

## **Stuck in the middle again**

High stress is the first thing that comes up when interviewing Darrielle Ehrheart, Clinical Manager of Dignity Healthcare in Sacramento. Second thing is being pulled in multiple directions with competing time demands where flexibility and balance is the new basis to what makes employees more productive and happy. The goal is to create a dual-centric (equal emphasis) culture which gives employees satisfaction and the ability to balance work and home demands. No longer do employees relate to work with a singular focus. Instead, work competes with other critical issues for attention. It's difficult to care for aging parents or family members, manage the household, or stay home with a sick child.

For example, an employee that needs to tend to an ailing parent, stay home with a sick child, or attend a parent/teacher conference, flexibility gives the employee the opportunity to address these personal demands thereby making them more focused and productive at work.

Women in particular get sandwiched between competing priorities. Today, women want to have a career and need to consider all of the other balls suspended in mid-air. One ball is paying for childcare, another ball is thinking about how to care for an aging parent, and yet another ball is managing the household. Concerns and tension rise when thinking of how to manage finances such as, the escalating cost of living (e.g., paying higher rent and/or rising mortgage rates). Also in dealing with other pressures such as, meeting work project deadlines or stepping up to new roles and responsibilities, all of which adds to the surmounting pressure cooker. Even though men face these same issues, they deal with them in different ways.

Generation X is identified as the "sandwich generation." A study conducted by the Sloan Center of Aging and Work reported that the majority of each of age group/generation which has access to flexible work options, also indicated that these options contribute to their overall quality of life "to a great extent." Moreover, employees between the ages of 36-52 (Generation X) were the most likely to indicate that workplace flexibility contributed to their success as an employee, whereas the largest percentage of the Gen X'ers and the Older Baby Boomers claimed that having access to flexible work options contributed to their success as an employee "to a great extent." In contrast, the most frequent response from Gen Y'ers, Younger Baby Boomers, and Traditionalist to flexible work options contributing to their success was "to a moderate extent."

This study shows the need for employers to understand the connection between quality of life and higher productivity in the workplace. Furthermore, flexible work options have the potential to contribute to workplace effectiveness and efficiencies while offering benefits that are attractive to employees. In Sloan Center's study there were five top areas that were found to be

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most important to Gen X'ers and they included flexibility in the number of hours worked, flexible schedules, options for time-off, as well as a number of other options.

Epiphany Coaching is a business consulting firm specializing in organizational effectiveness, creating and building infrastructures to support companies large and small as they grow, go through change, and look at becoming a healthy dual-centric organization. We spend hundreds of hours a year working with our clients' talking about cultural and generational issues, and how to make the best of their situation to create a dual-centric culture that supports and helps sustain work/life balance.

We're saying, you can think anywhere if you have a laptop, you can write. If you have an Internet connection, you can communicate. We believe such a shift will lead to workers who are more productive and happier as they craft a routine that works best for their professional, health and family needs.

Workplace flexibility is a response to these changes in the American workplace. Current trends indicate a new, more flexible model of employment which benefits both employers and employees. Employees with access to flexible work options can respond productively to the demands of work, education and family.

## **INVEST IN TOOLS THAT WORK FOR THE COMPANY — AND THE EMPLOYEE**

Moving to a cloud system, where information is stored on Web-based servers that can be accessed from anywhere, is key to making remote work possible. "The knowledge and information world is going to the cloud, and in that process, it's basically [making obsolete] how we've done it for decades, commuting to the office," Perez says. Tools like Skype, online document sharing, editing programs and other Web resources allow staff to communicate and collaborate without sitting in neighboring cubicles or around a conference table.

## **MANAGE WORK, NOT PEOPLE**

We help clients envision a fundamental shift in work culture wherein employers change not only where employees work but how they are evaluated. That means workers are "measured by their work instead of their attendance and their face time," Perez says. Such an approach allows employees to complete assignments when they are most creative and productive, whether that is first thing in the morning or in the evening hours. It also gives them an incentive to get their work done faster. "Because people have time ownership in that kind of world, we would hope individuals would learn ways to be more efficient and effective in their work," she says.

## **MAKE WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY THE RULE, NOT THE EXCEPTION**

The concept goes beyond what many consider "telework" these days — employers allowing some staff to work from home on Fridays or jump on a conference call remotely while they're waiting for the cable guy. Perez recalls speaking to one client's employee who was elated that her manager would let her leave early on days her daughter had doctors' appointments.

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Making such arrangements the exception not the rule means employees taking advantage of the schedule could be left a disadvantage, potentially missing crucial communication or resented by coworkers.

“Why can’t I be a good, dedicated employee and also be my future son or daughter’s baseball coach? Why does that have to be mutually exclusive?” Arba and Pilot from Flexible Workspace, Inc. believe giving all employees the tools and option to work from anywhere creates a more level playing field that allows all workers to balance professional and personal responsibilities.

Sometimes you need to be in the box to think outside of the box. Keep in mind that this statement is based on a case by case situation in your company and depends on your organization and company’s policy. Also, the level of flexibility for an employer means more than just flexible work schedules it also means higher retention, becoming an employer of choice, and showing your employees how much they are valued.

To learn more about our research, best practices, business models, seminars and workshops contact Laura Perez directly at [laura@epiphanycoaching.net](mailto:laura@epiphanycoaching.net) or call 916-248-9756

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