

CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, 5 March 2009

**Office of the Special Adviser for Gender Issues and Advancement of Women: Panel Discussion
on Workplace Flexibility and Productivity**

WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY: Strategic Business Models across Industries and Organizations

On 5 March 2009, International Women's Day, the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women/Office of the Focal Point for Women (OSAGI/OFPW) hosted a panel discussion on flexibility and productivity in the workplace. The symposium focused on the panelists' answers to a series of commonly asked questions concerning flexibility in the workplace. The event was moderated by Ms. Aparna Mehrotra, the Focal Point for Women at the United Nations.

The distinguished members of the panel included:

Cali Williams Yost, CEO and founder of Work+Life Fit, Inc.;

Brad Harrington, Executive Director of the Boston College Center for Work & Family;

Aparna Mehrotra, Focal Point for Women, OSAGI/DESA, Moderator of Panel Discussion;

Barbara Taylor, a partner at BDO Seidman;

Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and President of Flexi-Time Lawyers.

Ms. Mehrotra began the proceedings by pointing out that flexible work arrangements did not, and should not, apply exclusively to women. Given technological advances, the state of the global economy and the shifting of familial gender roles, flexible work arrangements highly benefited not only both male and female employees, but their employers as well.

She reminded the audience that "Our facts, our legislation, our spirit . . . all support the issue of flexibility and, because of this, we have promulgated policies in 2003 on this matter". However, according to statistics, 2,410 United Nations staff members had flexible work arrangements in

2004; however, in 2008, the number had dropped to 1,137. She attributed that drop to a lack of implementation of existing policy on flexible work arrangements (ST/SGB/2003/4 of 24 January 2003). Ms. Mehrotra pointed out that, unfortunately, many United Nations employees were not aware that flexible work arrangements even existed. It was now time for United Nations employees to utilize those arrangements and for managers to recognize the benefits. Ms. Mehrotra identified the following objectives of the panel discussion:

- To bring allies to the cause of flexibility and productivity, enlightening each one with an effective weapon called “information”.
- To call upon the audience to believe in the issue and to become advocates for flexibility making life better within the organization and outside of it.

Panel Questions

A member of the panel asked why flexibility was an important business strategy for organizations to be productive and profitable.

Deborah Epstein Henry stated that flexibility had become more necessary because of four converging factors:

- (1) Increased work demands;
- (2) Increased demands at home and in the community;
- (3) Globalization of work brought about by new technology; and
- (4) Generational shifts.

Increased demands at work were partially caused by the rise of the global economy and were made possible by recent technologies that allowed for instant communication.

Competing in a global economy meant being available to meet demands from all time zones—traditional office hours no longer applied. In an era of globalization, flexibility was the key to

success. Flexible work arrangements allowed employees to make better use of their time so they could meet increasing productivity standards at work while simultaneously meeting increased demands from family and community.

Ms. Epstein Henry also pointed out that it was not only the tech-savvy “Generation Y” demanding flexible options.

Baby boomers were pushing to “phase into retirement” slowly, over periods of five to ten years, due to the impact of recent economic developments on their retirement savings. As proof of the relationship between flexibility and productivity, Ms. Epstein Henry cited a 2005 study by the Bold Initiative which found that 10 companies had increased their productivity by 5 to 10 per cent merely by implementing flexibility options for their employees.

Cali Williams Yost built on Ms. Epstein Henry’s assertions by saying that flexibility was no longer just an option for employees, but was fast becoming “a way of operating” or a “business strategy” for companies. Companies that effectively utilized flexibility could not only increase their productivity, but also decrease their operating costs by saving on rental space and utilities. Organizations that were moving to another location, like the United Nations Secretariat due to the renovation plans, could use flexibility as a cost-saving measure. Furthermore, providing flexible options gave employers a way to retain their talent—particularly individuals who were considering retirement. Ms. Williams Host emphasized that the outputs and scrutiny applied to non-telecommuting staff would be only the same as that applied to non-telecommuting staff, and that no additional layers or frequency of reporting would be added. Finally, she noted that many flexible work arrangements decreased commuter traffic and energy usage—meaning that a flexible business could also contribute to environmental sustainability.

Barbara Taylor shared her findings from the recent assessment and implementation of flexibility at BDO Seidman. The assessment found that male employees felt they had not been given the same opportunities for flexibility that female employees had. Similarly, employees without families felt they had been offered less flexibility in the workplace than employees with families. Given this finding, BDO Seidman had implemented a company-wide flexibility strategy. The strategy created more employee satisfaction, and, in addition, helped employees to assist customers better—leading to greater client satisfaction.

Ms. Mehrotra closed the discussion by pointing out that India's Information System had been able to become a top global competitor in its field primarily because of the increased retention and motivation of employees who were allowed to work off site.

A member of the panel asked if others had noticed any particular effective managerial styles that allowed leaders to transform a culture of rigidity into a culture of flexibility.

Brad Harrington began the discussion by noting that flexibility demonstrated a company's commitment to corporate social responsibility. He added that there were three ways in which social responsibility was related to work life:

- (1) The way a company treated its employees was the primary indicator of whether it would be perceived as socially responsible;
- (2) The opportunities an organization extended to its employees to spend time with their families and do community work, which directly benefited society; and
- (3) The use of flexibility programmes that were ways of "going green" as they reduced commuting time.

He also pointed out that flexible work arrangements could be implemented in any organization.

Mr. Harrington emphasized that the problem with leadership lay in the fact that many leaders tended to be workaholics who were “dominated by their career identity”, and that most junior employees took their cues as to what an organization expected from the example of their superiors. In order for the employees to feel comfortable asking for flexible arrangements, those leaders needed to support flexible options consistently which acknowledges that “they may have made choices that are different from the choices they expect from others”.

Barbara Taylor stated that BDO Seidman made a point of engaging their leadership in a number of ways from creation to development to implementation of a flexibility strategy. The major breakthrough with the leadership’s acceptance of the programme occurred when they realized that flexibility was not only a programme for formal arrangements with certain employees but was a force that benefited management as well. Once the leaders of BDO realized “this is something that is actually benefiting me” their engagement with, and acceptance of, the programme became much stronger.

Deborah Epstein Henry next addressed how there had been a stigma attached to workers who engaged in flexible arrangements. There were perceptions that “These individuals who avail themselves of the policies don’t get the good assignments. They’re suddenly not on the promotion track. They’re not getting the same access to clients. They’re not being paid commensurate with what their delivery of work is.”

Her solution to this problem was an echo of Mr. Harrington’s “Leadership by example.” She also argued that it was vital for organizations to have a written policy in place so employees could consider their flexibility options whether or not they used them. This policy also had to include a monitoring system to ensure that flexible workers were paid and promoted according to their work and that substantial assignments were given

with the expectation that those assignments would be efficiently completed. Finally, the written policy must also include a training programme to ensure that employees who used flexible arrangements made the most of the time spent out of the office and their work did not suffer. Ms. Mehrotra concluded the discussion with a quote from Colin Powell, when he was asked to give advice to Hillary Clinton who had been nominated to become U.S. Secretary of State. Colin Powell said: “Go to bed early. . . . The electronic age has fundamentally changed the way in which we do business in every aspect of human life, but in diplomacy and politics as well— instantaneous transmission of information, instantaneous knowledge . . .” Mr. Powell had challenged his staff to use search engines and consult Wikipedia to check changes in countries. He had noted that he had been a workaholic and it had been his practice to work from home “. . . so that I could get some rest and also so my staff could get some rest”. One of his first acts had been to install 44,000 thousand computers in the State Department so that his staff could catch up with the times and individuals would be able to work from any location, not necessarily the office of the State Department. Colin Powell had worked 24 hours a day, but he hadn’t thought it necessary to work sitting in the State Department. Ms. Mehrotra emphasized that this story would provide an excellent argument for employees who sought flexible arrangements from their bosses, because leaders “won’t question the credential or the character of General Powell, where they might yours as an advocate”.

A member of the panel wondered how the work/life flexibility issue had cut across different constituencies and what the motivations of the different constituencies were with respect to this issue.

Cali Yost noted the difficulty of categorizing constituencies because there were commonalities as well as differences among all groups. She divided the constituencies according to age.

- First, she addressed the youngest group of workers (people under the age of 30), noting that they thought and operated very differently from previous generations, that they knew what technology was available to them and that there was no need for them to be on site every day for work.
- The next group of workers was comprised of those who were raising families and caring for their elderly parents, those who had commitments, schedules and responsibilities outside of work that had to be met, but who also knew that their professional productivity must not suffer.
- The last group was the older workers who were transforming the retirement process as they began to demand flexible arrangements to ease themselves into retirement.

Ms. Williams Yost said, “All these demographics will look into flexibility to creatively manage different areas in their lives”.

Brad Harrington agreed with Ms. Williams Yost’s assertions concerning workers of the retirement age, stating that retirement might even become a thing of the past if the economy continued to weaken, and that studies had found that it was easier for people to maintain psychological health if they had steady work. He asserted that retirement-aged workers were looking for flexible, part-time and seasonal employment opportunities. He also pointed out that the demographics of the family had changed radically in the previous 30 years. At that point, 75 per cent of couples in the U.S. were dual-career couples, and 28 per cent of households in the U.S. were headed by a single parent. Given those changes, Mr. Harrington predicted that families absolutely required flexibility in order to meet their needs.

Ms. Mehrotra concluded the discussion by pointing out that it was estimated that if 200 United Nations staff members (of the 8,000 to be moved under the Capital Master Plan) were willing to telecommute, there would be a \$10 million savings. The money that could be saved by flexible

practices could be used to increase productivity. Alternatively, given the current economic situation, the savings might need to be used in other ways. According to Ms. Mehrotra, “This is a bad time, but it’s a good opportunity for unconventional agendas.”

The panel questioned what exactly the face of flexibility was and how flexibility was being instituted above and beyond telecommuting.

Brad Harrington began by defining the different types of flexible arrangements:

- Flex time: workers were able to alter their start and stop times.
- Telecommuting: full-time workers did not have to report to an office every day.
- Compressed work weeks: people worked a little extra time during each day of the week in order to expand their weekends.
- Job sharing: two people worked part-time to take on a full-time job.
- Reduced hours: employees could decrease their weekly hours and receive less pay as a result, without being marginalized.
- Seasonal work: workers would put in hours only during certain times of the year.
- Flexible career paths: employers opened up new and customized career opportunities for workers.
- Phased retirement: an employee could put in fewer hours for a few years prior to retirement, rather than quitting their jobs entirely.

Ms. Epstein Henry stated the two guiding principles of individual’s flexible work options:

- (1) The individual’s creativity and that of his/her employer; and
- (2) A win-win situation that benefited the employee and his/her colleagues at the workplace, the employer and the clients of the company.

In addition, she outlined the five things that were important to individuals in their satisfaction with their arrangement:

- (1) Flexibility on how they performed their assigned work;
- (2) Predictability of and control over their assigned work;
- (3) A reasonable and manageable number of hours;
- (4) Ability to set aside certain hours of unavailability; and
- (5) Location or where employees wanted to work.

“If you don’t fit in one of those boxes that Mr. Harrington mentioned”, Ms. Epstein Henry asserted, “think of a creative solution . . . and design a win-win so that it’s in the interest of the United Nations but is also working for you and your family.”

Cali Yost agreed that employees needed to think creatively when determining the flexibility arrangement that would provide them with a good work + life fit, and noted that sometimes employees “get boxed in by the policy and don’t think creatively”. She quoted a female U.S. Navy Admiral who had stood up in a workshop and had said:

“Just thinking this through and being creative about what we do on the ship and the different job capacities that we all have, I can already see different ways that we can all work. And not only can I run my ship better, but the people who work on my ship can have a better work/life fit . . . Everything is not going to work in the same place in the same way on the ship, but I see that different types of flexibility can work in different jobs.” (It was not clear how flextime could work on a ship at sea, with, presumably, no telecommuting.)

The Focal Point for Women concluded the discussion by describing another form of flexible work arrangement that created a win-win situation for organizations and their employees. For example, different departments in the United Nations had “peak periods of work” when

employees were expected to work 50 to 70 hours a week. Employers could decrease employee burnout and also decrease their payroll by making sure that employees worked less during non-peak times. That way, employees would average 40-hour weeks over the course of a year. Managers should be convinced of the value of such a project and have instructions issued. Heads of departments, however, would have to be convinced first.

Ms. Mehrotra then opened up the discussion to questions from the floor.

Questions from Participants

A member of the audience wondered how the United Nations could be made more flexible. It seemed pretty rigid—open only from 9 a.m.–5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Ms. Mehrotra pointed out that even when the United Nations was not open for business, people were still working, some of them around the clock and on weekends. It was because so many United Nations employees were overworked that flexibility was an issue of importance. That was also why flexibility required creative solutions for seemingly rigid situations. She asserted that the best way to make the United Nations more flexible would be to introduce practices that accommodated flexible work environments. Once the practice was instituted, employees would become more accustomed to using their options and managers' attitudes towards employees who used flexible arrangements would become more positive. That arrangement was a reflection of humanism for which the United Nations stood.

Another participant addressed a question to Ms. Taylor, about the research that had found that men and childless workers had more problems with work balance issues, and wondered why that was so since one would think that it would be mothers with children.

Ms. Taylor's responded by stating that her data had been taken from employees' perceived satisfaction with their work, and had not addressed the validity or cause of those perceptions. She

said, however, that one possible explanation would be because men and childless workers had felt less comfortable asking for flexible work arrangements because their reasons had not been as socially valid.

Brad Harrington agreed. He then pointed out that the most progressive employers did not want to know the reason behind an employee's desire for flexibility. Those employers knew that it was not up to them to judge the social validity of an employee's needs. Rather, the organization needed to know whether and how the arrangement would work so that the employee met his/her responsibilities.

An audience member found it interesting to hear that employers did not ask why their employees needed a flexible arrangement. In this person's experience, the supervisor must give his/her approval before a request for flexible work could go forward. And, because of the bureaucracy, many people didn't want to start with the process. The questioner could not be sure that this Organization was even at the stage where children were an acceptable reason to ask for a flexible arrangement. The audience member then asked how the "prove-your-case" attitude toward flexible work arrangements could be changed.

Mr. Harrington redefined his earlier assertion, stating that even in progressive companies that did not want to know the reason behind the request for a flexible arrangement, the employees still had to make a case for the arrangement. Rather than saying: "I need this because," the employee should be making a case that argued his/her ability to perform satisfactorily in a flexible arrangement.

Cali Yost supported that argument, saying that she had also seen companies not take the "why do you need this" approach as it had become clear that the approach had allowed managers' biases

to cloud their judgement. It removed that stigma from the person with the care responsibility, and removed that bias from the conversation.

Deborah Epstein Henry pointed out that a great deal of a company's willingness to work on a flexible arrangement had to do with an employee's talent and skill. If the company received value from an employee, then it would be more willing to compromise to meet the employee's needs. Otherwise, the company risked losing its talented employees. As advocates for flexibility, staff members should take the opportunity to prove to the United Nations that flexible arrangements would improve productivity.

A member of the audience who had worked at the United Nations for 20 years and had experience 75-hour work weeks knew about burnout and brownout. Although the United Nations did have a policy for flexibility in the ST/SGB/2003/4 on flexible work arrangements, the problem was trying to get through to the programme managers who felt that a staff member was working only when sitting at his/her desk. Under those circumstances, the questioner wanted to know how to convince managers that staff would be better off in a flexible arrangement.

Deborah Epstein Henry answered by reiterating that her company had helped change managerial attitudes toward flexible work arrangements by engaging leaders in the process of creating, developing and implementing the flexible work programme and simultaneously educating the leadership to alleviate negative attitudes and biases. The company had also found success when it had convinced leaders that allowing for flexible arrangements had been an important, innovative and profitable business strategy. Ms. Mehrotra, the moderator, added that she had witnessed divisions and departments where the "power and culture of control" of the leadership did not allow for employees to engage in flexible arrangements that truly suited them, and that the Secretary-General had called for a new assessment that would monitor which flexible

arrangements were being used. In this way, she hoped it would be possible to identify objectively which departments were providing only pseudo-flexibility. Concerning managers who felt that they would lose control of their employees if the employees were not in the office, she stated that it was important gently to point out “that the person who is responsible will work anywhere and the person who is irresponsible will work nowhere.” A staff member pointed out that the United Nations must update the 2003 bulletin of the Secretary-General to garner an attitude of acceptance toward flexible work arrangements in corporate culture.

The language was too non-committal; because it gave the department heads discretionary power to grant flexibility. Instead, she suggested that the language of the bulletin should focus on the cost benefit analysis of flexible arrangements, and show how flexible arrangements could make the Organization more effective.

Cali Yost applauded the staff member’s attitude toward flexible arrangements, reiterating her statement that flexibility was not an accommodation for employees, but was actually an efficient business strategy with broad bottom-line and operational impact.

Deborah Epstein Henry provided a few ideas about how to help build a case to have the bulletin (or any policy on flexibility) revised by:

- Running a pilot programme of flexibility in a department of the organization and using it to show that work quality and employee accessibility could be maintained or improved in an unconventional working arrangement. After a successful pilot run, it would be easier to argue that the practice should be implemented in other departments.
- Finding people who were already using flexible arrangements and interviewing them and celebrating their success.

Ms. Mehrotra agreed with the staff member, stating that it was difficult to run cost-benefit analyses but that they were working to conduct surveys and support implementation. She then concluded the panel discussion with these final thoughts:

- A major obstacle in implementing flexibility was existing cultural and organizational rigidity. She argued that “when the body becomes rigid it becomes problematic . . . that is also true when the workforce becomes rigid and when our mindset becomes rigid”. This rigidity had to be overcome.
- Flexible work arrangements should not be looked upon as a perk, but as a regular and effective work method. People who opted for it did so because they often wanted to be better and work more.
- Finally, Ms. Mehrotra offered a quote from Indra Nooyi, CEO of Pepsi, which highlights the benefits of organizational flexibility and hints at the cost of rigidity: Ms. Nooyi said when asked the key to her success that most of the time she had been lucky enough to be surrounded by people who “allowed me to be who I was”, and who therefore allowed her to conserve her energies for constructive purposes rather than waste them in negativity, combating unnecessary resistance of her natural grain.

Aparna Mehrotra emphasized that the United Nations was built on justice and the staff had to conserve their energies for the Organization. She called on the audience to be advocates for the issue of flexibility and to request it, because the policies were there to be used for mutual benefit of the Organization and the staff.

Panel highlights

Flexibility was not only technologically possible and desired by employees; it increased worker productivity and morale. If used correctly, it could save an organization’s funds on rental

properties and utilities, help an organization to become more sustainable, and increase retention and talent. Although flexible work arrangements had historically been thought of as applying primarily to women (especially those with children), it had become apparent that flexible arrangements were appreciated, necessary and used by both men and women, with and without families, and across all age demographics. In fact, one demographic that called for flexible work arrangements was that of retirement age employees who, due to recent economic factors, would rather phase out of a job gradually. Another demographic calling for flexible work arrangements was middle-aged employees facing elder care issues. Organizations needed to have a clear-cut written policy in place considering that there were many kinds of flexible work arrangements beyond telecommuting and flexible hours. Those included: compressed work weeks, job sharing, reduced hours, seasonal work, flexible career paths, peak and non-peak work hours and phased retirement. When taking into account a flexible work arrangement, therefore, an employee must assess his/her unique situation and find the best possible combination of those options. Equally important was the employee's presentation of his/her case when asking for a flexible arrangement. Rather than proving that personal situations required flexibility, an employee should make an effort to show how a flexible arrangement would not only assist in maintaining present productivity, but also help improve the productivity of the organization. Conversations that did not concern an employee's personal situation could avoid the stigma that had typically accompanied flexible situations, transforming flexible work options from a perk to an economical business strategy and ultimately bringing benefits both to the employee and the employer.