

How to reap the benefits of flexible work time

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Flexible working time arrangements are becoming increasingly popular around the globe – but do they really work? In Europe, up to 40 per cent of employees may schedule their working hours at their discretion. This ‘flextime’ is thought to help meet ever-increasing job demands and strike a balance between work and life. Yet, researchers know surprisingly little about the circumstances in which flextime has the desired effects. Less is more, our findings reveal, suggesting that those who use flexible schedules only now and again might reap its benefits and avoid its turning into a hindrance.

Global competition, technological progress, and demographic change are driving up the job demands of the modern workplace. Add childcare needs and elderly parents to look after, and you will see why flexible working hours count as one way to help employees to juggle work and life while keeping up with job demands. And work-life balance is more than a mere feel-good matter. If work and life clash too much, they may not only bring down work satisfaction and job performance. They might also put satisfaction with marriage and family on the line, cause bodily symptoms, lead to substance abuse, and even depression.

Luckily, several studies suggest that being able to flexibly arrange working hours is beneficial for well-being, health, work–life balance, as well as job performance and job satisfaction, while keeping absenteeism low. More and more companies act on these findings and offer their employees flextime. Most employees no longer hold the traditional nine-to-five job. Instead, working time is increasingly flexible.

That said, having access to flexible time arrangements doesn’t mean everyone uses it to the same extent, let alone to the same extent every day. It needs active management. Should you establish a general routine when to start and finish your work and when to take breaks, or just ‘play it by ear’ every day? Should you take an extra work break to meet up with your spouse for coffee to get that conflict from last night out of the way? Should you stay at the office to finish a project at the price of not getting enough sleep? By using flextime people move around the boundaries they set around their work and private life and how they shield the work sphere is shielded from private hassles, or whether work matters are kept from spilling over into ‘the home zone’.

To date, there has been no clear way of telling how to best manage work time flexibility, but [our research](#) now sheds a brighter light onto how employees do it. Using one-off questionnaires, most research has taken a ‘snapshot’ of people’s flextime use.

What we did comes closer to ‘shooting a film’ of flextime management. We tracked employees’ use of their time on a daily basis for two weeks and looked at the effects on work-life boundaries and daily well-being. In two studies with 758 staffers from different types of companies we found that using flextime helped them ‘keep the office out’ of home in terms of stronger boundaries around one’s private life domain – and those stronger boundaries went with higher levels of emotional well-being. That uplifting effect even lasted into the next day.

More importantly, however, employees differed widely in how often they used flextime overall across the two weeks – and this clearly played a role in achieving their work goals. Occasionally they reported achieving more of their work goals than those did who used their flexible schedules to the fullest extent. It seems, therefore, that there might be too much of a good thing. Using flextime only occasionally when really needed, while keeping up regular working hours on most days, may be the golden strategy to reap the most benefits from flexible working time arrangements.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors’ paper [Help or Hindrance? Day-Level Relationships Between Flextime Use, Work–Nonwork Boundaries, and Affective Well-Being](#), *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(1): 67-87*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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