

Workplace Flexibility: From Research to Action

Ellen Galinsky, Kelly Sakai, and Tyler Wigton

Summary

Ellen Galinsky, Kelly Sakai, and Tyler Wigton explore the “time famine” among American workers—the continuing sense among employees of not having enough time to manage the multiple responsibilities of work and personal and family life. Noting that large shares of U.S. employees report feeling the need for greater workplace flexibility to enable them to take better care of family responsibilities, the authors examine a large-scale community-engagement initiative to increase workplace flexibility voluntarily.

Using the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce as a primary source of data, the authors begin with an overview of the prevalence of flexibility in today’s American workplace. They track which categories of employees have access to various flexibility options, as well as the extent to which employees with access to various types of flexibility use those options. Findings from the study indicate that the majority of employees want flexibility but that access to it varies, with more advantaged employees—those who are well educated, have high salaries, and work full time, for example—being doubly advantaged in having greater access to flexibility.

A number of employers, say the authors, tend to be skeptical of the value of workplace flexibility and to fear that employees will abuse it if it is offered. But the study data reveal that most employees use flexibility quite conservatively. When the authors use their nationally representative data set to investigate correlations between access to workplace flexibility and a range of workplace outcomes especially valued by employers—employee engagement, job satisfaction, retention, and health—they find that employers as well as employees can benefit from flexibility.

Finally, the authors discuss When Work Works, a large, national community-based initiative under way since 2003 to increase voluntary adoption of workplace flexibility. The authors detail the conceptual basis of the project’s design, noting its emphasis on flexibility as one component of effective workplaces that can benefit employers, employees, and communities alike. Galinsky, Sakai, and Wigton conclude by drawing lessons learned from the project and briefly discussing the implications of using research to bring about workplace change.

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The recurrent feeling of so many American employees that there simply are not enough hours in the day has been called many things, but one phrase—a “time famine”—captures the feeling especially well.¹

Employees experience the time famine in different ways (figure 1). Women, in particular, feel the effects of the time squeeze on their psychological well-being.² Almost all employee groups of parents feel that they have insufficient time with their children. Employed fathers and mothers, for example, feel similarly deprived of time with their children. Differences begin to appear in other areas of time deprivation. Parents, full-time employees, more highly educated employees, managers and professionals, higher paid, and younger employees are the most likely to feel deprived of time with their husbands, wives, or partners. The gap between parents (73 percent) and nonparents (52 percent) in that respect is particularly striking. The disparity between parents (72 percent) and nonparents

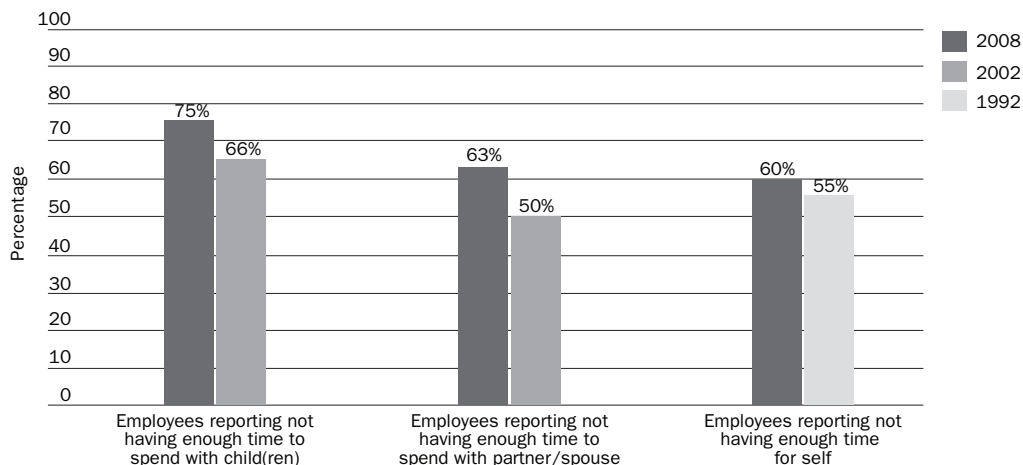
(50 percent) is similarly large when it comes to feeling deprived of time for themselves. Women, full-time employees, managers and professionals, unionized employees, salaried employees, employees living with a spouse or partner, employees making between \$25,000 and \$39,999 annually, and more highly educated employees are the most likely to feel starved for time to spend on themselves.

In recent years, researchers have focused their attention on the effect of the time strain on women. Women, particularly mothers, face challenges in the workplace that men and childless women are less likely to experience. Workplace evaluations, for example, seem to hold mothers to higher standards (in terms of commitment to work, punctuality, and competence) than they hold their childless counterparts.³

Access to Workplace Flexibility

A logical remedy to employees’ sensation of being famished for time is workplace flexibility—allowing employees to have flexible work

Figure 1. Feelings of a “Time Famine” among Wage and Salaried Employees



Source: Families and Work Institute, 1992, 2002, and 2008 editions of the National Study of the Changing Workforce.

National Study of the Changing Workforce

The primary source of data for this article is Families and Work Institute's National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW), a comprehensive, nationally representative, ongoing study of American employees' lives on and off the job. Originally conducted as the U.S. Department of Labor's Quality of Employment Survey (QES), it was discontinued in 1977. It was then adopted by Families and Work Institute in 1992 and continues to be conducted every five to six years.

schedules that enable them to better manage work and personal or family life. According to the latest (2008) edition of Families and Work Institute's ongoing nationally representative study, the National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW), a large majority of employees—87 percent—report that having workplace flexibility would be “extremely” or “very” important if they were looking for a new job. Employee access to such flexibility, however, is limited, and even when employees do have access, they may worry about using the offered flexibility—often for good reasons, as several studies show.

Jennifer Glass, for example, found that mothers who used flexibility policies offered by their employer experienced wage depression, missed promotions, and other negative consequences, even when the policies used were employer-sanctioned. The long-term effect of flexibility policies on mothers' wages depended on the type of flexibility used, the occupation, and continuity with the employer.⁴ Similarly, Michael Judiesch and Karen Lyness studied 11,815 managers and found that those who took leaves were more likely to receive smaller salary increases and negative performance evaluations, and less likely to be

Technical Background on the National Study of the Changing Workforce

Primary sources to inform this article were the Families and Work Institute's 1992, 1997, 2002, and 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) surveys. The NSCW builds directly on the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey (QES) conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan with funding from the U.S. Department of Labor. Both the NSCW and QES are based on random samples of the U.S. workforce.

Total samples of the NSCW include wage and salaried employees who work for someone else, independent self-employed workers who do not employ anyone else, and small business owners who do employ others. The overall sample size of the 2008 NSCW is 3,502; this article, however, is based on 2,769 wage and salaried employees. All NSCW samples are adjusted to (that is, weighted to) reflect recent U.S. Bureau of the Census statistics on the total U.S. population to adjust for any sampling bias that might have occurred. The response rates for all NSCW surveys are above 50 percent, applying the conservative method of calculation recommended by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. In 2008 the response rate was 54.6 percent and the completion rate was 99 percent. The estimated maximum sampling error for the total wage and salaried sample is approximately plus or minus 1 percent.

promoted. They did not find gender differences in the penalties for leaves of absence.⁵ In addition, a study by Scott Schieman and Paul Glavin found that increased use of flexibility can lead to “work-home blurring.”⁶ Because workers were available to their employers anytime, anywhere, they reported “receiving work-related contact outside of normal work hours” and found themselves working during designated family time.

Table 1. Access to Flexibility among All Employees

Type of flexibility	Percentage of employees with access
<i>Choices in Managing Time</i>	
Allowed complete or a lot of control over their work schedule	37
It is very true that their schedule or shift meets their needs	62
<i>Flextime and Flexplace</i>	
Allowed traditional flextime (can choose own start and end schedules)	45
Allowed daily flextime (able to make short-notice schedule changes)	84
Allowed to work compressed workweek some of the time	36
Allowed to work some regular paid hours at home	16
<i>Reduced Time</i>	
Full-timers who could arrange to work part time in their current position if desired	37
Part-timers who could arrange to work full time in their current position if desired	92
Could arrange to work part year	23
<i>Time Off</i>	
It's not hard at all to take time off during the workday for personal or family matters	35
Receive at least five paid days for personal illness a year	62
Receive at least five paid days for sick child(ren) a year	48
Able to take time off for elder care without fear of losing income	53
Able to take time off for elder care without fear of losing job	70
Have paid vacation days	78
Average days of annual paid vacation days allowed	15
Receive paid holidays	77
Able to volunteer during work time without losing pay	32
New mothers (with children under the age of six) with access to parenting leave	99
New mothers (with children under the age of six) with access to parenting leave with partial or full pay	48
New fathers (with children under the age of six) with access to parenting leave	94
New fathers (with children under the age of six) with access to parenting leave with partial or full pay	56
<i>Culture of Flexibility</i>	
Strongly or somewhat disagree that they have to choose between advancing in their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives	58
Strongly or somewhat disagree that employees who ask for flexibility are less likely to get ahead in their jobs or careers	61
Supervisor support (summary of five questions on a scale from 1=low to 4=high)	3

Source: Families and Work Institute, 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

The 2008 edition of the NSCW investigated, for the first time, workers' access to, use of, and demand for flexibility. The 2008 survey explored twenty-eight different aspects of workplace flexibility, which can be grouped into five categories (the categories are aligned with the labels used by business leaders). The first category, Choices in Managing Time, includes feeling control over one's schedule and agreeing that the schedule or shift meets

one's needs. The second, Flextime and Flexplace, includes traditional flexibility (control over when the workday begins and ends), daily flexibility (short-notice schedule changes), compressed workweeks, and working at home. Reduced Time, the third category, includes, for full-timers, being able to work part time in their current position, and, for part-timers, being able to work full time in their current position, as well as to

work part year. The fourth option, Time Off, includes being able, without difficulty, to take time for personal or family matters, at least five paid days off for personal illness, at least five paid days off to care for sick children, time off for elder care without fear of losing one's job, paid vacation time, paid holiday time off, time off for volunteering without the loss of pay, and maternity and paternity leave. The final category, Culture of Flexibility, includes not having to choose between advancement and devoting attention to family life, not jeopardizing advancement by asking for flexibility, and having overall supervisor support when work-life issues arise. Table 1 presents an overview of how many employees have access to each of these five types of flexibility.

In the following subsections we break down the overall employee responses from the 2008 NSCW, making comparisons within the following employee groups: men and women; parent and nonparents; employees of different ages—Generation Y (born between 1980 and 1995), Generation X (born between 1966 and 1979), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1965), and Matures (born between 1922 and 1945); employees with different levels of education (high school or less, some postsecondary education, four-year college degree or more); employees with full- and part-time jobs; employees from different industries (goods-producing and service industries); employees who are managerial and professional and those who are not; unionized and nonunionized employees; hourly and salaried employees; employees who are married or living with spouse or partner and those who are not; and employees from various annual wage groups (less than \$25,000, \$25,000–\$39,999, \$40,000–\$64,999, and \$65,000 and more).⁷

Choices in Managing Time

Only 37 percent of employees overall report having “complete” or “a lot” of control over their work schedules. Perhaps surprisingly, no differences exist between the responses of men and women and between the responses of parents and nonparents in schedule control, but there are differences among other groups. Older employees, more educated employees, part-time employees, employees working in the service sector, nonunionized employees, managers and professionals, and those with higher wages report having the greatest schedule control.

Employees are more likely to feel that their schedule or shift meets their needs (62 percent) than they are to feel that they have control over their schedule (37 percent). Age matters here. Matures (76 percent) clearly experience a better fit in their schedule or shifts than Generation Y employees (56 percent), as do managerial employees, non-union employees, and those living in a couple relationship.

Flextime and Flexplace

Overall, 45 percent of employees report having access to traditional flextime, defined as being able to choose one's own starting and ending times for work. Men (48 percent) are more likely to have access to traditional flextime than women (41 percent), as are more highly educated employees. Those with a college degree or higher have much greater access (57 percent) than those with a high school degree or less (37 percent). Employees working in the service sector, salaried employees, employees in managerial positions, and employees with higher wages have greater access to traditional flextime than other groups, but the gap in access is particularly large between nonunionized (49 percent) and unionized employees (27 percent).

A far smaller share of employees (16 percent) is allowed the option of flexplace, defined as working some regularly scheduled paid hours at home. Men, older employees, more highly educated employees, full-timers, employees in the service sector, managers, nonunion employees, salaried employees, those living with their spouse or partners, and those with the highest wages are the most likely to have access to flexplace. Particularly large is the gap between employees with the highest wages (41 percent) and those with the lowest (4 percent).

In addition to asking about traditional flex-time and flexplace, the 2008 NSCW asked employees whether they can make changes to their starting and quitting times when last-minute problems arise and found that 84 percent had such access. The groups with the most access to this short-notice daily flexibility are managers, nonunionized employees, salaried employees, better-educated employees, and higher-income employees. Certainly, education affects the kind of jobs that employees have—and certain jobs lend themselves more easily to flexibility than others—but, as becomes clear when we discuss other types of flexibility, less advantaged employees are also less advantaged in having access to workplace flexibility in many respects, although they may in fact have the greatest need for it. Experience at Families and Work Institute reveals that more jobs lend themselves to flexibility than employers might initially imagine.

Compressed workweeks are defined as working a full-time schedule, but shifting some of those hours into longer days to be able to take more time off on other days—such as being able to work four ten-hour days a week instead of five eight-hour days or for all or part of the year. Some employers

allow compressed workweeks during the summer months, calling them “summer hours.” Thirty-six percent of the total workforce reports having access to compressed workweeks. The only difference in access is between nonunionized and unionized employees (37 percent and 31 percent, respectively).

Reduced Time

In investigating access to reduced time, the 2008 NSCW asked part-timers whether they believe they could work full time in their same position and full-timers whether they believe they could work part time in their position if they wished to. The question raises a variety of constraints, including whether employees could afford such changes in workload and time commitments. Only 37 percent of the full-time employees (who make up 82 percent of the study sample) report that they could arrange to reduce their hours to part time in their same position, if they wanted to, with women (41 percent) more likely than men (34 percent) to feel this way. Overall, because part-time jobs are more likely to be filled by women (63 percent) than men (37 percent), it may not be surprising that women might also take jobs where reducing their time is a possibility.

Part-time work is sometimes referred to as a part-time ghetto from which escape is difficult. But according to the 2008 NSCW survey, 92 percent of the part-time employees (who make up 18 percent of the study group) report that they can move into a full-time schedule and maintain their current position if they want to.

The 2008 NSCW also asked full-time employees if they would prefer to work a part-time schedule, and part-time employees if they would prefer a full-time schedule. A greater

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share of part-time employees (37 percent) report an interest in working a full-time schedule than vice versa (20 percent). With 37 percent of part-time employees wanting to move to a full-time schedule and more than nine in ten reporting being able to do so, it is unclear why more part-timers don't increase their hours. Obviously, other factors must explain this discrepancy. Interestingly, data from Families and Work Institute's most recent nationally representative study of employers, the 2008 National Study of Employers, show that 44 percent of employers allow at least some of their employees to move back and forth between full- and part-time positions while remaining at their same level.⁸ Thus employees may also be more optimistic about being able to make these changes than employers are.

In exploring access to part-year work, the 2008 NSCW asked whether employees could arrange to work for only part of the year in their current job and found that 23 percent have such access. Part-time employees are more likely than full-time employees to be able to work part year (36 percent and 20

percent, respectively). Other employees who are most likely to be able to work part year are those in the service industry, hourly employees, employees not living with a spouse or partner, and employees in jobs with the lowest wages.

Time Off

Overall, 35 percent of employees report that it is "not at all hard" to take time off during the workday for personal or family matters. Mature employees (51 percent) have much greater access to this kind of flexibility than do Generation Y employees (29 percent). The kind of trust that permits time off during the day appears to be earned by a longer tenure in the workforce. Employees who live with a spouse or partner (38 percent) also have greater access to time off during the workday than those who do not (30 percent).

The 2008 NSCW asked employees who were providing elder care if they were able to take the time off they needed without fear of losing income as a result. Overall, 53 percent report being able to do so, with men, full-time employees, and those living with a spouse or partner having more access to this flexibility than their counterparts. Seventy percent of employees who have elder care responsibilities report being able to take time off to perform such care without fear of losing their job. Women and older employees report having the greatest such access.

Asked the extent to which their employers support their contributing to their communities by volunteering, 32 percent of employees report that they are able to volunteer during work time without losing pay. Three differences emerge among groups: men (36 percent) have greater access to paid leave for volunteering than women (28 percent), nonunion employees (35 percent) have more access than

unionized employees (19 percent), and salaried employees (42 percent) have more access than hourly employees (26 percent).

The 2008 NSCW also asked employees with a child under the age of six about their experiences in taking time off after birth or adoption (although these employees may not have worked for their current employers when the child was born). Nearly all women with children under the age of six (99 percent) report having access to some maternity leave, which could also include the time off for medical disability. The only significant differences in access are between full-time (100 percent) and part-time (95 percent) employees and between those in the service industries (100 percent) and the goods-producing industries (92 percent). When asked whether either partial or full pay was provided during this leave, the share reporting access drops to 48 percent. Those most likely to receive pay during leave are better-educated, full-time, and salaried employees and those who already have higher wages.

Men and women with children under the age of six have similar access to caregiving leave. Overall, 94 percent of fathers have some access to leave after the birth or adoption of a child. The only difference is between men who live with a spouse or partner (95 percent) and men who don't (76 percent). Overall, 56 percent of fathers report being given some pay during leave, with older, better-educated, and salaried employees and those with higher wages more likely to have access to payment during leave than others. It is likely, however, that men are using personal or vacation time for wages during caregiving leaves rather than paid paternity leave.

For the most common forms of paid time off, large differences exist among different

groups of employees. For example, 62 percent of all employees report having at least five paid days off for personal illness, but the share of full-timers (68 percent) with access to paid sick time is much larger than the share of part-timers (37 percent). Parents (67 percent) are more likely to have paid sick time than nonparents (59 percent)—perhaps because parents look for jobs that provide this option. In addition, employees who are in the Baby Boomer generation, in service industries, salaried, living with their spouse or partner, and who have higher wages are the most likely to have paid sick time. One particular difference—that between union and nonunion employees—is interesting. Nonunionized employees have greater access to unpaid flexibility, but unionized employees have greater access to paid time off. For example, 72 percent of unionized employees have at least five paid sick days, compared with 60 percent of nonunionized employees.

More advantaged employees have the greatest access to paid sick days—only 55 percent of employees with a high school degree or less have access compared with 76 percent of college-educated employees. Managers and professionals, as well as employees with higher wages, are also more likely to have access to paid sick days than do less well-paid employees.

A smaller share of employees has at least five paid days for their children's illnesses (48 percent) than has such leave for their own illnesses (62 percent). The pattern of access is similar to that for paid sick time, with more highly educated employees, full-timers, employees in the service industries, managers and professionals, unionized employees, salaried employees, and higher wage earners having the greatest access.

Overall, 78 percent of employees have access to paid vacation days. Men (82 percent) have greater access than do women (73 percent). Employees in the middle years (Generation X and Baby Boomers) have greater access than those who are younger and older. Parents, better-educated employees, full-timers, managers and professionals, salaried employees, employees living with a spouse or partner, and higher wage earners have the greatest access.

On average, employees have 15.4 days of paid vacation time a year. As has been the pattern, more advantaged employees have access to longer vacations. As an example, the highest-paid employees average 18.9 vacation days, compared with 10.3 days for the lowest-paid employees.

Similarly, 77 percent of the workforce has access to paid holidays. Those most likely to have paid holidays are men, parents, better-educated employees, full-timers, managers and professionals, salaried employees, employees living with their spouse or partner, and higher-wage employees.

Culture of Flexibility

Some employees who have access to flexibility believe that they would pay a price if they used it. To determine how widespread such views are, the 2008 NSCW investigated the extent to which employees think that they put their jobs in jeopardy if they use the flexibility they are offered.

Asked how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement that they have to choose between advancing in their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives, 58 percent of employees disagree strongly or somewhat. Thus, about two in five employees feel that they must make a choice between work and family life. Interestingly, those least

likely to feel the need to make that choice are less well-educated employees, full-timers, and nonmanagers. In other words, the higher employees climb within their organizations, the more likely they are to believe that they have had to make tough choices.

Asked if they agree or disagree with the statement that employees who ask for flexibility are less likely to get ahead in their jobs, 61 percent disagree strongly or somewhat. The employees who are most likely to disagree are older employees, better-educated employees, employees in the service industries, managers and professionals, salaried employees, employees living with a spouse or partner, and employees with higher wages.

To measure the final item in the Culture of Flexibility—support that supervisors give employees regarding work-life issues—we created a scale of supervisor support that combines five variables.⁹ The scale runs from 1 to 4, with 1 representing low support and 4, high support. Among all employees, the average “score” for supervisor support is 3.3. The only significant difference in support received from supervisors is between managers and professionals (3.4) and employees in other positions (3.2).

How Widespread Is the Use of Flexibility?

Employers’ assumptions about the use of workplace flexibility can be negative and strongly entrenched. Firm managers voice concerns about flexibility at employer conferences and events, typically saying that if they offer workplace flexibility, their employees will take advantage of them by abusing it. “If you give them an inch, they’ll take a mile” and “There will be nobody here when we need them” are oft-repeated comments in such discussions.

The 2008 NSCW is one of the first studies to investigate the usage of flexibility nationwide. Asked if they “sometimes” use a variety of types of flexibility, 79 percent of employees with access to traditional flextime report that they sometimes use it; 46 percent of those with access to compressed workweeks report that they sometimes use it; and 64 percent of those allowed to work some of their paid hours at home report that they sometimes do so. These types of arrangements, once adopted, can become predictable so that employers and employees can know when and where employees are working. The study finds that employees make less use of short-notice flextime: 19 percent never use it, 70 percent use it once a month or less, and only 11 percent use it regularly. Likewise, only 3 percent of those allowed to work mainly at home do so, and 23 percent of those who could work part year adopt that schedule.

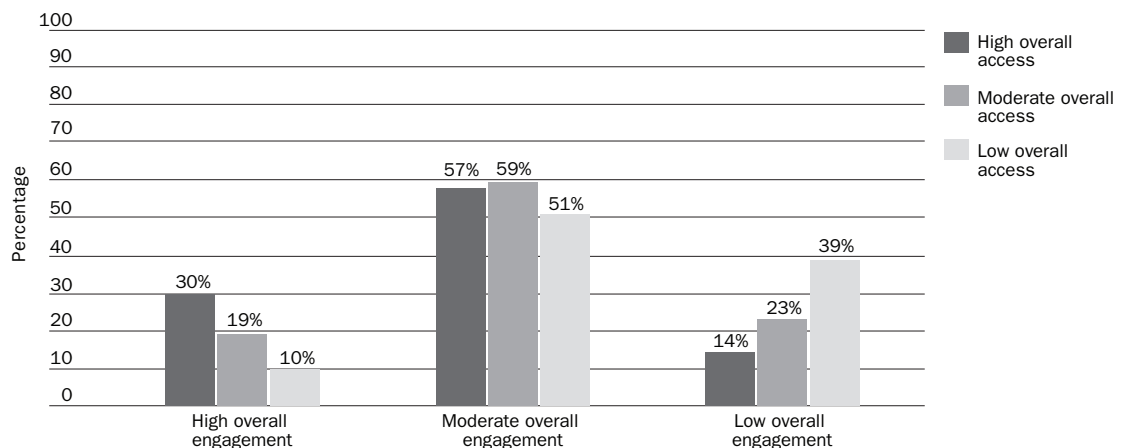
Likewise employees take less time off than they are allowed. For example, although they are offered, on average, 15.4 days of paid

vacation time, they take 12.9 days on average. Only 60 percent of employees use all of the vacation time available to them in a year. Employees who receive at least five paid days off a year for personal illness on average took 1.9 days for personal illness over the past three months. Eighty-nine percent are satisfied with the amount of time they are given.

Employees who are allowed to volunteer during some of their paid hours spend 4.8 hours a week on these activities—or the equivalent of half a workday (though the 2008 NSCW measure does not indicate whether these hours are on-the-job hours). Finally, among employees who have given birth to or adopted a child in the past six years, mothers take 14.4 weeks off on average, and fathers take 5.4 weeks (though these totals likely include personal and vacation time).

In sum, although a small number of employees may take advantage of their employers by abusing the flexibility they are offered, most appear to use it quite conservatively,

Figure 2. The Relationship between Job Engagement and Access to Flexibility*



Source: Families and Work Institute, 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

*This figure shows that the relationship between having access to flexibility and an employee’s level of engagement would occur by chance 1 in 1,000 times.

indicating that employers' fears about high usage and abuse are largely unfounded.¹⁰

Does Access to Flexibility Make a Difference in the Workplace?

Findings from the 2008 NSCW indicate that employees want flexibility; that access to it varies, with more advantaged employees being doubly advantaged in that they have greater access; and that overall usage is modest. To what extent do the NSCW data address the larger issue: does access to flexibility matter—both for employers and for employees? Though correlations do not indicate causation, we believe our findings can lead the way to other studies that do assess causation. Several studies are now under way to assess employee outcomes such as job engagement, retention, physical health, and well-being before and after employees are offered greater access to supportive supervisors and flexibility (such as the studies funded by the National Institutes of Health and conducted by the Work, Family, and Health Network).¹¹

To explore whether access to flexibility makes a difference in the workplace, we used a global measure of access to thirteen types of flexibility included in the 2008 NSCW.¹² We conducted a series of analyses to determine how access to flexibility affects four workplace outcomes of interest to employers and employees: job engagement, job satisfaction, job retention, and employee health. Our focus was on access to, rather than use of, flexibility, because analyses reveal that access has a greater impact on workplace outcomes than usage. It appears that flexibility functions like an insurance policy—just knowing that flexibility is there for them, should they need to use it, appears to be reassuring to employees.

Job Engagement

One workplace outcome about which employers are deeply concerned is job engagement—which they see as a proxy measure for productivity and business success.¹³ As figure 2 shows, flexibility and engagement are positively linked.¹⁴ For example, 30 percent of employees with high access to flexibility are highly engaged in their jobs, compared with 19 percent of those with moderate access and only 10 percent of those with low overall access. Similarly, 39 percent of employees with low access to flexibility have low overall job engagement, compared with 23 percent of those with moderate access and 14 percent with high access. Interestingly, the relationship between high, moderate, and low access to flexibility and moderate job engagement is less systematic, a finding that warrants further investigation by other researchers.

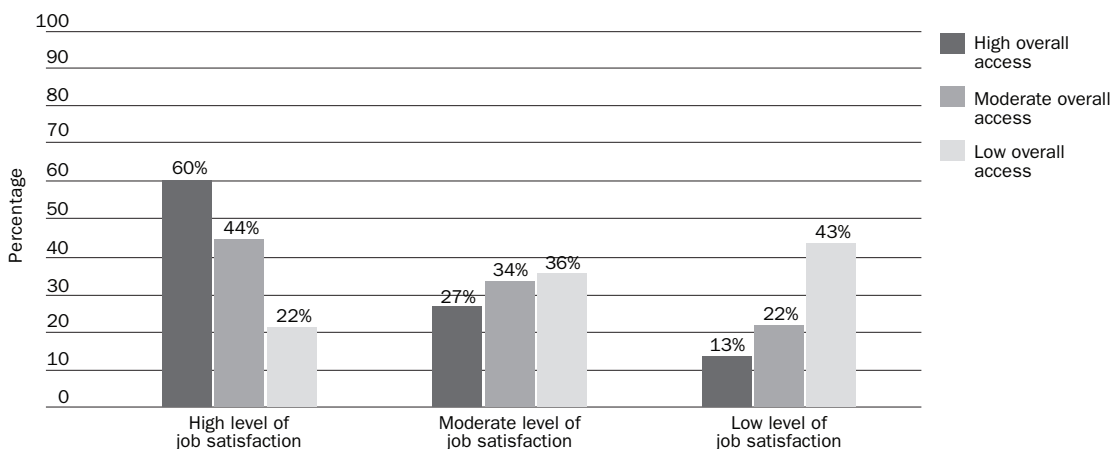
Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is also positively linked to access to flexibility (figure 3).¹⁵ Sixty percent of employees with high access to flexibility are highly satisfied with their jobs, compared with 44 percent of those with moderate access and only 22 percent of those with low access.

Retention

Overall, according to the 2008 NSCW, 17 percent of employees are very likely and 23 percent are somewhat likely to make a concerted effort to find a new job in the coming year. As the national economy slowly recovers, many employers know that they need to retain their best talent to thrive. Among employees with high access to flexibility, 71 percent are very unlikely to try to find a new job in the coming year, compared with 61 percent of those with moderate access and 45 percent of those with low access (figure 4).¹⁶

Figure 3. The Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Access to Flexibility*



Source: Families and Work Institute, 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

*This figure shows that the relationship between having access to flexibility and an employee's level of job satisfaction would occur by chance 1 in 1,000 times.

The inhospitable nature of an inflexible work environment has led some mothers to leave successful jobs in a number of fields and return home to raise their children. In *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, Pamela Stone chronicles the experiences of women who quit their jobs because of a one-size-fits-all work environment and the unwillingness of corporations and managers to help women create other options.¹⁷ Only a few of these women had originally planned to leave the workforce to raise children; most had expected to continue with their careers while raising their families, but found it very difficult to do. Phyllis Moen and Patricia Roehling similarly call attention to how the mystique “that Americans give their all to paid labor in order to ‘make it’” is at odds with the expectations of women today. In their book, *The Career Mystique*, they illuminate the clash between the expectation that employees will devote their entire lives to their employer and the reality of life among dual-earner families today.¹⁸

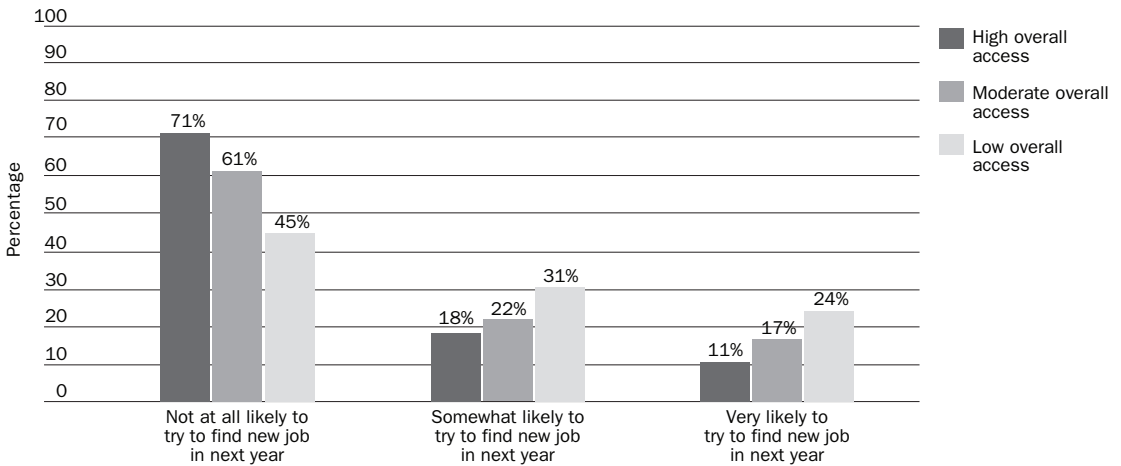
Employee Health

As escalating health care costs take a rising toll on employers' bottom line, the overall health of the U.S. workforce is in decline.¹⁹ On average, less than one-third of employees (28 percent) say their overall health is “excellent”—a 6-percentage-point drop since 2002. For that reason, the link between employee health and access to flexibility (figure 5) is of particular concern, particularly because of the cost implications. Among employees with high access to flexibility, 39 percent report being in excellent health, compared with 29 percent of those with moderate access and only 20 percent of those with low access. Again, however, these relationships are complex and warrant further investigation.

An Experiment to Increase Access to Flexibility

The findings reported above as well as those from other articles in this volume reveal that workplace flexibility can have positive benefits for employers, employees, and children.

Figure 4. The Relationship between Job Retention and Access to Flexibility*



Source: Families and Work Institute, 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

*This figure shows that the relationship between having access to flexibility and an employee's likelihood of leaving his or her job in the next year would occur by chance 1 in 1,000 times.

So the question is how to increase flexibility. There are two broad alternatives: a *mandated* approach, where change is required by law, and a *voluntary* approach, where employers recognize their own self-interest in offering workplace flexibility and thus increasingly provide it.

In 2003, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation challenged Families and Work Institute to create and evaluate an experiment to increase the voluntary adoption of workplace flexibility. The resulting project, called *When Work Works*, was launched later that same year with funding from the Sloan Foundation. The project, based on a strategy of community involvement, was directed by Families and Work Institute in partnership with the Institute for a Competitive Workforce (an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) and the Twiga Foundation. In 2011 the Society for Human Resource Management partnered with Families and Work Institute to expand the project in new ways.

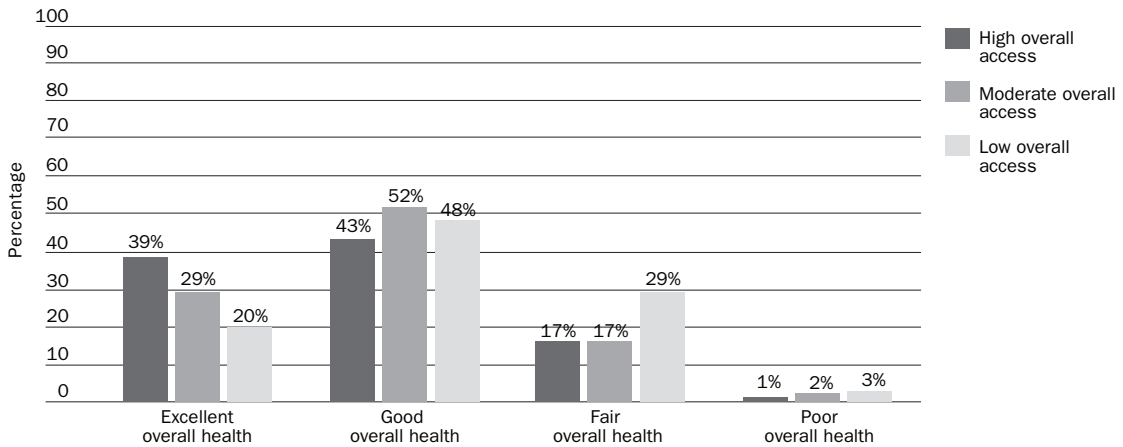
Eight Principles of the Theory of Change

The conceptual basis of *When Work Works* is a theory of change developed by Families and Work Institute after extensive consultations with scholars and practitioners who have successfully carried out change experiments. Eight principles inform this theory of change.

The change theory's first principle is to proceed in stages. Social and business change takes time and requires a long-term strategy that unfolds slowly, with each stage containing within itself the seeds of the next. The first stage is raising awareness; the second, changing behaviors; and the third, engaging people in action.

The second principle is to understand how the public frames the issue. Knowing in advance how people see the issue helps target change for maximum effectiveness. It also ensures against the inadvertent use of language or issues that trigger unnecessary opposition or backlash.

Figure 5. The Relationship between Overall Health and Access to Flexibility*



Source: Families and Work Institute, 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.

*This figure shows that the relationship between having access to flexibility and an employee's health would occur by chance 1 in 1,000 times.

The third principle of the theory of change is to focus on action. Changing attitudes is not enough. It is important to be able to specify concrete steps when people say, “I get it. What do you want me to do?”

The fourth principle, that messages are critical, incorporates several ancillary lessons. One is that unexpected messages can get people's attention. An unexpected message causes people to take in information precisely because it is unexpected. Another related lesson is that the message should be based on solid research that spells out not only the benefits of change, but also the costs of no change—of not taking action. People change their opinions or actions when they see that the benefits of change can outweigh the costs of no change. This kind of cost-benefit analysis is what employers call “making a business case.” A third related lesson is the need for messages to project into the future. It is easier for people to think about the present in new ways and to move beyond everyday realities

and opinions when they are looking into an unknown future. The final lesson is the importance of tailoring different messages for different groups. One size does not fit all.

The fifth principle is that unexpected messengers also make a difference. Hearing messages from the usual messengers (for example, advocates talking about the importance of their advocacy issue) is predictable and easy to dismiss as self-interest. Hearing messages from unexpected messengers creates increased attention and involvement.

The sixth principle is to target the people who have the power to bring about change—to recognize, connect with, and assist them. It is essential first to define both the decision makers and those who influence them and then to target both groups—typically, public policy makers, businesses, professionals, the media, citizens, families, and employees—and finally to develop strategies to reach them effectively. Enabling people in diverse

sectors to feel connected to a large change initiative and to learn from their successes and failures can be very sustaining.

The seventh principle of change is to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. The release of a new study or some event that captures the public's attention could lead to unexpected opportunities. It is critical to take advantage of an issue that has already engaged the public or key constituencies to show how it relates to the change effort.

The final principle of the theory of change is to plan in detail what outcomes to expect and to assess results and make adjustments all along the way. Goals should be built into the process from the very beginning. Continuing to assess progress in reaching these goals allows for ongoing mid-course corrections and a greater likelihood of achieving what is hoped for and expected.

The Strategy of Change

To reach small and mid-sized employers (where most U.S. employees work) as well as large employers from all sectors—public, private, for-profit, and not-for-profit—When Work Works took a local and worksite, or community involvement, strategy. The strategy was chosen before the analyses from the 2008 NSCW became available, but in retrospect it could hardly have been better suited to the survey results. In detailing who has most access to workplace flexibility, the 2008 NSCW survey described, again and again, the more advantaged worker²⁰—men, parents, married employees, employees who are better educated, who are salaried, who are managers and professionals, full-timers, employees in the service industries, and those with higher wages. To reach less advantaged employees, who do not yet have and who most need access to flexibility, the

project would have to do extensive outreach within communities.

When Work Works was launched as a pilot effort in eight communities in 2005. Having a pilot year made it possible to get the kinks out before expanding—as the project has done every year thereafter. In 2011, the project is ongoing in twenty-eight communities and statewide in five states. Each of these communities and states is asked to take a series of strategies, which grow out of the eight principles of the theory of change.

Strategy 1: Create a Coalition of Community Leaders

Community leaders serve as champions for workplace flexibility. This strategy targets the people who have the power to bring about change with the aim of recognizing, connecting with, and assisting them. Coalitions of leaders involve local “movers and shakers” who represent diverse constituencies, such as local and state government, business councils and employer groups, media, nonprofits, and workforce development. The When Work Works project provides these local leaders with information, tools, and resources to be champions for creating better workplaces in their communities so that they, in turn, can become expected and unexpected spokespersons for change.

Strategy 2: Provide Educational Events within the Community

This strategy speaks to the principle of moving in stages from changing awareness to changing behavior to engaging people in action. The lead organization, in partnership with its coalition of community leaders, hosts a minimum of two educational events on effective *and* flexible workplaces. This business-to-business strategy integrates workplace flexibility with existing business

topics and presents it as a stand-alone live or webinar event. The national When Work Works team has supported this educational effort by providing and suggesting resources and services that can be customized to meet the issues and needs of a particular community or audience.

Strategy 3: Provide Media Outreach within the Community

This strategy is linked to the principle of knowing ahead of time how the public sees this issue. When the When Work Works initiative was launched in 2003, workplace flexibility was seen largely as a benefit either for employees—a perk that was given to an individual (often a woman)—or for employers—a strategy to help businesses manage the ebbs and flows of demand by having “on call” employees who have little certainty about their work schedules.

The challenge has been to reflect solid research—that flexibility can be a component of effective workplaces that can benefit employers, employees, and communities alike. When Work Works has tackled this challenge by sharing research data on the potential links between workplace flexibility and employers, employees, and communities.

The partner communities provide a gateway to local media outlets for targeted efforts, especially because members of the local business media often belong to the leader coalitions and because the communities are responsible for outreach to local media. The When Work Works national team provides support for these efforts and continues to release research that keeps these issues in the news.

Since When Work Works first went into operation, overall media attention to workplace

flexibility has grown, and the issue is now being reported less as a “nice-to-have” benefit in human-interest stories, and more as a necessary business tool in hard-news stories.

Strategy 4: Implement the Sloan Awards

This strategy speaks to the principle of knowing what you want people to do. At the center of When Work Works are the Sloan Awards. Worksite-based awards make it possible for organizations to be evaluated on their effective and flexible programs and policies as well as their organizational culture. The Sloan Awards also allow When Work Works to evaluate its progress in bringing about change.

Employers are eligible to apply for the Sloan Awards if they have been in operation for at least one year and have at least ten employees who work from or report to the applying worksite. Employers can reapply every year, whether or not they win. The application process takes place in two rounds. In Round I, *employers* self-nominate by completing a questionnaire about their worksite’s flexibility practices, policies, and the supportiveness of its work culture. Responses to the questionnaire are then measured against norms that have been derived from Families and Work Institute’s ongoing nationally representative study, the National Study of Employers. To qualify for Round II, employers must rank in the top 20 percent of employers nationally.

In Round II *employees* are asked about their access to and use of flexibility, the aspects of the workplace culture that support their ability to work flexibly, whether they experience “jeopardy” when working flexibly, and their access to other ingredients of an effective workplace. Of those surveyed, a minimum of 40 percent must respond (the average response rate is 52 percent).

On the basis of both the employer and employee questionnaires, an overall score is computed, with two-thirds of the score based on employees' responses. There is no minimum or maximum number of award recipients. All applying companies have access to technical assistance and receive an individualized benchmarking report that compares their responses on the surveys with those of employers nationally, of applicant companies, and of winners. If they participate in Round II, their benchmarking report also compares their employee data with the 2008 NSCW. All winning companies are written up in an annual *Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work Work*, which describes and promotes best practices in workplace flexibility.

Strategy 5: Specify Outcomes and Measure Results

The principle of detailing expected outcomes, assessing results, and making changes informs this strategy. Every year, When Work Works sets goals and measures itself against them, making changes as necessary.

Lessons Learned

Through the When Work Works project we have learned important lessons about when workplace change is most likely to occur.

The first lesson is that key community leaders across different sectors (business, media, government) must direct the effort locally. A well-functioning coalition of key community leaders can ensure that the initiative is informed by diverse constituents; that it taps into networks that can lead to new opportunities and synergies; and that it maintains a continuum of support, keeping change going during times of transition. By securing the commitment of influential leaders, including unexpected messengers, partner communities build a broad-based foundation of local

support, sowing the seeds for a sustainable grassroots movement for workplace change.

Houston, Texas, for example, promoted workplace flexibility as a community solution to ease traffic congestion and lessen pollution under the leadership of former Mayor Bill White. By moving even a relatively small number of people off the roads during peak congestion times, Flex in the City was able to improve commuting time, reduce traffic congestion and pollution, and help employers improve productivity as well. The mayor's office worked with the city's mass transit and Commute Solutions programs, local employers, chambers of commerce, and the When Work Works national team. This community approach served the program well and ensured its continuity after the mayor left office. Although no longer housed by the city government, the initiative, now called Flexworks, continues to operate as a division of TCT Enterprises, LLC, a management consulting firm, and is poised to expand to other areas of Texas.

The second lesson is that change is most likely when community leaders are committed to improving workplaces to meet an important community challenge. For local efforts to take root and succeed, workplace flexibility must be framed not just as an employer issue that can yield business benefits, but also as a community issue—such as reducing traffic congestion and air pollution, becoming green, attracting younger workers, retaining older workers and helping them live better as they age, and responding to economic challenges. One role of the leadership coalition is to help define the community case for the initiative.

In Dayton, Ohio, for example, flexibility is framed as a way for the community to

address its economic challenges. Located in the nation's "Rust Belt," the Dayton region is transitioning from a manufacturing-based to a knowledge-based economy. Effective and flexible workplaces are part of the community's overall workforce development strategy to recruit and retain talent. Michigan, a state-wide When Work Works partner, likewise focuses on flexibility as a strategy for attracting new businesses to the state.

The third lesson is that flexibility does not stand alone but should be viewed as one component of an effective workplace. Research from Families and Work Institute has found that flexibility is one element—albeit an essential one—of an effective workplace that benefits employers and employees. Analysis of 2008 NSCW data has identified six criteria of effective workplaces: job challenge and learning, a climate of respect, autonomy, work-life fit and flexibility, economic security, and supervisor task support.

Because employers know that flexibility alone will not solve all their problems, flexibility has much more resonance in the context of other more accepted components of an effective workplace. In effect, making flexibility one component of an effective workplace reflects the principle in the theory of change that action should be based on solid research evidence. It also builds on a cost-benefit strategy. When employers' own company research shows that certain components of an effective workplace enhance their employee engagement and productivity, they can begin to see flexibility in a similar light.

The fourth lesson is that the effectiveness of the Sloan Awards grows out of the respect they earn from the employer community by providing quality assurance and by being based on a rigorous application process.

When Work Works uses the Sloan Awards to assess—rigorously and comprehensively—workplace flexibility programs, policies, practices and culture, and the components of an effective workplace. The award program, one of the few such evidence-based programs in the country, draws on information about effective and flexible workplaces from Families and Work Institute's nationally representative studies of employers and employees. The award is unique in being worksite-based and reaching employers of all sizes and industries—from mom-and-pop shops to global companies. It also reaches employers with varying ethnic groups and income levels, as well as companies where people have said flexibility is "not possible," such as call centers or manufacturers.

The application process is reviewed annually by subject-matter experts and modified to address emerging concerns. The criteria for the awards evolve in response to changing conditions so that there is always "something new." In 2009 new questions included how employers were helping employees manage the recession; in 2010, how to help employees increase their education and improve their skills. In 2011 surveys are addressing the flexibility needs for members of the military and their families.

The fifth lesson is that workplace awards alone are not sufficient to bring about change. The awards' effectiveness is magnified because they are part of a continuing process that includes education, technical assistance, and employer-to-employer communication about promising practices and how-to techniques. Applicants for a Sloan Award receive, in essence, a comprehensive tutorial on the different types of programs and policies that employers might use to create effective and flexible workplaces. Upon

completing the process, all applicants receive a custom benchmarking report, which compares their employer and employee responses to other Sloan Award applicants and winners as well as to nationally representative data. An annual publication, the *Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work Work*, compiles promising practices from all of the award winners and is a useful resource for any employer, manager, or employee interested in innovative workplace initiatives.

Finally, what we have learned as these lessons have been absorbed and the change experiment has matured is that workplace flexibility has increased. When Work Works is not a controlled experimental study, in which subjects are randomly assigned to different conditions and cause and effect can be rigorously determined. Many conditions beyond the project's control—not least, the local, national, and global economy—affect what happens to flexibility. Another complication is that the employers involved in the project are self-selected and thus do not represent a random group of employers within the population. These limitations make it impossible to draw causal conclusions about whether and how the When Work Works project has increased flexibility. That said, however, flexibility has increased over time among participants in the project. Analysis of the data to try to explain that increase more narrowly has been inconclusive. The length of time that communities are involved with this initiative,

for example, is not consistently linked with increased employer flexibility. For four years there was a consistent link between increases in workplace flexibility and repeated applications for the Sloan Awards. That correlation made sense, on the hypothesis that the process itself—the benchmarking reports, technical assistance, and the best-practice guide—helps reapplying employers improve. Then, in 2009–10 all applicant companies, not just repeat applicants, saw an overall increase. We hope other researchers will investigate the possibilities, as we will.

In Conclusion

When Work Works has offered Families and Work Institute and its partners an unprecedented opportunity to explore the conditions under which workplaces can be improved by providing employees with greater access to workplace flexibility. Initial data reveal that increased flexibility can make work “work” for increasing numbers of employers, employees, employees’ families, and communities.

A perennial issue in research is how it can be applied to practice. And a perennial issue in practice is how to bring successful pilot projects to scale and make them sustainable. Now in partnership with the Society for Human Resource Management and poised to spread even further, we believe that When Work Works offers many lessons that can be adapted to other research-based change experiments.

Endnotes

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2. Ibid.
3. Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik, "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297–1338.
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5. Michael Judiesch and Karen Lyness, "Left Behind? The Impact of Leaves of Absence on Managers' Career Successes," *Academy of Management Journal* 42, no. 6 (1999): 641–51.
6. Scott Schieman and Paul Glavin, "Trouble at the Border? Gender, Flexible Work Conditions, and the Work-Home Interface," *Social Problems* 55, no. 4 (2008): 590–609.
7. Because our initial analyses reveal that having elder care is not predictive of the outcomes we look at in this article, we exclude it from our analyses.
8. The 2008 National Study of Employers surveyed a representative national sample of 1,100 for-profit (77 percent of the sample) and nonprofit employers (23 percent of the sample) with fifty or more employees by telephone interviews with human resource directors. Representatives of Harris Interactive conducted the thirty-minute interviews from April 19 through August 13, 2007. Employers were selected from Dun & Bradstreet lists using a stratified random sampling procedure in which selection was proportional to the number of people employed by each company to ensure a large enough sample of large organizations. The response rate for the study was 43 percent. The maximum sampling error (margin of error) for the study in describing the total sample is approximately 2 percent.
9. The five variables included in the supervisor support measure are: 1) My supervisor or manager is fair and doesn't show favoritism in responding to employees' personal or family needs; 2) My supervisor or manager is responsive to my needs when I have family or personal business to take care of; 3) My supervisor or manager is understanding when I talk about personal or family issues that affect my work; 4) I feel comfortable bringing up personal or family issues with my supervisor or manager; and 5) My supervisor or manager really cares about the effect that work demands have on my personal and family life.
10. We analyzed the data for demographic differences in use, but there were few significant findings, so they are not included in this report.
11. E. Kossek and J. Michel, "Flexible Work Schedules," in *Handbook of Industrial-Organizational Psychology*, vol. 1, edited by S. Zedeck (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2011), pp. 535–72.
12. The thirteen types of flexibility included in the global measure are: traditional flextime, short-notice flex-time, flexplace, compressed workweek, lack of difficulty in taking time off, advance notice for overtime, at least five paid sick days for oneself, at least five paid sick days for one's child, part-time work if full time or full-time work if part time, part-year work, overall schedule flexibility, a schedule or shift that meets one's needs, and lack of career jeopardy for using flexibility.

13. Steve Bates, "Getting Engaged," *HR Magazine* 49, no. 2 (February 2004): 44–51.
14. This measure of job engagement asks employees how much they agree with the following statements: "I look forward to going to work," "I feel I am really a part of the group of people I work with," and "When I'm at work, time passes very quickly." We also ask, "How often do you think about good things related to your job when you're busy doing something else?" Answers are averaged and then converted into a three-point scale in which low overall engagement represents the bottom 25 percent of scores (bottom quartile), moderate overall engagement represents the middle 50 percent of scores (quartiles 2 and 3), and high overall engagement represents the top 25 percent of scores (top quartile).
15. Our measure of job satisfaction includes three items: all in all, how satisfied are you with your job? knowing what you know now, if you had to decide all over again to take the job you now have, what would you decide? and if a good friend of yours told you that he or she was interested in working in a job like yours for your employer, what would you tell your friend? Job satisfaction was measured with an index scale, which was converted into a three-point scale (low is the bottom 25 percent; moderate is the middle 50 percent; high is the top 25 percent of scores).
16. Turnover intent was measured with one item (not at all likely, somewhat likely, very likely to look for a new job with a new employer in the next year).
17. Pamela Stone, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* (University of California Press, 2007).
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19. Kerstin Aumann and Ellen Galinsky, *The State of Health in the American Workforce: Does Having an Effective Workplace Matter?* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 2009).
20. Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).