

Flexible Work Arrangements: Stories from the Field

Creating more flexible work arrangements is one way to better attract and retain talented leaders and managers. Balancing work and personal life has become a pressing challenge in society today, and the ability to create work schedules that accommodate this challenge is an extremely attractive proposition for potential employees.

We talked with both employers and employees who have experience with flexible work options to learn more about their thoughts on this topic, and how such arrangements have worked for them personally.

Michelle Volpe, Senior Lender, Boston Community Capital

I have been working at Boston Community Capital (BCC) for 11 years—ten of those in a part-time capacity. I joined the organization as a full-time employee in 1995, after four years in BayBank's nonprofit lending division. When I had my first child a year later, I shifted to a significantly reduced schedule, working from 9:30 to 12:30 every day, so that I could spend every afternoon with my son. Over time (and two additional children later) I have shifted my hours so that I'm working closer to 80 percent, but still on a very flexible schedule.

BCC's flexibility and willingness to accommodate my needs has made me incredibly loyal to the organization. Part of what made this arrangement work for me is that the work of a lender naturally accommodates a part-time schedule, as you can adjust the number and type of loans you take on at any point in time to make the balance work. And the fact that technology has evolved to a point where I can work very productively from home has made this even easier.

The part-time arrangement worked for the organization as well, although I know it was tough at times. They were willing to make this happen in large part because the culture of the organization was and continues to be very supportive of flexibility—several staff members work either part-time and/or from home several days a week. This flexibility allows BCC to attract and retain talented people. People here know we get measured on the quality of our work, not just the hours we've logged. And at the end of the day (sometimes literally at the end of the day, after the kids have gone to bed or the community meeting has ended), we work harder and better because of it. BCC recognizes that by offering its employees flexible work arrangements, it actually gets more out of us not less—in terms of the caliber of people it can attract, the quality of work we produce, and our loyalty to the organization. It's certainly true for me.

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
P 617 572-2833
F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor
New York, NY 10036
P 646 562-8900
F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
P 415 627-1100
F 415 627-4575

Phyllis Segal, Senior Fellow, Civic Ventures

Civic Ventures works to inspire organizations to meet pressing needs by tapping into the growing resource of older adults interested in work for the greater good. Capturing this experience dividend will provide a triple win—strengthening these organizations by filling labor needs and increasing effectiveness, strengthening communities by meeting increased needs with additional human resources, and strengthening society by making full use of human talent to solve social problems.

This fall, Civic Ventures will launch the MetLife Breakthrough Awards program to identify and showcase organizations that are creating new jobs, restructuring the workplace to incorporate more flexibility, and devising new pathways for adults over 50 to engage in meaningful and rewarding work.

There is ample evidence that flexible work arrangements are critically important to baby boomers as they move from midlife careers to a new stage of work. This generational impetus has the potential to set in motion a new dynamic in the flexible work debate. Our goal is to shift the focus of the debate over flexible-work arrangements away from the “mommy track” discussion that has sidelined it until now. Instead, a broader-based interest in, and demand for, work-life balance will prompt a realization that more flexible work arrangements can contribute to more organizational success. Eventually, this realization will spur the growth of flexible career options in all sectors, for all ages.

Lisa Schorr, former Executive Director of Project HEALTH

We were looking for a really high-level, experienced person who could oversee all of Project HEALTH's fundraising streams. As we went through the recruiting process, we found that we didn't have the ability to pay for a full-time salary for the kind of person we needed.

On the other hand, what we had going for us was flexibility. Since our staff of then six was spread out over four cities, we were experienced in working together virtually. I knew that there would be a lot of proposal writing, and that didn't necessarily need to happen 9-to-5. Furthermore, though there was a ton of work to do, the position was new, so even if we couldn't get someone to work 40-50 hours a week, whatever time the person could give us would be more than we had before.

The candidate we eventually hired was an absolute stand-out: in addition to his wide-ranging fundraising experience, he had a great background in social justice work, a Harvard MD—which gave him huge credibility with a lot of the audiences we were interested in—and a great understanding of what we were trying to do as an organization. Also, because he wanted a job that was compatible with his family commitments, he was willing to be flexible about some things like working without the kind of support staff that a person with his skills would normally have.

When it became clear that the fit was good, he and I had some very candid conversations about what we could do and what he needed. Thanks to some creative thinking on both sides and the excellent rapport between us, we were able to come up with a solution that worked for everyone. We hired him at 90 percent of full time, and his schedule was completely in his hands, as long as he was able to be present for major meetings. I would say the arrangement worked exceptionally well for everyone.

Nora Bloch and Sarah Kitterman, Community Development Banking, Wainwright Bank

Nora: I joined Wainwright in 2001 as a Community Development Banker, and when I got pregnant in 2002, we needed to figure out a way to cover my portfolio while I was on maternity leave. It just so happened that my boss had been talking with Sarah on and off about part-time opportunities in our group, and thought that we could hire her to fill in for me during my leave, and then figure out other opportunities over time.

Sarah: We can't really remember whose idea it was first, but as we started to work together to prepare for the transition, and as Nora started to feel that she wanted to work part-time after her leave, the idea of a job share began to take shape.

Nora: The way we structure it is that each of us works three days a week, and we overlap face-to-face on Wednesdays. Rather than split up our lending portfolio, we are jointly responsible for all of our customers. We're both up to speed on every deal, and this way when a customer needs something, they know they can get it from either of us, no matter which day of the week it is.

Sarah: It helped a lot, I think, that I was here covering while Nora was on leave, because I had to get to know all the customers and all the deals, so by the time she came back they were comfortable talking with me as well as with Nora.

Nora: This job share has been a blessing. It's 100 percent coverage for our customers, and there's real comfort among them in asking for either of us. And for us, we really don't work on our days off, because we know the other one is there to cover. Working a part-time job alone would be much more stressful. There's always some emergency that pops up on the day you're not working, and I've heard friends who work part-time talk about scrambling to manage this. But for us, if there's an emergency, there's always one of us in the office, so the other doesn't have to go into crisis mode.

Sarah: Plus we can go on vacation and not leave customers hanging for a week! There are other benefits for our customers too. We are much more creative and innovative as a pair than we are individually, and

we do some of the most creative and complex deals at the bank. We also have better institutional memory, because what one of us forgets the other usually remembers.

Nora: And we've been able to continue our career trajectory, do interesting deals and grow our responsibilities over time. We're in lockstep to one another of course, but I've never felt that I've been "mommy-tracked" at all.

Sarah: We really lucked out, in that our personality fit was so good, partly because our backgrounds are similar (we both did the Bank Boston training program before Wainwright) and partly because we just have similar styles. We also communicate very well, and try to check in briefly every day, whether by phone or email. The communication is key.

Nora: And we both have a healthy sense of guilt, in that we don't want to leave the other person hanging or let her down. Plus our manager was extremely supportive of us, and really invested in making this work.

Sarah: And most importantly, we back each other up 100 percent. We're very careful about this. People try to play us off one another, and it just won't work. We're a team, a united front.

Nora: I'd imagine this type of job-share could be difficult, if you had the wrong fit or didn't go into it with full buy-in, but for us it has been amazingly, miraculously painless! I can't imagine doing this job any other way at this point.

David Simms, Managing Partner, Bridgestar

At Bridgestar, a significant percentage of our people work a variety of flexible arrangements—including about half of our senior leadership team. We have people who work "virtually" from home; people who work very flexible part-time arrangements; people who work on a contract basis; even people who work on a seasonal basis.

By being so flexible, we have been able to recruit extremely talented people to our ranks whom we would not otherwise have been able to attract, and they have made tremendous contributions to building our success. Especially as a nonprofit start-up, we had a clear need for targeted skills and expertise—for example, in HR, in marketing, in technology, and in knowledge creation—and yet frequently didn't have enough work to keep a seasoned full-time person busy in those roles. Our willingness to offer part-time roles helped us get talented, highly experienced and sophisticated people, while only paying for the amount of capacity we needed.

We have found several keys to making this constellation of talented individuals work. One is that we start by hiring highly-skilled, self-motivated people with the energy and drive to succeed. The second is that we work hard to clearly articulate roles, deliverables, and expectations on both ends. The third, and perhaps most important, is that we invest in making sure that everyone—even those who work only a day a week or almost 100 percent in a virtual office—feels connected to the organization, in terms of both mission and people. Without that sense of connection, our flexible work structure would not work.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.