

CHAPTER-10

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENT: BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS FOR WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Remote, Hybrid, In-person: Much of the discussion around workplace flexibility has centred on where work takes place. But for organizations that want to retain and engage women in the workforce, when work takes place is emerging as one of the new priorities. For the past three years, employers and employees have had to adapt to the dramatic implications the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the way we work. This has been a developing picture as countries started to reopen, with some companies initially embracing hybrid working, others going fully remote, and others demanding a return to the office. As organizations continue to evolve their hybrid and flexible work strategies, they will need to consider how leadership styles and employee support structures can be adjusted to align with these ways of working.

Keywords: *flexible working arrangements; work life balance; women; labour market.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Regarding the first point, women's participation to the workforce in jobs that provide them with some real exposure and contribution to the societal needs offers women an identity, a sense of purpose, and also useful financial education and security. As a job is part of the identity of a woman, it must be first and foremost her choice, and so the request to work flexibility. It must be anchored to a guarantee of trust and attachment to the purpose of the job, it should not only come as the rightful request of the working mother/carer. There is a dual path towards flexible work: one for the businesses to understand and allow it, one for women to take right steps, negotiate it, and earn it too. Regarding the second point, it has come the time for businesses to understand their fair share of responsibility in determining the conditions of women's access to the workforce and their chances of remaining in the workforce. In the Middle East (in both the Levantine and Gulf regions), as in many other countries, too often businesses look at flexible work arrangements as an exception to 'normal' working patterns. While the pandemic has brought a shift towards normalising it, very often there are no formal HR procedures to request or process it, but rather one-to-one ad-hoc negotiations. The call for flexible work arrangements, especially for working mothers/carers, needs to be discussed as much as possible now because the pandemic has shown it may be feasible and possible to accommodate such requests. While working women could be major beneficiaries of these policies and procedures, their reliance on flexible work arrangements should not interfere with their identity, their level of representation and access to higher career steps.

2. WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AND GENDER EQUALITY

International Women's Day highlights issues around gender equality in the workplace, including the need for greater flexibility through offering different flexible working options, such as working from home, working part-time, or having flexible hours (Lyonette 2015). Flexible working arrangements are especially important for women when it comes to balancing work and family responsibilities (Chung and Van der Lippe 2020). 74% of women are the main caregiver for children compared with just 26% of men. Women are also more like to provide caring responsibilities for elderly relatives or family members with disabilities. Having flexible working arrangements can help women to balance their work and caregiving responsibilities whilst being able to remain in the workforce and progress within their careers. Since the pandemic, there has been more recognition placed on the importance of flexible working arrangements; many companies and organisations have implemented.

3. IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE TIMEING ON FAMILIES

Despite how far we've come regarding gender equality in the home and the workplace, women still perform the lion's share of childcare in the home, with women putting in about 50 hours per week, and men clocking in around 24. It stands to reason, therefore, that one of the advantages of careers with flexible work arrangement options is that it allows women professionals more flexibility when it comes to balancing work and life responsibilities. Without this freedom, women professionals would have to work family and personal responsibilities around rigid work hours, making it difficult for them to maintain both. In fact, nearly 60 percent of women in workplaces that don't offer flexible hours say they have to lower their career expectations because of these opposing demands.

4. COMPANIES CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY AND SUPPORTING FLEXIBLE WORK HOUR

It's great to see so many companies commemorating International Women's Day, helping to support change in the workplace.

1. Learn more about gender in the workplace and what's standing in the way of equity.
2. Get to know non-profits working to empower girls and women in their career path.

3. Get involved! Participate in a short virtual volunteering session in virtual breakout rooms”

More and more companies have begun to recognise the benefits of flexible working, not just for employee happiness and morale but also for productivity and company growth. Alongside this, flexible working helps to bridge the gap and promote gender equality in the workplace (Lyonette 2015).

The recent findings from a comprehensive survey conducted by Flex Jobs shed light on a significant trend in the modern workforce: the paramount importance of workplace flexibility. This survey, which gathered insights from over 2,500 female respondents, delved into what factors weigh most heavily when individuals assess job opportunities. Surprisingly, the results revealed that flexibility at work emerged as the leading consideration for job seekers, ranking even higher than traditional perks like salary, health insurance coverage, company reputation, and retirement benefits. This signifies a marked shift in priorities among professionals, indicating a growing desire for work arrangements that accommodate personal needs and foster a healthy work-life balance. Furthermore, the survey unearthed a compelling correlation between workplace flexibility and employee retention. Astonishingly, more than one-third of the respondents (35 percent) disclosed that they had willingly departed from a job specifically due to the absence of flexible work options. This statistic underscores the tangible impact that flexible arrangements—or the lack thereof—can have on an organization's ability to retain its talent pool. These findings underscore the nuanced dynamics at play within the contemporary job market, where the traditional allure of competitive salaries and benefits is being complemented, if not surpassed, by the appeal of flexible work arrangements. Employers who recognize and respond to this shifting landscape stand to not only attract top-tier talent but also cultivate a loyal and motivated workforce poised for long-term success.

In a shifting landscape of workplace priorities, the significance of flexibility has emerged as a paramount concern, particularly among women. A notable portion of female professionals express a readiness to make substantial sacrifices in pursuit of greater flexibility in their work arrangements. Surveys reveal that 29 percent are prepared to accept a reduction in pay, ranging from 10 to 20 percent, to secure telecommuting privileges. Additionally, 21 percent are willing to forego precious vacation time, while 15 percent express a willingness to sacrifice employer-matching retirement contributions, all in exchange for the freedom to mold their work schedules to better suit their lives. These findings underscore the evolving dynamics of the

modern workforce, where flexibility stands as a currency of considerable value, offering a glimpse into the changing expectations and priorities of today's female professionals.

Furthermore, in a time where changing jobs is frequently done, employers might wish to pay attention to this important finding: If their companies offered flexible work arrangements, 82 percent of respondents claim they would be more devoted to them.

In India, 72 percent of working women reject jobs that do not provide them flexibility. According to LinkedIn's research, 8 out of 10 working women (83%) have realised they want to work more flexibly as a result of the pandemic's impact. In fact, according to the report, 72% of working women reject employment that do not enable them to work flexibly, and 70% have already quit or are considering resigning because they were not offered the necessary flexible policies. When asked about the advantages of flexible working, nearly two-fifths of women said it improves their work-life balance (43%) and helps them advance their careers (43%), while one-third said it improves their mental health (34%), and boosts their chances of staying in their existing professions (33 per cent). However, India's working women pay a high price for working flexibly due to strong employer bias. 9 out of 10 working women (88%) had to take a wage reduction to work flexibly, 2 out of 5 (37%) had their request denied, and 1 out of 4 (27%) struggled to persuade their bosses to approve their request. Women are hesitant to ask for more flexibility because they are afraid of being excluded, being passed over for promotions, having to work overtime, taking salary cuts, and being treated unfavourably by their bosses. Given the potential for guilt and stigma associated with flexible policies, one out of every three working women in India is hesitant to tell their clients (34%), coworkers (35%), and friends (33%) that they work flexibly.³

Working women in India are taking career breaks to enhance their well-being, plan career changes, and boost their confidence at work, as they continue to juggle personal commitments and professional advancement within rigid schedules. Career breaks are helping women upskill and increase their employability in today's tight job market, with 9 out of 10 working women using their time off to master new hard and soft skills.

Despite these advantages, nearly four out of five (77%) professional women in India who took a break think it harmed their careers. This is owing to the widespread stigma surrounding career breaks among recruiters and employers, making it difficult for every second (50%) working woman in India to explain her leave to recruiters. As a

³ <https://www.womenentrepreneurindia.com/viewpoint/experts-column/workplace-flexibility-is-the-key-for-retaining-female-employees-nwid-1707.html>

result, many people choose to leave career breaks off their CVs (42%), or mislead to potential recruiters about them during interviews (35 per cent). Keeping women in the workforce is not an option, it's an imperative. A recent study found that if women received better access to secondary education, childcare, and flexible work arrangements, they would be able to occupy as many jobs as men and add trillions of dollars to the global economy. It's more crucial than ever that workplaces not only extend support to women, but also consistently challenge ourselves to show up, listen, and do more. PwC has long upheld a culture of flexibility with benefits that are constantly evolving to meet the needs of our people. Together, they are a fundamental part of our work culture. Our expanded menu of benefits includes traditional health and medical benefits, as well as year-round flexibility, well-being and mental health support, and backup childcare reimbursement and support. As a result of supporting the evolving needs of our people, we're fortunate to have seen a steady rate of retention among our female employees.

None of this is to say we are claiming victory. The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't been easy for anyone. However, it is undeniable that women have been affected disproportionately. And that's why reimagining a workplace culture that supports everyone is a continual work in progress that requires ongoing self-reflection, listening to your employees, and adapting to their needs (Chalofsky 2010). It's a process that every employer in corporate should be engaging in right now if we want to retain our female employees.

5. LONG-TERM FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS: A GAME CHANGER FOR WORKING WOMEN

Over 75% of caregivers are women, which means that many of them are juggling the obligations of caring for a loved one on top of the demands of their jobs. Women's unpaid labor outside of the workforce frequently leads to a career hiatus with both immediate and long-term consequences. In fact, according to a 2019 FlexJobs poll of over 2,000 women with children under the age of 18, almost 31% of women who took a career sabbatical after having children stated they didn't want to but had to because of a lack of workplace flexibility. When taking into account lost wages, future wage growth, and missed retirement and social security contributions, a woman on a \$50,000 salary who takes a three-year break could lose over \$500,000 over her career, according to a MarketWatch study. Seventy percent of those same women stated that it was difficult for them to return to the workforce after taking time off. *"The worst choice that you can force somebody to make is to pick between their family and their career"*, bestselling

author and futurist Jacob Morgan says “*I think that’s terrible.*” Morgan, who is the host of “*The Future of Work*” podcast, said he thinks that allowing workers to work from home for a certain amount of time will demonstrate that they are still capable of doing quality work. He argues that any “forward-thinking organization” will execute long-term flexible work arrangements following the pandemic, enabling parents – particularly women – to work hours that meet their personal and professional obligations.

6. BENEFITS OF FLEX TIME FOR EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

In recent years, the landscape of the workforce has undergone a significant transformation, marked by a notable increase in the prominence of flexible work arrangements. Among the demographic benefiting most from this shift are working women, whose professional journeys often intersect with various personal responsibilities and aspirations. Flexible work options have emerged as a game changer for working women, offering them a newfound sense of empowerment and agency in navigating their careers while managing other aspects of their lives. Unlike traditional rigid work structures, long-term flexible arrangements provide women with the flexibility to tailor their work schedules and environments to better suit their individual needs and priorities (Crompton, 2002). One of the primary advantages of long-term flexible work options is the enhanced work-life balance they afford. For many working women, juggling career ambitions with familial obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and personal pursuits can be a daunting task. Flexible arrangements enable them to better integrate these different facets of their lives, reducing stress and enhancing overall well-being. Moreover, long-term flexible work options facilitate greater career advancement opportunities for women. By breaking away from the constraints of traditional nine-to-five schedules and physical office spaces, women can pursue professional growth on their own terms. Whether it's telecommuting, part-time schedules, job sharing, or flexible hours, these options allow women to design career paths that align with their unique circumstances and aspirations.

Furthermore, flexible work arrangements contribute to a more inclusive and diverse workforce. By accommodating the needs of working women, employers foster an environment that values and respects individual differences. This, in turn, leads to greater employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention, ultimately benefiting the organization as a whole. However, it's crucial to recognize that the adoption of long-term flexible work options requires a cultural shift within organizations. Employers must embrace a mindset that values outcomes over hours worked and trust employees to manage their time effectively. Additionally, infrastructure and policies need to be in

place to support remote work and ensure equitable access to opportunities for all employees.

Therefore, long-term flexible work options represent a transformative force in the professional lives of working women. By providing greater autonomy, flexibility, and opportunities for balance, these arrangements empower women to thrive both personally and professionally. As the workforce continues to evolve, embracing flexibility will be essential for fostering inclusivity, driving innovation, and unlocking the full potential of women in the workplace.

7. CONCLUSION

Flexible working is not just a 'perk', a 'reward' or a 'luxury'; it is a strategic approach that unlocks the full potential of women in leadership positions. By providing flexible work arrangements, organisations can create a supportive ecosystem where women can thrive professionally without sacrificing their personal lives. This, in turn, fosters diversity, drives innovation, and enhances overall organisational success. As businesses strive towards a more equitable future, the integration of flexible working practices will continue to play a pivotal role in empowering women, unlocking their talent, and propelling them towards leadership excellence.

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