



News from Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management

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First ever use of control group to measure effectiveness of workplace flexibility program shows increased job satisfaction, reduced burnout and stress say U Minnesota and MIT Sloan co-authors

Study spotlights need for organizational initiatives versus individual workplace arrangements

Cambridge, Mass., January 13, 2016— New research released today shows that workers at a Fortune 500 company who participated in a pilot work flexibility program voiced higher levels of job satisfaction and reduced levels of burnout and psychological stress than employees within the same company who did not participate.

This is the first time a randomized controlled trial has been used to measure the effects of workplace flexibility in a U.S. firm.

Conducting this research over the course of 12 months in the IT division at a Fortune 500 company with 700 employees were Phyllis Moen, who holds the McKnight Endowed Presidential Chair in Sociology at the University of Minnesota; Erin L. Kelly, a Professor in Work and Organization Studies at the MIT Sloan School of Management and an affiliate of the Institute for Work and Employment Research at MIT Sloan; and their colleagues in the Work, Family, and Health Network.

Moen and Kelly split the department in two: half the work groups participated in a pilot program, where they learned about work practices designed to increase their sense of control over their work lives. These practices focused on results, rather than face time at the office.

Employees then implemented these practices, which ranged from shifting their work schedules and working from home more to rethinking the number of daily meetings they attended, increasing their communication via instant messenger, and doing a better job of anticipating periods of high demand, such as around software releases. Managers in the pilot group also received supervisor training to encourage their support for the family/personal life and professional development of their reports.

The control group was excluded from the training and instead was governed by the company's preexisting policies.

The results were definitive, say Moen and Kelly: employees who participated in the organizational initiative said they felt more control over their schedules, support from their bosses, and were more likely to say they had enough time to spend with their families. Moreover, these employees reported greater job satisfaction and were less burned out and less stressed. They also reported decreases in psychological distress, which captures depressive symptoms that do not amount to clinical depression.

The study adds to a growing body of research showing that flexible work arrangements result in happier, healthier and more productive employees.

Flexible work arrangements, meanwhile, often have a bad reputation says Kelly. “The worker thinks, ‘If I ask for special treatment, it will kill my career and I won’t get promoted.’ The manager thinks, ‘If I give in to this employee, others will ask me too and no one will get their work done.’ Even many academics take a skeptical view flex of programs and see them as a way for Corporate America to take advantage of workers.”

But it shouldn’t be this way, Moen notes. “Our research demonstrates that workers who are allowed to have a voice in the hours and location of their work not only feel better about their jobs, but also less conflicted about their work-to-family balance. Crucially, these workers are also more efficient and more productive on the job. In other words, workplace flexibility is beneficial—not detrimental—to organizations.”

Previous studies have shown that organizational initiatives that improve employees’ subjective wellbeing also improve the bottom line: they increase productivity and decrease absenteeism, turnover, and presenteeism—which means showing up, but not being engaged at work.

“Today’s workers are bombarded by advice on how to juggle their work and family lives—we’re told to take up yoga, or learn to meditate, or only check email twice a day,” says Moen. “But individual coping strategies alone won’t solve the problem. Our study makes clear that organizational initiatives, including programs that promote greater flexibility and control for workers as well as greater supervisor support, are needed.”

To access the study, “*Does a Flexibility/Support Organizational Initiative Improve High-Tech Employees’ Well-Being? Evidence from the Work, Family, and Health Network.*” *American Sociological Review* 1–31 2016; Phyllis Moen, Erin L. Kelly, Wen Fan, Shi-Rong Lee, David Almeida, Ellen Kossek, and Orfeu Buxton, please visit:

<http://asr.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/12/23/0003122415622391.full>