

LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: SCHEDULING FLEXIBILITY

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using background research, information from Phase I of the Labour Market Dialogues and a focus group with 8 local employers, the project focused on how various barriers to employment affect a person's work schedule.

Why allow flexible schedules?

Flexibility provides an important competitive edge and benefit in today's labour market. There is solid evidence that it helps employers to increase recruitment, retention and productivity and decrease absenteeism¹.

In a survey of over 10,000 small businesses, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) found that the majority were providing at least a little workplace flexibility. Small businesses in the survey were most able to practice flexibility in vacation time scheduling and giving time off to deal with personal issues. Almost half of the employers said they prefer to deal with requests for flexibility "as they arise." Small businesses that did not offer flexibility stated that the main reason was type of business (73%) such as those involving face-to-face interaction or that require being in a specific location².

The benefits of providing flexibility include: increased productivity, improved morale, savings on overtime, increased retention and referrals of new employees. This practice can allow employers to meet business demands with flexible labour and production, and can benefit both employer and employee³.

However, offering flexibility in scheduling can be time-consuming. It can be difficult to be fair and consistent with all employees and some people may take advantage of this practice. Not all jobs are able to offer flexibility.

Some of the employees who need flexibility have deeply rooted barriers to employment. Employers have greater difficulty employing people with deeply rooted barriers, expressing

concern about trust, reliability, public perception and morale of coworkers.

Who needs flexibility, and why?

Lower wage workers are more at risk to burnout due to "the nature of their jobs, limited access to time off and often greater work-life demand"⁴. These workers also have smaller budgets available to manage complications in child care, transportation, housing and other challenges that face low-income individuals and families.

Employers often are not aware of scheduling challenges faced by their employees, which can be various. The following lists are a range of reasons employees need flexible scheduling, including on-the-job, transition and periodic issues.

On the job issues –ongoing issues that need to be addressed with either flexibility for start and stop times or an alternative work schedule. For example:

- Child care –especially for shift hours, split shifts, weekend or shifting work hours/start/end times
- Personal preference for hours of work and number of hours
- Hours of availability of public transportation
- Time for educational training: skill development, GED, literacy or ESL
- Probation meetings which can be ongoing, and probation officers who may call unscheduled, mandatory meetings
- Shift work or some schedules can be physically or emotionally hard on a person.

Transition issues –temporary issues while an employee adjusts to being back in the work

force and becoming financially independent.

For example:

- Adjusting to length of work shift or week can be very tiring and may require shorter shifts or shorter work week in the beginning
- Time management can be difficult for people who are getting used to working again
- Mental health and physical health conditions including depression, schizophrenia, FAS, physical relapse for illnesses like hepatitis C or diabetes where low blood sugar can make it hard to work to full-time or for extended periods.

Periodic issues—issues that need to be addressed with “as needed” solutions but are repeated due to the nature of the issue. For example:

- High number of medical, psychologist or physiotherapy appointments
- Legal issues that require time in court
- Drug or alcohol treatment program meetings and/or a need for unscheduled support meetings if a person has been under stress, as well as appointments at pharmacy for methadone injection
- Personal illness or family member illness that has acute symptoms or relapses that require time off.

Recommendations

There are a number of opportunities and incentives for employers to create jobs with scheduling options, and promote them among people looking for flexible schedules:

- Create a \$500/month job for people with disabilities or other barriers, who are permitted to earn up to that amount without affecting their benefits
- Create casual work opportunities for people with temporary needs
- Promote night jobs to people who take classes in the day or are looking for full time work in the day
- Create “first job” opportunities for people trying to work and get off of streets and integrate life and work skills such as budgeting, time management, dressing for work, etc.
- Advertise training, skill development and advancement opportunities, especially for women and people with barriers.

Employment agencies can play a role in arranging an alternative work schedule or for flexibility on behalf of a person with barriers entering a job, as this requires good communication skills and can be intimidating to bring up when trying to compete with others to win a position.

Employers could be supported by a service which assesses their jobs and creates schedules and flexibility strategies targeted to accessing new pools of labour facing barriers to work.

Some flexibility strategies for employers include:

- Accept schedule changes with notice
- Accept shift swapping and requests for desired shifts (sometimes this is done by bids)
- Prepare schedules in advance and give advance notice of schedule changes
- Devise scheduling systems that workers can access and allow for self-scheduling at identified busy times
- Allow employees to use vacation time in days rather than weeks to deal with periodic or short term leave
- Create sick leave banks to use for own or family members’ personal medical appointments and illnesses
- Be open to need for unpaid short term and long term personal leave, sometimes periodically and with short notice
- Cross-train staff and/or use temporary employees to better accommodate absences or increases in work flows
- Give employees more control over how work is accomplished
- Allow part-time schedules, voluntarily reduced time and salary, or job sharing opportunities
- Allow telecommuting or work from home
- Grant flex-time or flex-weeks – daily variation of work time around core hours; this can include using banked time off for extra hours worked.

More venues should be created for employers to share successful strategies for scheduling flexibility.

More research may be needed into employers' perceptions about the need to "earn" perks like flexibility.

¹ "The Business Case for Work-Life Balance," HRSDC, http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/lp/spila/wlb/16benefits_costs_businesscase.shtml <accessed June 19, 2007>.

² "Majority of small firms offer flexible work practices; Better employee relations result" (2004), www.cfib.ca/en/media/releases04/nat090804_e.asp <accessed July 17, 2007>

³ "Flexible Work Schedules and Mental and Physical Health. A Study of a Working Population with Non-Traditional Working Hours" (1999), M.F.J. Martens et al, *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 20(1).

⁴ Workplace Flexibility for Lower Wage Workers, Corporate Voices For Working Families (2006). This publication can be downloaded here: www.cvworkingfamilies.org/issues/publications.shtml <accessed July 31, 2007>.

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