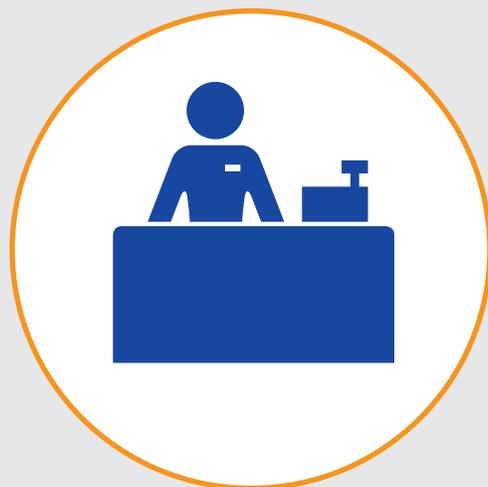


Workflex in Retail, Service and Hospitality Guide

Cooperative Scheduling, Beyond Bias



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Is Workflex Possible in Retail, Service and Hospitality?

For many, the idea of flexible work arrangements for hourly frontline service jobs feels impractical or difficult to manage. But, in reality, it is possible and has been instituted by a number of retailers, restaurants and hotels across the country. Not only is it possible, but it also actually helps boost employee satisfaction, and, ultimately productivity and the bottom line.

CASE IN POINT:

QuikTrip, a gas station and convenience store chain, is well regarded by employees, customers and industry peers. The company's sales per labor hour are 66% higher than the average convenience store chain and 50% higher than those in the top quartile of their industry.¹ QuikTrip ranks on both Fortune's and Glassdoor's best places to work lists and enjoys extremely low turnover of just 13%. Company reviews typically include mention of flexible hours, work-life balance, above average wage and benefits, and a culture of respect and autonomy. One way QuikTrip offers workflex is by maintaining a large force of floating employees who can fill in when staff members are sick, on vacation or have an emergency.

As this story shows, workflex is a business strategy. Making more effective workplaces for all employees, including hourly workers, does not have to come at a cost to the bottom line. In fact, workflex may very well advance both profitability and performance. For workflex to be successful, however, Human Resource and other leaders must follow the example of such companies as QuikTrip to reinvent how they strategize around and implement workflex for their specific organizational and employee needs.

This Guide is designed to help leaders change the conversation about workflex from impossible and easily dismissed ideas to achievable goals for mutual success.

Matching Scheduling Practices with Modern Workforce Realities

Conceptually, workplace flexibility or workflex is the same in any industry: a dynamic partnership between employers and employees that defines how, when and where work gets done in ways that make sense for everyone involved. In this way, workflex is not merely an employee benefit — something an organization does for employees — but an effective way of working that also benefits the business.

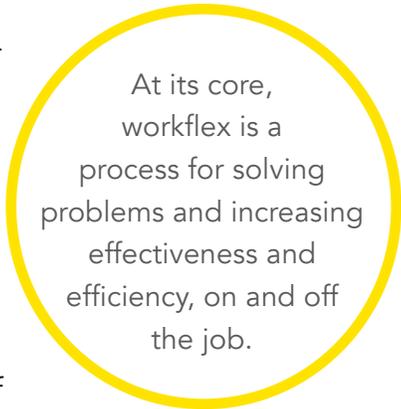
The results of any workflex partnership can look very different between industries and even among specific organizations in the same industry. For workflex to be maximally effective, it must respond to the unique combination of products and services, business strategies, federal and local employment laws, and employees present at a specific organization or worksite.

In the retail, service and hospitality industries, workflex bumps up against unique challenges such as fluctuating customer demand, evening and weekend hours, and tight profit margins. These industries deal with another common challenge, however, which is a bias against low-wage employees.

Research reveals that barriers to flexible work sometimes include management mistrust of employees, coupled with concerns about the need to control hourly workers.² Employees in low-status jobs are least likely to be granted flextime,³ reflecting management bias that flex-time should be earned. The assumption is that low-wage workers are unreliable — the idea is that if you're at the bottom, you've earned being at the bottom.

Belief and Bias. Lazlo Bock, Google's Senior Vice President of People Operations, targets this anti-employee bias in his book *Work Rules!* To create a renowned workplace culture akin to Google's, he writes, "All it takes is a belief that people are fundamentally good — and enough courage to treat your people like owners instead of machines."

Bock oversimplifies, of course. Scheduling and talent practices are complicated. But employers need to consider that workforce problems like high turnover and absenteeism may have more to do with ineffective scheduling practices than the work ethic of its labor force. As Joan Williams, Director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings, writes, "High attrition and absenteeism stem from outdated assumptions, the most basic of which is that any responsible and committed employee is always available for work."⁴



At its core, workflex is a process for solving problems and increasing effectiveness and efficiency, on and off the job.

In one study Williams cites, researchers found that 80% of the sales staff employees in one department store were on probation due to absenteeism.⁵ When scheduling becomes that problematic for an organization, leaders would be better served by rethinking policies and procedures rather than by pointing fingers at a so-called "unreliable" workforce.

Contemporary Families. Too often, hourly workers are penalized when inflexible (or unpredictable) work schedules conflict with family needs. The workforce has changed, and today's employees are juggling multiple commitments. In most U.S. families today, all parents work. (This includes single, married and cohabiting parents.) Only about a quarter (27%) of married couple households have one member working and the other member available for full-time child care or other home responsibilities.⁶ By comparison, in the 1970s, two-thirds of married couples had one spouse at home.⁷ Moreover, 19% of working parents today are single parents.⁸

Williams writes, "Erratic schedules just don't work for single parents, tag-team families and employees who rely on relatives for help with family care. That means they don't work for the bulk of hourly workers."⁹

However, the workplace has yet to catch up with the realities of the modern workforce. This disconnect creates a cycle of dysfunction in which employees fail to meet employer expectations, are sanctioned and then subsequently quit or are fired. As a result, these employees lack the kind of workplace seniority that contributes to better scheduling opportunities and job stability. Moreover, they fail to build long-term employment records, contributing to negative employer perceptions when they seek different, more supportive jobs. These stressors have a negative impact on employees' mental health, marriages and on the well-being

of their children.¹⁰ Simultaneously, employers who continue to ignore these realities reap the unpredictability, high turnover and reduced customer satisfaction that comes from an unstable workforce.¹¹

New Thinking. The challenge for HR is to create scheduling systems that reduce work-life conflict in their employees' lives. In doing so, they can lower turnover and absenteeism and create workplace cultures in which employees are motivated to provide better customer service.

This report includes a variety of suggestions on how to expand workflex options in retail, service and hospitality settings. None of these options are universally applicable, but all of them should be considered as inspiration for rethinking what might work in your organization. Each organization must consider what options make the most sense for them; a policy that works well in one organization may not be effective or viable in another.

Before deciding that an option doesn't make sense for your organization, consider whether that option could be adjusted to fit into your context, and whether you could address the relevant employment issues using another, more viable option.

Work-Life Challenges of Hourly Workers

Key scheduling challenges for hourly workers include rigidity, unpredictability and instability. Scheduling challenges compound work-life challenges for hourly workers and limit their effectiveness on the job.

Child Care. Lack of quality, affordable child care is a barrier to stable employment for hourly workers. Unpredictable schedules lead to child care instability, as workers cannot hold on to spaces in child care centers when schedules and income vary from week to week or month to month.

Transportation. Many hourly workers cannot afford a reliable vehicle. Workers whose schedules do not coincide with peak public transit hours (e.g., evenings, weekends) may find it difficult to get to work.

Health. Challenging schedules can contribute to poor health. Research shows that interventions focused on improving employees' control over work schedule and supervisor support for flexibility led to measurable improvements in employee health and well-being.

Job Loss/Turnover. Challenging schedules contribute to a cycle of turnover and job loss. New hires are more likely to be subject to unstable hours, leading to voluntary quits.

Adapted, in part, from *Flexible Workplace Solutions for Low-Wage Hourly Workers: A Framework for a National Conversation*.

What Are Some Unique Aspects of the Retail, Service and Hospitality Industries That Influence Workflex?

In order to understand workflex opportunities, one must first understand the context in which workflex operates. The retail, service and hospitality industries have several characteristics that must be considered when going through a workflex process to improve outcomes for everyone involved.

- **Just-in-Time Profit Models.** Unpredictable scheduling practices represent efforts to control costs by matching staffing levels with variations in customer demand. Managers are under pressure to balance employee interests with prescribed staffing ratios which are often in conflict.
- **Fluctuations in Customer Traffic/Consumer Demand.** Predictive scheduling models can be used to forecast future demand based on past experience. However, outside factors such as weather, special events or a surprise promotion at a neighboring business can create anomalies in customer traffic. Online retail options are also changing the way consumers shop, making it more difficult for brick-and-mortar stores to rely on historical demand projections.
- **Nontraditional Working Hours, Including Nights and Weekends.** Retail and food service businesses typically operate extended hours, requiring early morning, evening, overnight or weekend hours. Filling evening and weekend hours can be a challenge as those shifts are typically the least preferred.
- **Balancing Business and Employee Needs.** The challenge for managers is to coordinate employee schedule preferences with the demands of the business. That challenge extends beyond day-to-day scheduling to hiring. Search and recruitment efforts must consider more than just employee qualifications to find the best employee who can work the hours the business needs.¹² The company must also advertise and openly discuss work conditions, like unusual hours, so that they can attract employees whose lives fit well with the business needs.
- **Ensuring Fairness and Equity.** Managers may struggle to juggle multiple time-off requests for each shift. In addition, certain shifts are favored more than others, and managers must deal with conflicts, with certain employees perceiving the solutions as favoritism.
- **Jobs That Are Not Designed to Be Primary Employment.** For some employers, the part-time jobs they offer were not intended to be someone's primary employment. As such, their scheduling practices have not been developed to support employees in need of full-time economic security.
- **Limitations on Full-Time Hires.** When businesses limit the number of employees offered full-time positions (an effort to limit benefit expenses), managers must work harder to coordinate schedules for more part-time employees — many of whom carry a second part-time job in order to make ends meet. In fact, the practice of cobbling together full-time employment from multiple part-time jobs has increased over time.¹³

How Can Retail, Service and Hospitality Reinvent Work for Greater Flexibility?

The characteristics described above must be addressed openly and directly as constraints on the pool of possible solutions, not as a reason to stop the workflex process altogether. When engaging with these issues, it is essential to respond to any statements like, “That just isn’t possible because...” with the question, “Given that constraint, what is possible?” The goal of workflex is the best of all possible outcomes, not the best of all imagined outcomes. Below are several examples of strategies retail, service and hospitality should consider when creating more effective workplaces.

- **Advance Schedule Notice.** According to Bureau of Labor Statistics’ data, 47% of part-time hourly workers ages 26 to 32 receive a week or less advance notice of their schedule.¹⁴ Other research suggests nearly two-thirds of food service workers and half of retail workers receive their work schedules a week or less in advance.¹⁵

Scheduling practices like these place workers in a constant state of uncertainty about when they will work. Such unpredictable schedules can be untenable for parents who need to make child care arrangements. Last-minute scheduling prohibits employees from making plans, both essential (like medical appointments, parent-teacher meetings or car service) and social (like time with friends and family). This creates significant work-life stress that could be alleviated with advance planning.

Researcher Susan Lambert of the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration has studied scheduling practices in retail environments and has found that in stores with just-in-time scheduling practices, roughly 80% of the hours that need to be scheduled do not change from week to week. Better use of technology and demand data would aid employers in crafting permanent schedules, leaving just 20% in need of alternative staffing strategies.¹⁶

Indeed, short-notice scheduling has become a political issue in some communities. San Francisco established legislation requiring four weeks’ notice for employee schedules, and similar bills have been proposed in at least a dozen state legislatures.¹⁷ Companies that resolve short-notice staffing challenges now could gain a strategic advantage over their competitors who wait to react to any for legislative mandates.

In August 2014, following a pilot study with the Center for WorkLife Law, **Gap Inc.** announced its decision to provide employee work schedules 14 days in advance. In November 2015, the company began an expanded pilot program designed to further improve schedule flexibility. The new effort — beginning in Chicago and San Francisco stores — includes increasing the number of shifts that are stable from week to week, so employees are able to plan their lives around a more predictable work schedule.¹⁸

QuikTrip offers stable schedules for its managers and many full-time employees, using its part-time employees to deal with seasonal fluctuations in traffic.¹⁹

- **Relief Pools.** Some companies maintain pools of temporary employees who provide short-term help when regularly scheduled workers take a vacation, get sick or have some kind of emergency. Relief pool strategies vary. Some relief pools are staffed by full-time employees who can be deployed across the organization while others are filled by on-demand staffers who aren't guaranteed hours and don't receive benefits. Typically, on-demand relief workers are paid a higher wage rate to compensate for their flexibility and responsiveness.

QuikTrip, a gas station convenience store, invests in relief employees. These workers do not have regularly scheduled hours at a specific store, but are available to fill in for employees on short notice.²⁰

Zazie, a San Francisco restaurant, provides workers with core schedules which include no more than one on-call shift per week used strictly to cover gaps in the schedule due to illness.²¹

- **Limited On-Call Hours.** Like short-notice scheduling, on-call practices create significant challenges for employees with other responsibilities. On-call rotation practices — in which employees are on-call for limited, predictable days — can help alleviate the burden. For example, it may be possible to divide employees into four scheduling bands. Band A must be available for on-call work the first weekend of the month, Band B the second weekend of the month, and so on.

- **Shift Swapping.** Workers voluntarily exchange shifts or workdays to manage such personal and family responsibilities as school events, medical appointments or caring for a sick relative. Shift swaps are best when the employee is responsible for arranging the swap, including finding the person to swap with and pursuing all required paperwork and approvals. In turn, employers should be clear on which employees are eligible to swap with one another, acknowledging such issues as seniority, expertise and shift-specific knowledge. This method also helps managers be more productive by freeing them from the choice of doing extra work or denying flexibility.

Gap Inc.'s new scheduling pilot program includes use of a scheduling app, designed to increase the ease and flexibility in which employees swap and pick up additional shifts.²²

- **Shifting Hours.** Akin to shift swapping are scheduling options that allow employees to shift their work hours by finding coverage for just part of their shift. For example, a line cook might ask a coworker to work an extra two hours before his/her regularly scheduled evening shift, enabling him to leave his afternoon shift two hours early. Employers should consider whether allowing limited overtime, in such situations, would be worth the cost of enabling flexibility.
- **Flex Place.** For businesses with multiple locations within a metro area, multi-location scheduling can help ensure hourly employees get a guaranteed number of hours each week. Enabling employees to work in multiple locations helps an organization smooth out staffing shortages due to vacations or absenteeism. Multi-location scheduling can also help an organization create full-time jobs for employees seeking more hours.

- **Seasonal Staffing.** Workflex isn't limited to daily or weekly schedules. Seasonal scheduling can accommodate businesses that have temporary surges in demand or help alleviate staffing shortages during peak vacation seasons, when full-time staff want time away.

CVS/caremark has developed a snowbird program in which several hundred pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and other employees transfer from northern states to CVS locations in Florida, Arizona and other warmer climates. The program helps CVS keep up with seasonal business surges as customer traffic fluctuates from one region to another.²³

Food service company **Sodexo** enables hourly workers to trade shifts, use floating holidays and take unpaid leaves without penalty. Sodexo leaders understand they employ a globally diverse workforce, and employees use extended breaks to visit their home countries.²⁴

- **Just-In-Time Flex.** Relief pools, cross-training and other strategies can help organizations create approved methods for employees to miss work on short notice without penalty.

At **Marriott's** Global Reservation Sales and Customer Care Center, associates can request short-notice time off through use of flextime coupons. Coupons are requested online and can be approved by a manager up to five minutes before taking time off. Associates earn 15 coupons each year and have access to more through ongoing incentive programs.²⁵

- **Cross Training.** Employers that engage in extensive cross training develop workforces where employees are able to cover multiple positions in the sales and service process. When an employee is absent, a cross-trained workforce can be redistributed to focus on high-priority tasks. When employees are cross trained, there is less need for floating employees who are forced to wait until a specific position is not covered before providing value. All employees are able to be deployed to where the company needs them rather than just to a small set of tasks that are covered by more limited skill sets.

At Marriott, cross-training enables employees to pick up shifts in other functional areas. Here cross training is facilitated by job rotations in which associates might work in the laundry and the lobby.²⁷

Instead of varying the number of employees to match traffic, **QuikTrip** varies employee job responsibilities. They achieve this by training employees to perform a variety of tasks. When customer traffic is high, employees at QuikTrip focus on customer-related tasks. When traffic is low, they focus on other tasks.²⁶

- **Allowing Leave in Small Increments.** Sick leave and vacation policies may be amended, allowing employees to take their paid leave in one-hour or two-hour increments.
- **Scheduling Software.** Online scheduling tools allow employees to check schedules online and initiate shift swaps. When used effectively, these tools give employees greater visibility in and control over their schedules. One issue faced by many managers is scheduling and payroll systems that cannot accept particular forms of flexibility, even if they would work in practice. Organizations bound by such limited technology should openly coordinate with staff on potential solutions that fit into the organization’s reporting requirements. These organizations can also help promote change by demanding more sophisticated software options from their providers. When organizations incorporate these requirements as specifications for their purchases, designers will incorporate those options.
- **Predictive Analytics.** Software can help organizations cut labor costs by tracking busy times and staffing accordingly. However, such technology should be used effectively to limit chaos in employees’ lives and the resulting fallout for the organization, not to contribute to it. Longer-term data analysis could help leaders identify “schedule equilibrium,” in which labor supply best meets labor demand, without driving up turnover and absenteeism.²⁸

Economic Security

For hourly workers, *schedule predictability* is a significant challenge and closely tied to the issue of *economic predictability* or economic security. People who work lower-wage jobs may be struggling to make ends meet and need jobs that provide dependable incomes. Fluctuations in work hours leads to income instability, making it hard for people to plan their finances.

The challenge for organizations is to come up with a process to address customer demand fluctuations while still supporting an effective work environment for staff. To that end, some organizations are addressing the problem by accepting the financial risk for overstaffed shifts, rather than shortchanging employee paychecks. Though this does entail some financial costs for the organization, these employers believe that employees with less economic insecurity induced stress and work-life conflicts will be more productive and likely to stay. In addition, economic insecurity has been found to have negative effects on employee health²⁹ which also impacts businesses in terms of productivity, absenteeism and insurance costs.

Such solutions include:

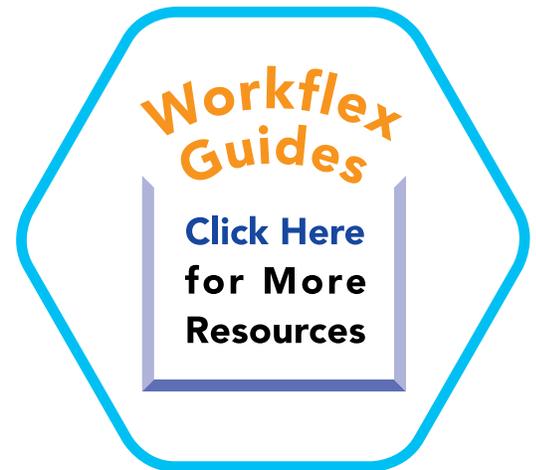
- **No Cancellation Policies.** These policies stipulate that employees are not sent home when customer demand is low on any given shift. Instead of going home, the employees address other tasks that might not receive full attention during busy hours, such as

When customer traffic at **Costco** is lower than expected, a store manager gives employees the opportunity to take time off. Employees are not forced to accept, but there are often more than enough employees who want time away. If no one volunteers, then Costco accepts the cost of having too many employees on that shift.³⁰

cleaning, stocking or online training. The net result being a more highly-trained staff in a well-maintained environment that is better prepared for periods of high demand.

- **Minimum Hour Guarantees.** Similar to no-cancellation policies, minimum hour policies guarantee that employees will receive at least a set number of hours each week at their usual pay rate. Employers may be able to provide more than the minimum, but employees are guaranteed pay, even if they are not required to work. This policy allows employees to better plan their finances and take advantage of the discounts offered to people who can make earlier commitments to purchasing a service or product. This, in turn, stretches their paycheck farther and provides a net increase in their pay without requiring raises.

Overall, employers should consider how particular workflex options may impact employee economic security. Arrangements that could have a negative impact on wages or benefits should be avoided, if possible, as such arrangements will likely damage employee morale and trust in their employer which rebounds back to the employer in the form of absenteeism, turnover and lower performance. Consider how employees might keep their benefits and service credit so employees are not penalized for using flexibility or volunteering for programs that help the employer manage payroll costs in collaboration with employees.



Conclusion

Peruse the job postings for retail, food service and hospitality positions, and you'll often come across this key qualification: "Must be available to work flexible hours." In other words, employers are actively signaling that they don't offer predictable, stable schedules.

In these workplaces, efforts to introduce more flexibility may meet with resistance when its primary purpose is to support just-in-time staffing models in which employees have little control or predictability in their schedules. For these industries, flexibility alone is not enough. Employees and employers also want greater predictability in wages, hours, attendance, staffing and performance. In order for flexible scheduling options to be effective, they must meet the needs of *both* the organization and the employees.

For many organizations, the challenge is less one of how to offer flexibility, but how to schedule in a way that reduces stress and work-life conflict for their employees. For retail, food service and hospitality workers, workflex, in large part, represents strategies for creating schedule predictability, reducing last-minute shift changes and providing opportunities for employees to have more control over their schedules — without penalty.

We hope that this Guide advances the workflex conversation at your organization and provides fresh insight into the opportunities for creating more effective workplaces.

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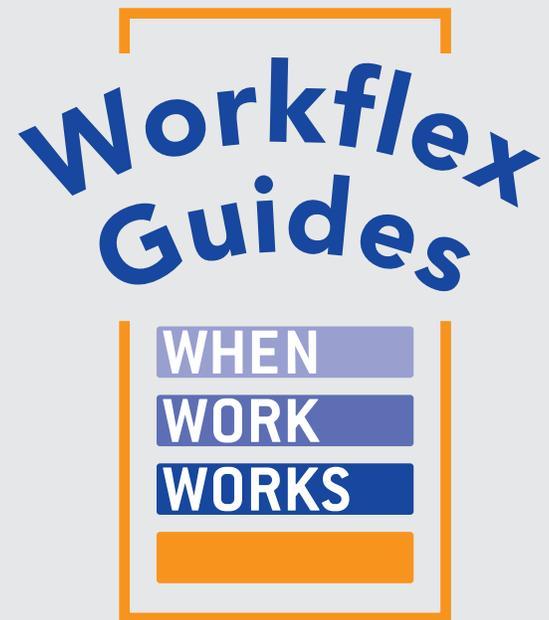
When Work Works is a nationwide initiative that brings research on workplace effectiveness and flexibility into community and business practice. Since its inception in 2003, When Work Works has partnered with an ever-expanding group of communities from around the country to: share rigorous research and employer best practices on workplace effectiveness and flexibility; inspire local employers to create more flexible and effective workplaces to benefit both business and employees; and recognize exemplary employers through the When Work Works Award and local community events. www.WhenWorkWorks.org



The **Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)** is the world's largest HR professional society, representing 285,000 members in more than 165 countries. For nearly seven decades, the Society has been the leading provider of resources serving the needs of HR professionals and advancing the practice of human resource management. SHRM has more than 575 affiliated chapters within the United States and subsidiary offices in China, India and United Arab Emirates. Visit us at shrm.org.



Families and Work Institute (FWI) is a nonprofit center dedicated to providing research for living in today's changing workplace, changing family and changing community. Since the Institute was founded in 1989, our work has tackled issues in three major areas: the workforce/workplace, youth and early childhood. In 2016, Mind in the Making, our major child development initiative, became a program of the Bezos Family Foundation and the National Study of the Changing Workforce, the National Study of Employers and When Work Works became projects of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). www.familiesandwork.org



Retail, Service and Hospitality

When Work Works produces Workflex Guides to help businesses and organizations explore ways to #ReinventWork and create effective and flexible workplaces for their employees.