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Workplace flexibility revives employees, in and out of the office

- Story Highlights
- Employer programs help employees balance work and home life
- Alternative work schedules don't require nine-to-five hours
- Most employees are guaranteed by law up to 12 weeks of leave
- Part-time, job-sharing and telework give more hours outside the office

(CNN) -- Juggling work, family, friends and community may seem sometimes like an impossible task. A flexible work schedule may be one solution to a better work-life balance.

In 2004 nearly 30 percent of the full-time and salaried work force was taking advantage of flexible work schedules, according to government figures.

Take a look at a few of the options and some real world examples that have been recognized with business excellence awards by the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit research group.

Alternative work schedules: Alternative work schedules can be used to accommodate everything from avoiding peak traffic to facilitating childcare. They include two types: flexible (not the traditional eight-hour days, but totaling 40 hours a week) or compressed (completing 80 hours worth of work in less than 10 days.)

In the real world: The nature of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) in Seattle, Washington, is not 9 to 5. The GAO staff work on a variety of issues for Congress, spanning time zones. That means it's possible for people to be working from 6 a.m. through 7 p.m. or later in order to provide information for their colleagues in Washington, D.C.

The Seattle GAO employees work 80 hours every two weeks, but have a personalized schedule that they confirm with their manager, according to the Families and Work Institute. Some employees work compressed schedules, where they take every fifth or 10th day off, and others, for example, take the mornings off and work into the evening. To offset the potential chaos of employees working myriad schedules, managers usually require their staff to be at the office at the same time at least once a week.

Leave Programs: Leave programs ensure job security after a prolonged absence. Generally, leave programs are not paid and can include leaves for medical issues, natural disaster and military reasons. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 guarantees most employees up to 12 weeks of leave for birth, adoption, care of a sick family member or a serious health condition.

In the real world: Microchip industry giant Intel Corporation offers its employees a generous leave policy. At the Chandler, Arizona, facility, every seven years employees are given a paid two-month leave, with their job safely held for their return.

Another program at Intel recognized by the Family and Work Institute is designed to take care of emergency leaves. It is an hours-earned policy. All non-salaried employees accumulate six hours off for every month they work, which they can tap into for unexpected needs, from dealing with a flooded basement to visiting the doctor.

Part time and job sharing: Some employees may want to work fewer than 40 hours a week (part time) because of their family's care requirements, education goals or a phased retirement. Job sharing entails two or more part-time employees filling a position that needs to be occupied full time.

In the real world: At the Boys & Girls Clubs of Long Beach, California, three-quarters of the employees are college students who work part time. The part-time employees allow for greater flexibility and coverage for the organization, which works with thousands of children at all hours of the day. Previously, the group hired only people able to work five hours a day, but the change in part-time policy has resulted in a stronger workforce, according to the Families and Work Institute.

Telework: Telework allows employees to work from home or a convenient satellite location instead of their company's main office. Teleworking helps decrease traffic congestion, boosts employee moral and productivity and helps employers minimize real estate costs. It is a boon for people with disabilities seeking employment, because it meets the Americans with Disabilities Act requirement for reasonable accommodation.

In the real world: At the insurance brokerage company NRG::SEATTLE, employees are encouraged to work at home one day every week so they can concentrate better and recharge their spirits. The result is little turnover and a higher attraction for recruiting employees who are full of energy at work.

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