

Myths and Facts about Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs)

The Secretary-General's bulletin (SGB) on Flexible Working Arrangements (ST/SGB/2003/4) states "it is time to align the work practices of the Secretariat with those of many national civil services and other parts of the United Nations system by offering more flexible working arrangements leading to a better balance between the professional and personal lives of the staff of the Secretariat." Further, FWAs are demonstrably good for staff motivation and morale and can also lead to increased productivity and organizational effectiveness.

Notwithstanding the SGB, however, surveys indicate that the organization and staff alike may benefit by both increased awareness among staff and implementation by managers of FWAs. The Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) **have jointly compiled the following collection of myths and facts to enhance understanding and increase the implementation rates of FWAs within all departments and offices of the UN.**

Attached there are also links of the relevant SGB and a short rendition of a day in the life of a telecommuter. Other similar renditions are welcome. Please send to: ofpw@un.org

Myth #1 – FWAs consists only of one option - flexible work hours.

ST/SGB/2003/4 **delineates four FWA options** available to Secretariat staff:

Option 1: Staggered working hours

Option 2: Compressed work schedule: ten working days in nine

Option 3: Scheduled break for external learning activities

Option 4: Work away from the office (telecommuting)

Myth #2: Productivity decreases with FWAs.

Fact: FWAs can be a win-win situation for both organizations and staff members. Many organizations in the public and private sector support FWAs as a means to recruit and retain talent, create an organizational culture of trust, enhance staff commitment and satisfaction, and increase productivity.¹ Studies that have evaluated the impact of FWAs in the UN support these findings.

In January 2009, the Department of Management (DM) conducted a survey on telecommuting. Ninety-three per cent of respondents to the survey believed telecommuting is a valuable tool for the Secretariat, while 73% of managers who supervise telecommuters indicated that the arrangement is working well. In addition, in the July 2009 OSAGI survey on FWAs, a large majority of staff (67%) agreed that flexible work arrangements are simply a modern tool to allow persons to retain their productivity, while increasing their flexibility in choosing a work method more compatible to their work life fit.

Flexible working arrangements also decrease organizational costs. Capital Master Plan calculations show that over the duration of the Capital Master Plan, the organization can incur a \$1 million saving

¹ Catalyst, *Making Change: Beyond Flexibility, Work-Life Effectiveness as an Organizational Tool for High Performance* (2008).

for every 20 staff sharing 10 desks (i.e. telecommuting by 200 staff yields a savings of \$10 million).²

Myth #3: Use of FWAs is a form of special treatment.

Fact: Given their proven benefits, FWAs should not be viewed as a form of special treatment but as a viable option for all staff that the organization offers and encourages, as stipulated in the SGB on FWAs.

Myth #4: If managers approve telecommuting for their staff, they will not be able to effectively supervise the staff's work, and performance appraisals will be difficult to conduct.

Fact: Responsibility and productivity are the result of attitudes, dedication, work ethic and trust between managers and their staff, not the result of physical location or particular working hours or days. Responsible workers will work anywhere, while irresponsible workers will shirk work anywhere. The focus should remain on productivity.

Staff members utilizing FWAs will continue to be guided by the clearly identified goals and actions in their work plans. Managers can assess staff members' outputs and quality of work against their work plans, whether they are working from the office or elsewhere, using staggered working arrangements, utilizing the 9-days in 10 option or scheduled break for external learning activities. In short, FWAs encourage both the manager and staff member to focus on outputs and quality of work, rather than micro-management. FWAs are expected to be both a cause and consequence of a culture of

² Improvement of the status of women in the United Nations system, Report of the Secretary-General (A/63/364), page 44.

trust between staff members and management. As one manager who encourages FWAs in DPKO recently stated aptly, “You’ve got to trust your team, because in any event you can not be assured that a person sitting at their desk is being any more productive than someone working out of sight.”

Myth #5: Staff members will ask for FWAs if they need them.

Fact: Surveys show that one of the factors that deter staff members from applying for FWAs is a perception that their reputation will be tarnished and they will be seen as “weak” or “problematic” staff members. Those in management positions can actively dispel these fears by publicizing, encouraging and endorsing FWAs, and by facilitating the use of these options by staff. In the best case scenario, managers can utilize the options themselves. In other words, managers can lead by example.

Myth #6: FWAs and other work-life policies and practices only benefit female staff or staff with young children.

Fact: FWA policies and practices can benefit all staff. These policies and practices play an important role in promoting productivity at the same time as encouraging work-life balance for all UN staff members. While FWAs can be of particular benefit to those with care responsibilities and staff with study commitments, they can also benefit staff with other considerations related to a healthy work-life fit and well-being. Women may historically have undertaken most family-related care responsibilities, but men are increasingly taking on these tasks. The fact is that today both men and women are looking for tools to better balance their lives, attain improved work-life fits and enhance quality and productivity

in multiple activities, especially work.³ In the UN, FWAs provide such a tool.

Myth #7: FWAs are not for senior level staff.

Fact: Flexible working arrangements are equally available to and appropriate for all levels of staff. In fact, several Heads of UN entities and other senior officials in the UN system have utilized FWAs. The utilization of work-life policies and practices by senior level staff can positively impact their work-life balance needs as well as set an example and pave the way for junior staff to utilize such policies. Further, FWAs can be particularly important for senior managers since the nature and demands of their responsibilities often make them more susceptible to burn-out and stress, both of which are not uncommon and also less than beneficial for organizational productivity.

Myth #8: FWAs are only available to staff at Headquarters.

Fact: FWAs are available to all staff, whether stationed at UNHQ or in the field. With planning, coordination, and supportive management, an organized office schedule can be developed to allow staff to utilize FWAs while ensuring that no task or urgent matter is left unattended. FWAs are currently being availed of by staff, with support from their managers in various locations in the field. Some staff members of DPKO, for example, use FWAs whilst covering conflicts in several field duty stations. ST/SGB/2003/4 notes that “flexible working arrangements may be authorized in all departments and offices of the Secretariat.”

³ Although women at 60.2 per cent represent the majority of users within each option, they only constitute 35.5 per cent (11 out of 31) of users at the Director level, thus confirming the trend that the majority of the users at the Director level are men. (OHRM June 2008) Source A/63/364 Improvement of the Status of Women in the United Nations system. 18 September 2008.

Myth #9: FWAs cannot work for a large number of staff because of the nature of their functions.

Fact: With few exceptions, most jobs in the UN can adjust to any of the four available FWA options with the assistance of supportive management, peers and team members. Some offices have found that options 1-3 result in office functions being covered for longer hours each day. There is no doubt, nonetheless, that there may be a few specific functions which are not suitable to one or the other of the FWA options, especially during particular periods of the year. But such positions, it is expected, constitute only a small minority within any given department or office.

Myth #10: FWAs can be suspended for extended periods of time.

Fact: Ideally, flexible working arrangements can be implemented consistently throughout the year. Nonetheless, for limited periods of time due to what are clearly demanding circumstances, e.g. the need to service inter-governmental meetings, or emergency situations in field missions, FWAs can be temporarily suspended. Most of these meetings or emergency situations, however, usually last only weeks at a time. Continuous or repeated suspensions of FWAs, permanent bans on usage of certain types of FWAs, or the denial of a FWA option(s) for a certain category or level of staff, in normal circumstances and for extended periods, raise questions of intent as well as managerial dexterity and are contrary to the spirit of the SGB.

Myth #11: Technology imposes a constraint on the use of telecommuting.

Fact: On the contrary, with the use of both Webmail and the internet, and using saved documents (with the exception of highly confidential papers), the normal requirements of office work can be linked with or transmitted to any other location

in electronic form. For example, some staff e-mail file attachments to themselves for further review or processing, while others take them to alternate work stations on external storage devices. For verbal communications and “meetings,” teleconferencing is increasingly common, being used by geographically disperse offices both within the same duty stations (for example because of the CMP) and across them. Such solutions do not require additional investments or budgets.

Related Material

Secretary-General’s bulletin on flexible working arrangements (ST/SGB/2003/4)

A Day in the Life of a Telecommuter – Article by Rita Ihekwa