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Workplace Flexibility

Various Reasons Support FWA Programs For State, Local Government Employees

State and local government employers that have adopted flexible work arrangements for one reason often continue those programs because they have benefits in other areas, speakers said Dec. 1 at an event in Washington, D.C., hosted by the New America Foundation.

Martin Simon, program director for Workforce Development in the Economic, Human Services & Workforce Division of the National Governors Association, said that workplace flexibility is "one method that we're seeing an interest growing across the states in helping to attract and retain a skilled and knowledgeable workforce." Public sector employers often cannot compete with the private sector in terms of salaries, so there must be other incentives, he said.

Simon noted, however, that the "entry point" for a flexible work arrangement may not be the sole reason for continuing one.

In Arizona, for example, a workplace flexibility program was started as an environmental improvement effort, but the state saw a 10 percent boost in productivity as well as expanded recruitment opportunities, he said. Workplace flexibility programs there include moving the health care cost containment system to "virtual offices" so that all employees work from home, as well as a program allowing employees to work reduced hours and collect unemployment insurance to make up the difference in pay.

'Aging and Shrinking Workforce.'

Simon noted that states are facing "an aging and shrinking workforce." Not only is the public sector workforce older than the private sector workforce—an average age of 44 versus 40—but states also are undergoing budget-cutting measures such as employee layoffs and furloughs, he said.

"States now have to be much leaner, they have to deal with a multi-generational workforce," making it more important "to streamline and modernize their business practices," including making greater use of flexible work arrangements, Simon said.

Patricia Kempthorne, founder and executive director of the Twiga Foundation—which, according to its website, is "dedicated to being a voice for family consciousness to strengthen each individual's commitment to themselves, their family, their work-life and their community"—said that the organization's workplace flexibility project started because of concern over the aging public sector workforce, even before the economic crisis began.

Kempthorne said that the foundation defines workplace flexibility as "the dynamic relationship between employers and employees that defines how, when, and where work gets done and how careers are organized in ways that work for both." Because flexible work arrangements encompass different elements—such as telework, work hours, and shift starting and ending times—she said that the definition should focus on the relationship creating that flexibility.

"We had to get away from the idea that it was a perk; we had to look at it as a management strategy for the public sector workforce because of the issues that were coming up," Kempthorne noted, adding that "we discovered that win-win-win is really there."

Workplace flexibility, she said, is a win for employers because of increased productivity and decreased overtime and leave usage, a win for employees because of increased job satisfaction and decreased travel time, and a win for the community because of the environmental benefits and extended service

hours.

Success in Utah

She praised the benefits in Utah from having most state employees work 10 hour days for four days per week, calling it "a wonderful story" because it was started as a pilot program but continued through two gubernatorial administrations because of widespread support. While the program did not significantly reduce energy costs—the basis for the pilot project—Kempthorne said that it has resulted in greater customer satisfaction, "which is really the role of the public servants in the state."

She noted that employers developing workplace flexibility programs need to look at the long-term benefits, which might require up-front implementation costs but could save money over time.

"You can't afford not to think about some of this stuff," Marcy Karin, an associate clinical professor of law and director of the Work-Life Policy Unit at Arizona State University, added. "The government can't go out of business," so "you have to make this work" in order to ensure that state and local governments can attract and retain employees, she said.

Kempthorne noted that her foundation has developed five characteristics of what it calls "employers of choice": trust, teamwork, putting the employee first, renewal, and dual-centric.

In terms of renewal, she explained that employees cannot be expected to work constantly without a break, because "at some point it's all going to break down" and they will make mistakes. In addition, Kempthorne said that an individual who is not both work-centric and family-centric is "actually not going to be a good employee in the end," and that idea needs to be integrated into the workplace culture.

Changing the Culture

For instance, Kempthorne said, a federal manager attending the release of a Partnership for Public Service report on what college students are looking for in an employer (47 GERR 61, 1/20/09)—which revealed that the number one criterion is work/life balance and workplace flexibility—asked why he would want to hire someone with those priorities.

"We've got to make sure that this is integrated into the employment opportunities, federal, state, or local in the public sector, or we're not going to be pulling in the best people as employees," Kempthorne stressed. Employees also need to be consulted as to what types of flexibility work for them, because not everyone "is going to use the same flexibility in the same way," she said.

In addition, Kempthorne said that younger employees who are demanding workplace flexibility also are helping the older workers, who may want flexible work arrangements but are more hesitant to ask.

Arizona, Michigan as Examples

Karin said that she and some of her students took a close look at Arizona and Michigan to study their workplace flexibility programs and how they are working. "Aging demographics really hit these two states very seriously," she noted.

"Arizona is very big on telework," Karin said, noting that telework has been an option for state employees since the late 1980s as part of a plan to reduce traffic. She said that the state provides individual agencies discretion over whether or not to permit flexible work arrangements, and each agency must approve the arrangement and state that the agency's objectives still can be met before it is permitted.

Simon noted the importance of a "strong leadership role" in promoting workplace flexibility, and Karin said that Arizona's program has been maintained with a "significant and continuous push from various governors" through a series of executive orders.

As in Arizona, Karin said that Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm (D) has "done a lot" to promote workplace flexibility in the state despite the fact that state employees' flexible work arrangements largely derive from the seven collective bargaining agreements that cover about 72 percent of state workers.

Karin explained that the concept of FWAs arose some three decades ago when the union representing state lake inspectors bargained for changes to their work hours so that, for safety reasons, they only

would have to work outside during daylight.

Simon said that leadership has been critical in Michigan because workplace flexibility programs were not being implemented consistently, "and that created some friction among employees."

Noting that the focus of the discussion had been on state employers, Karin also mentioned the "4 for Mesa" program in Mesa, Ariz., under which city offices are open from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday and closed on Fridays, with the exception of certain "essential services" such as police, fire, and garbage collection. The program appears to be working and is viewed positively both by employees and the general public, she said.

Karin said that there were four main results from her examination of workplace flexibility: (1) flexibility benefits employers, employees, and the community; (2) it helps the government respond to problems as they arise; (3) successful model flexibility programs exist and can be replicated; and (4) leadership is a "critical component."

By Laura D. Francis

More information and a webcast of the event are available at http://workforce.newamerica.net/events/2010/leading_by_example.

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