WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE

Harvard University: Flexible Work Policy

A conversation with **Nancy Costikyan, MSW, LICSW**, Director of the Office of Work/Life at Harvard University and Lecturer on Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

The Spotlight Series features best practices and key learnings from progressive organizations, as they re-imagine the workplace and the employee experience.

Describe the Office of Work/Life **at Harvard and your current priorities as the workplace and work models continue to evolve.**

My office serves 19,000 staff and faculty (as well as some student groups) and we have four main buckets, which I am beginning to think of as fountains that all spring from well-being: (1) Mental Health; (2) Flexwork, (3) Dependent Care and (4) Mindfulness. Obviously, flexwork has consumed much of our time as we forge our way to a widespread, hybrid work model, but the ongoing crises concerning child care and mental health are keeping me up at night.

You recently released a new Flexible Work Arrangements policy. Please describe the new policy and its guiding principles. How does it differ from what was in place before the pandemic?

Harvard first introduced a flexwork toolkit in 2005. As ad hoc flexibility became more widespread, we developed guidelines in 2012, then piloted team-based approaches among several departments across the University in 2017. Since COVID has provided us a proving-ground for flexwork as a potent business continuity strategy, we updated our policy to embed flexwork more broadly and permanently. The new policy ensures that all employees may propose flexwork arrangements, not just certain groups or individuals. We want to allow for new ways of working that up until now may not have been considered — or even imagined.

We think of the policy as the *platform* and the guidelines as the *scaffolding*, which ensure that both processes and outcomes are: (1) equitable, (2) without bias or favoritism, (3) job appropriate and driven by business needs, (4) net-neutral or net-positive in effect, (5) dynamic and responsive to change, and (6) documented for accountability and to inform larger institutional decisions. We continue to emphasize that proposals must be evaluated using an equitable process — but equitable does not mean the same or even similar outcome between two individuals.

Six Principles of Flexwork at Harvard

1. The process is equitable.
2. Decisions are without bias or favoritism.
3. Flexwork is job appropriate.
4. Flexwork has a net-neutral or net-positive effect.
5. Flexwork is responsive.
6. Approved flexwork arrangements should be documented.

These principles are intended to provide a conceptual foundation for best practices and common-sense decisions, where the nature of the work is the primary guide for when and where work is carried out.

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Harvard is a large, diverse, and decentralized organization and you recognize that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to flexwork. Can you share a few examples of different ways in which flexwork may be interpreted and utilized at Harvard?

There is a growing recognition that flexibility should not be a benefit for the lucky few, but beneficial on both sides of the employee-employer equation. The business drivers behind flexwork have expanded to include more mutually empowering concepts like trust, inclusion and well-being. We expect that managers will learn how to have more frequent, authentic conversations with their teams about mutual needs and expectations and will leverage all available tools to ensure true inclusion (thank you, Zoom).

Anyone who parks cars, cooks meals, provides medical treatment, or works in a lab recognizes that their jobs cannot be performed remotely. But within that constraint, flexibility of *time* can enhance workflow, coverage, or personal resilience, among other things. We know that the majority of our remote-ready workforce prefers to work remotely off-campus 2-3 days per week going forward. Some of our teams plan to adopt an anchor/flex approach in which they commit to a common set of hours or days per week for planned collaboration — generally in person.

The current perspective of the Harvard Human Resources department is that the past 16 months have taught us that many jobs can be performed effectively from any location with the appropriate tools, good organization, flexible schedules, and frequent/timely communication between staff and managers.

How do you view the role of the manager in managing the workplace of the future?

We are saying directly that work/life must now be a core manager competency. We have increased our work/life and flex overviews so managers can understand, promote, and model use of these programs, which play roles in multiple institutional priorities. We work closely with the Center for Workplace Development (CWD), which has created a comprehensive toolkit called *Leading and Managing in a Hybrid Work Environment,* with additional resources and training on topics such as Addressing Burnout, Job and Readiness Assessment, and Managing and Measuring Flex. Both of our departments give guidance with less prescriptive/constraining language than before, aiming to empower local units and managers to develop local practices that are consistent and fair.

How will you evaluate what is working or not working in the coming months? Which challenges concern you the most?

There are still some people at various levels who need convincing that our "be flexible with flexibility" approach is right for Harvard. The university intends to use the next several months for iteration, experimentation and

Flexwork Basics

Communication
- Which approved technologies and tools will be used
- Accessibility/inclusivity
- Formal and informal communications
- Expectations and mutual accountability
- Evaluate communications success
- Guard against the signaling of constant work

Managing Teams
- Set expectations and measure performance outcomes
- Provide tools and resources to help managers

Measuring Success
- Set goals and timetables and define deliverables clearly
- Assess the quantity, quality, and timeliness of work
- Consider how the flexwork arrangement has affected stakeholders, streamlined processes, led to new opportunities, or helped meet overarching goals

Trial Periods and Reviews
- 30 days for new arrangements
- Reviewed at least annually

pilots. Measurement tools will vary and include an increase in pulse surveys. The university will be looking at data on everything from employee retention, gender-related trends, building occupancy needs, and, above all else, how to help our community stay safe in the context of the pandemic.

An important challenge will be to ensure that our technology and infrastructure can support new ways of working. Many of our buildings, some as old as 300 years, were not built with WiFi in mind, so there are still places on campus where connectivity can make inclusion of remote participants difficult. In order to administer COVID testing cadences and plan onsite work, we are establishing systems to know when our employees plan to be physically on campus. To ensure that Harvard meets certain legal obligations, we also need to know where people are when they are working but *not* on campus.

Do you have any key learnings from the past year? Have you seen new ways of working that might carry over to the new workplace?

Many of our local units have created inclusive, remote spaces for collaboration and even serendipitous encounters with promising results. Some have experimented with 45 minute online meetings plus 15 minutes for the kinds of casual conversation that occurs onsite just before or after a meeting takes place. One of our ERGs did a story slam with a pandemic theme, resulting in unexpected friendships and creative ideas to support collegial collaboration.

One large department collaborated with a Harvard-affiliated mindfulness center to design and conduct a 9-week Mindful Self-Compassion course as part of its DIB programming. The evidence-based course was launched pre-COVID and was sustained through Zoom. It demonstrated — through participant feedback and survey data — how mindful self-compassion can strengthen inclusion, belonging, and allyship by bringing awareness to patterns of exclusion, bias, and judgment of oneself and one's own story. Zoom was specifically called out as surprisingly effective, and we hope to incorporate that program into our University-wide series.

Your guidelines state, "Harvard will use flexwork as a dynamic tool both to discover and invent the workplace of the future." Do you have any predictions (or hopes) for what the workplace will look like in a year for Harvard employees? How might your workforce be working differently?

With early feedback from senior leadership, we developed the new guidelines as a platform for less prescriptive and more aspirational language at a time when we truly needed the unifying effect of shared aspiration. It takes a long time for that sort of unity to emerge, but I hope to see a broader embrace of these concepts and more improvements in the way we work and the way we *feel* about work. If we continue to have a "change mindset" and are intentional about creating a more human-centric workplace of the future, we can continue to surface blind spots and allow for new and effective ways of doing our mission-driven work. That, above all, is what got us through this crisis so far. I hope we will all remember that.

Key Takeaways

- Adopt and communicate a "change mindset" that views flexible work as a key component of re-imagining how work gets done.

- Provide broad guidelines that enable "local" discretion combined with clear accountability.

- Ensure decisions about flexibility are driven by a transparent and equitable process.

- Make work/life a core manager competency by providing adequate support, training and incentives.

- Document, pilot, evaluate, and adjust flexible work arrangements routinely.