OSAGI
Office of the Focal Point
for Women in the United Nations

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Making the Case for the Implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements

Until recently, flexibility in the workplace was positioned as merely a benefit to employees. Today however, flexible work arrangements are commonly viewed as a powerful tool to institute positive organizational change. Indeed, the implementation of flexible work arrangements has been identified as Change Management priority for the United Nations in 2010 to encourage work-life balance and increased productivity.

Flexible Work Arrangements at the UN Secretariat

Over the past decade much has happened in the United Nations System to introduce flexible workplace options. Since 1 February 2003, flexible work arrangements have been authorized in all Departments and Offices of the United Nations Secretariat (ST/SGB/2003/4). Currently, four flexible work arrangements are available for UN staff:

* Staggered working hours
* Compressed work schedules: ten working days in nine
* Scheduled break for external learning activities
* Work away from the office (telecommuting)

More information about these flexible work arrangements can be found on the Office of the Focal Point for Women website (http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/fp.htm)

Why is flexibility in the workplace important?

Since the 1990s, several changes have occurred that have dramatically altered the workplace and propelled the need for flexibility forward. Considerable advancements in technology have resulted in increasingly sophisticated communication tools that enable employees to work collaboratively from various locations. Changing global demographics mean that people have to not only deal with child-care issues, but also care for aging parents. Further, employees in their twenties and thirties have been affected by advancements in technology and changing family structures and roles. As a result, they come to workplace with different expectations of time at work, engagement in work, and career growth opportunities.

Organizational expectations have also transformed. As a result of an increased pace and surge of technological advancements today's organizations are asking more of employees than ever before. In the face of increasing demands, employees struggle to be innovative and sustain quality and productivity while maintaining meaningful lives outside of the workplace.

The business case for flexible work arrangements

Organizational research over the past decade has continually demonstrated that employers can gain significant benefits from implementing flexible work arrangement policies. Flexibility in how and where employees work can have positive impacts on talent management and employee commitment and engagement, as well as business and operational outcomes.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that employees with even a small degree of flexibility have significantly greater levels of satisfaction and engagement, influencing their decision to stay with the organization.[1] This is significant considering the high cost of attrition, particularly for United Nations organizations that employ knowledge workers. Indeed, the cost of attrition is estimated at one and a half times the person's annual salary.[2]

An increase in employee satisfaction also leads to significant performance gains. It has been proven that highly committed employees perform at 20% higher levels than non-committed employees.[3] Flexibility also helps organizations deliver better services, engender stakeholder loyalty, and maintain a competitive advantage.

Examples of the positive outcomes of flexible work arrangements can be found within our own organization. Results from a recent survey conducted by OSAGI on flexible work arrangements in the UN Secretariat, for example, demonstrate that flexible arrangements have led to positive outcomes for both staff and the organization. Survey respondents who had taken a flexible work arrangement indicted that as a result of this arrangement they are working more efficiently (69%); they are more satisfied with their job (67%); their motivation has increased (65%); and their desire to stay at the UN is much stronger (64%).* Similarly, a survey conducted by DM in 2009 on telecommuting found that the number one factor motivating staff to telecommute was a desire to increase productivity levels.

New opportunities for flexible work arrangements at the UN Secretariat

Current changes occurring at the UN headquarters are creating opportunities to build an organizational culture and management climate that is more receptive to flexible work arrangements. The ongoing relocation of approximately 5,000 staff members at the Headquarters to swing space related to the Capital Master Plan (CMP), for example, is creating conditions more conducive to staff working remotely. Furthermore, a new data centre, currently under construction at Headquarters, will reduce some of the Information Technology barriers that are currently preventing some staff from working offsite.

While at one time the United Nations may have had an edge over other global employers; it now faces increasing international competition for top talent. Like many other non-governmental organizations, as well as companies in the private sector, the United Nations must evolve to meet the needs of both its employees and those it serves. The Secretary General has recognized this need and has requested, by memorandum of 3 April 2008, "Heads of Departments and Offices to embrace modern management methods and foster a healthy work-life balance, including by reviewing and enhancing the implementation of the policies of FWA."

*For full results of the survey visit the **OSAGI website.**

[1-3] *Corporate Voice for Working Families, Business Impacts of Flexibility: An Imperative for Expansion, 2005. Available at*: **http://www.corporatevoices.org/node/110**

[2] *Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Measures to Accelerate the Improvement in the Status of Women in the United Nations System, New York, 14-16 November 2007. The full report is available here:* **http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/fpegr.htm**