

VARIABLE WORK HOURS

Description

The 9-to-5 job is becoming a thing of the past now that employers have discovered the advantages of variable work hours. By varying the time of day or number of days that employees come to work, companies are operating leaner and employees are loving their new-found flexibility. Flex-time allows employees to choose when their work day starts and ends, as long as they're on the job during a specified core time. Another popular arrangement is the compressed work week, where employees work four 10-hour days, three 12-hour days or complete 80 hours of work in nine days.

Considerations

Local jurisdictions, employers and employees all benefit. Communities that promote variable work hour strategies to employers can reduce congestion, spread out the peak hours of congestion or provide commuters the flexibility to adjust their schedule to catch the bus or join a carpool.

More companies are offering variable work hours to their employees. A recent survey of 1,020 employers showed that 69 percent offered variable work hours programs in 1997, compared with 58 percent in 1992. (Survey conducted by Hewitt Associates, Lincolnshire, Illinois.)

Variable Work Hours programs are a hit with employees, according to a study of companies that offer alternative work schedules. As many as 88 percent of participating employees reported improved job satisfaction, and 43 percent said the programs helped facilitate child-care arrangements. Meanwhile, 30 percent of the su-

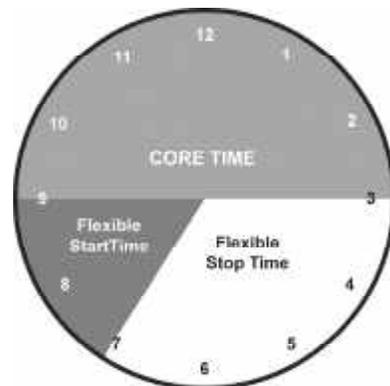
perisors surveyed noted an increase in productivity among participating employees. (Source: *Commuter Transportation Services, Inc.*)

Program Development

Variable work hours programs can include one or more of the following approaches:

✓ **Flex-time.** With a flex-time program, employees work five eight-hour days each week, but they are allowed to choose their work arrival and departure times, as well as the length of their lunch break. Flex-time programs generally require employees to be present during a specified core time when meetings or other company-wide events are scheduled.

Note that a flex-time schedule allows employees to work early or late, depending on their personal preferences. Some people may come to work at 6 a.m. and leave at 3 p.m., while others will arrive at 9:30 a.m. and work until 6:30 p.m. However, all employees must complete their usual number of hours by the end of each workday.



✓ **Compressed Work Week.** In a compressed work week, employees complete their required number of work hours in fewer-than-normal days per week (or per pay period). This arrangement allows employees to have one or two days off each week or one day off every other week, depending upon which type of compressed work week program is preferred.

The two most popular compressed work week schedules are the 4/40 and 9/80 programs, although other variations also exist. Each of these programs are described below:

4/40 Program. Employees work four 10-hour days each week, with the fifth day off. To ensure five-day coverage, you may want to consider having half the company take Mondays off and half take Fridays off.

9/80 Program. Employees work 80 hours in nine days, with the 10th day off. This schedule usually translates to eight 9-hour days and one 8-hour day (this shorter day is often the Friday that the employee works). In a company with two major work groups, each group might take off alternating Fridays.

3/12 Program. Employees work three 12-hour days each week, with two days off. (Employees often get the four additional hours to make a 40 hour work week as credit for working longer days.)

Compressed Work Week Considerations. – In any compressed work week program, there must be adequate coverage in the office for employees who are taking their day off. Generally, this means that not everyone takes the same day off.

- Employers may want to rotate days off every six months so that every employee gets a three-day weekend.

- Another option is for small departments or work groups to have everyone take the same day off and simply close down the department for the day. This is common for public agencies that want to extend customer hours during work days.
- To encourage ridesharing, you may want to give carpoolers, vanpoolers and employees who ride the bus a day off as a preference over non-ridesharers.
- Employees who must attend important meetings may change their scheduled day off with advance notice.
- Some employees may need to be exempt from the compressed work week program because of child-care duties, medical reasons, transportation problems or conflicts with school.
- You may also have employees who cannot follow a compressed work week schedule because of their job duties. These may include customer service representatives or computer operators who are required to maintain 24-hour coverage.

✓ **Staggered Work Hours.** This concept involves spreading out employee arrival and departure times by anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours. By staggering these shifts, you can help reduce bottlenecks in employee parking lots, in streets at the entrance to your office park or building, and even in elevators. Reducing congestion through staggered hours benefits air quality by reducing vehicle idling time in congested conditions or by allowing employees to avoid the peak travel period. Communities have asked businesses to voluntarily stagger their start and stop times to reduce localized traffic problems.

Examples

Flex-time has been an integral part of how the United States Forest Service does business. The Forest Service has found that flex-time not only helps employees better manage their home and work life, but it also can benefit the employer through improved productivity. The community also benefits from flex-time by spreading out the peak travel times and helping people to ride the bus or carpool. The North Regional Office in Missoula, Montana, touts their programs as a positive contributor to reducing traffic in and around the community.



The County of Ventura in California conducted a pilot study using compressed work week schedules. They found that compressed work weeks increased productivity, improved morale and encouraged ridesharing in that employees were less likely to need their car for errands before and after work. Most employee wanted to go directly home after working the longer days. Citizen also reacted positively to the extended work hours. Most could now visit County offices before or after their work day. For the community, this meant a reduction of 10 to 20 percent of work related trips for county employees.