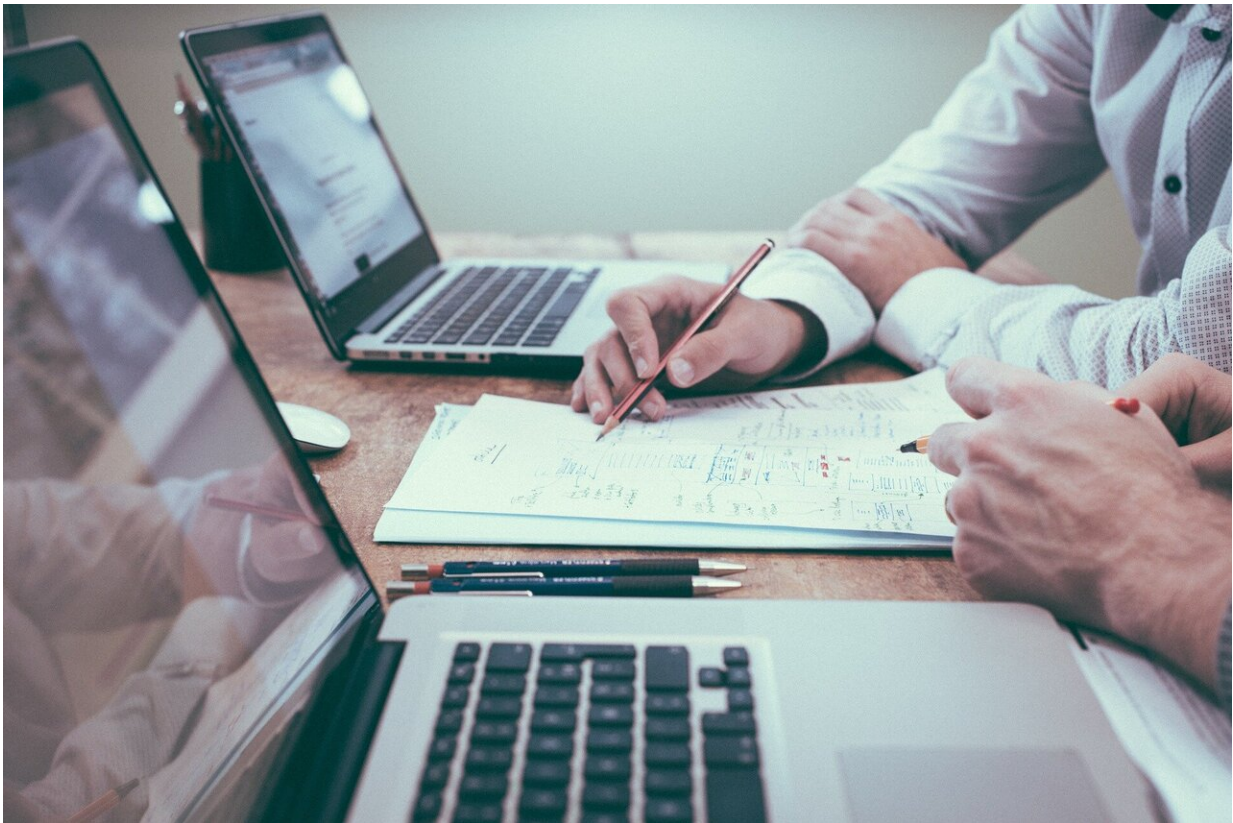


Doing more with less: Flexible, reduced-load jobs a win-win for workers, employers

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Attracting and retaining the best and brightest employees with an unemployment rate that is hovering near a 50-year low is a challenge for companies.

The challenge is made more difficult with more workers reaching retirement age, declining birth rates and fewer replacement workers to fill job openings.

One emerging answer: Get rid of unproductive "busy work" and commit to learning how to effectively design and implement flexible workload arrangements for interested high-potential employees on a career path.

Other countries, such as the Netherlands, have been trying it for years and seeing success, as well as increased gender equality among men and women after the birth of a child, says a Purdue University work-life balance expert.

Reduced-load work is finally gaining a little more traction in the United States, says Ellen Ernst Kossek, the Basil S. Turner Professor at Purdue's Krannert School of Management and research director of Purdue's Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence.

Reduced-load is a flexible form of part-time work, where an individual works with a manager to customize their jobs to reduce workload while still progressing in a career. For instance, a corporate sales manager with a portfolio of 10 products might keep eight, while taking a 20% pay cut and being able to choose to work longer hours four days a week or fewer hours during the traditional five-day work week.

The supervisor and employee work together to determine the duties that add the most value to the organization and then cut low-value tasks or identify tasks that others can cover. Or they can identify legacy tasks that aren't adding much value and should go away.

"We need to jettison our old conceptions of part-time work being low pay or a career dead end, or something relegating one to a secondary mommy or daddy track," Kossek said. "Given that many salaried

professional jobs today have ballooned to be up to 50 or 60 hours a week, reduced-load work is desperately needed as a temporary or ongoing career option for workers at all career ages and stages."

The Department of Labor considers full time for hourly paid jobs to be at least 30 hours a week.

"A reduced workload can enable sustainable careers for managers and other professionals," Kossek said. "Yet we see not only hesitancy from organizations to implement it, but also implementation hurdles such as insufficient workload reductions fitting the pay cut and stalled careers often adversely affecting women and caregivers.

"One reason there is hesitancy is managers sometimes think that having someone work less than full-time hours means they are getting less work done. But the reality is many reduced-load workers work more intently and often get as much done as a full-time worker. This is because they enjoy the opportunity to have an interesting job yet still be able to flexible in a way that enables time for other life interests—from continuing education, to caregiving to community involvement."

Another barrier to implementing reduced-load work is that many current accounting systems primarily use standardized headcount for labor costing, an approach that inadvertently can penalize managers experimenting with workload redesign because many firms make it hard to hire additional staff as a traditional tactic for controlling overhead costs. Yet employers need to move away from counting bodies toward using full-time equivalent costing.

Kossek says it is important to identify which tasks can be integrated with other workers' roles, from current staff to interns or trainees, and which tasks need to be differentiated as unique as part of the reduced-load redesign strategy.

"This enables managers to have more flexibility in organizing tasks and not be penalized for learning how to reallocate workloads or hours for individual talented workers," Kossek said. "Doing so can also develop other team members' knowledge and provide better backup for clients.

"In sum, the concept of reduced-load work requires a new approach to assigning job tasks and a way of thinking about how to manage work and careers. For those employers who consider such a prospect, the rewards can be great in productivity and company morale."

The Purdue work appears in a June edition of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. The study was partially funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

Kossek examined reduced-load work by interviewing nearly 100 manager, human resources experts and executives across 20 major leading North American employers across five industries that have been early adopters of reduced workload. She identified work redesign tactics that either reduced or reshuffled workloads.

"Reduced workload work is important to study because it is one of the few flexible work forms that prompt organizations to quantify the parameters of a full-time load and experiment with tactics to actually reduce workloads," Kossek said. "Reduced workload work matters for individuals and societies because being able to reduce one's workload while staying on a career track is an important asset to build careers that are sustainable."

Kossek says reduced [workload](#) also keeps more older individuals in the workforce and not seeking retirement as soon or dropping out to care for elderly parents. It also may help keep mothers or fathers of young children or children with special needs in the workforce rather than taking very long leaves of absence or quitting altogether. Reduced-load

work can foster retention and prevent burnout. Many reduced-load workers can shift back to full time later in their careers.

Kossek and her team developed a three-stage process of collaborative crafting of reduced-load work: exploration, implementation and [career](#) embedding. The third stage involves troubleshooting issues to ensure that the arrangement was working well over time.

Kossek has received worldwide attention for her research on work-life balance and has worked with the Purdue Research Foundation on some of her studies.

More information: Ellen Ernst Kossek et al, Desperately seeking sustainable careers: Redesigning professional jobs for the collaborative crafting of reduced-load work, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2019). DOI: [10.1016/j.jvb.2019.06.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.06.003)

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