

Sloan Award winners give their advice on putting flexibility into action.

Sloan Award winners have embraced flexibility as a way to solidify customer relationships and reduce hiring and training costs. Perhaps equally important, these employers have learned that by giving people more responsibility and accountability over their time at work—even in a limited way—they can build a workforce that is even more engaged and committed, and more resilient in withstanding change. Here are winners' suggestions for putting greater flexibility into place.

See flexibility as a strategic business tool. Research by Families and Work Institute reveals that flexibility is as important a component of an effective workplace as the other more traditionally understood components, such as learning opportunities, input into management decision making, job autonomy, and supervisor and coworker support for job success. In the past, flexibility was seen at best as a “perk” or an accommodation to employees and at work as a business problem. In responding to the changes in the economy, the workplace and the workforce in the 21st Century, these Sloan Award winners are increasingly likely to see flexibility as a management tool to help them be productive.

Be clear on the business gains you plan to achieve. Are you competing for top talent? Trying to reduce the costs of hiring new people? Ernst & Young (E&Y) was specifically addressing the retention of women who were leaving the firm faster than men did. Now, 10 years later, flexibility is among several factors that have helped E&Y retain women and men at the same rate. Make sure that you know what you want to achieve and, if possible, put metrics into place to measure your success in making change.

Involve top and middle management. Involve your top people from the start, and communicate the business gains you expect. If they have reservations, respond by offering to try a pilot first and then assess its impact on business gains. Top leaders always want to learn what other competitors are doing, so share the stories from these pages or from other companies they respect. It is possible that you will meet resistance from top management because they feel overworked. You may need to help them try out more flexibility in their own lives.

You also need to involve middle managers in the change process. Beginning with a pilot using managers who want to experiment may be the best way to begin. Then you can let the success stories spread, manager to manager.

Find out what aspects of flexibility employees value most. It is important not to try to solve a problem unless you are clear about what the exact problem is. Intel recommends bringing together small groups of people for informal discussions and asking them what kinds of flexibility they need. Typically, employees describe needing flexibility when emergencies arise, such as a sick child or the need to take an elderly parent to the doctor.

Define flexibility as working for both the employee and the employer. The definition of flexibility that *When Work Works* uses is that flexibility has to benefit *both* the employee and the employer. You need to establish this definition right from the beginning. Ask employees how having flexibility will maintain or improve business results and make sure that the employees know that they are accountable for these results. Include in the discussion how the employees will ensure that work gets done on time and that deadlines are met. Are they willing to come in earlier? Work from home at times? Setting the stage with this dual perspective will help make sure that flexibility helps both your organization and your employees.

Keep scheduling simple. Managers in many flexible organizations sometimes let their employees plot out their schedules for a stated period of time—every month, for example, or every quarter. Using a big calendar, staff members work among themselves to commit to specific days and hours, ensuring full coverage. As the Government Accountability Office finds, employees place great value on these arrangements and make them work.

Build flexibility into the assembly line. Intel's success hinges on big factories running 24 hours a day, with highly sophisticated and expensive equipment operating at full capacity. The organization nonetheless gives its people on the shop floor opportunities for flexibility—the ability to work four 10-hour days, for example, and then get three days off. Unexpected needs for time off can be harder to manage, but employees in a pinch can generally find colleagues able to substitute for them.

Put your technology to work. Most employers use a fraction of the technology they have on hand. The Puget Sound Center for Learning is an exception, fully exploiting their telephone, computer and e-mail systems in ways that allow all the organization's people to remain in immediate touch whether they're in the office, at a relative's bedside or waiting for a flight in an airport. Many employees joined the organization with little knowledge of some of these tools, but when they understand their importance to workplace flexibility, they learn quickly.

Communicate about flexibility. Put information about flexibility on your internal Web site if you have one. Talk about flexibility in meetings and generally integrate the message into whatever communications you use in your organization.

Create a culture of flexibility. This is where the rubber meets the road: an organization can have many programs and policies on the books, but be inflexible and, conversely, have few written policies but be very flexible. Companies create a culture of flexibility by having their top leaders speak out about flexibility, by including questions on flexibility on organizational surveys and rewarding those who manage it best, as First Tennessee does, and by having an ombudsperson for managers or employees to go to if they can't find a win-win in implementing flexibility—this person can work with them to resolve this situation.

Ensure that managers who use flexibility well are recognized and rewarded. Sloan Award winners recognize when managers who manage flexibility are spotlighted, recognized, and rewarded financially, that they will create the kind of flexibility that works for both the employer and the employees.