

**Employee Retention**

## **5 Myths About Flexible Work**

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**Summary.** When it comes to flexibility, executives are often worried that they'll open Pandora's box and set a dangerous precedent if they allow some employees to work flexibly. They worry that if they let a few employees work from home, then the office will always be empty... [more](#)

“Flexibility might be great in theory, but it just doesn’t work for us.”

We have literally heard this statement hundreds of times over the years. It doesn’t matter what industry we’re talking about — whether it’s tech, government, finance, healthcare, or small business, we’ve

heard it. There's always someone who works from the premise that "there's no way flexible work policies can work in our organization."

In reality, flexible work policies can work in *any* industry. The last twelve months of the pandemic have proven this. In fact, a recent Harvard Business School Online study showed that most professionals have excelled in their jobs while working from home, and 81% either don't want to go back to the office or would choose a hybrid schedule post-pandemic. It's important to recognize, however, that flexibility doesn't always look the same — one size definitely does not fit all.

## **The Myth of the Five C's**

You may be wondering, "If you can recruit the best candidates, increase your retention rates, improve your profits, and advance innovation by incorporating a relatively simple and inexpensive initiative, then why haven't more organizations developed flex policies?" This question will be even harder for organizations to ignore after we've experienced such a critical test case during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We believe fear has created stumbling blocks for many organizations when it comes to flexibility. Companies either become frozen by fear or they become focused by fear. It is focus that can help companies pivot during challenging times. In the years that we've been working with companies on flexibility, we've heard countless excuses and myths for why they have not implemented a flex policy. In fact, the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance has boiled these myths down to the fear of losing the 5 C's:

1. Loss of control
2. Loss of culture
3. Loss of collaboration
4. Loss of contribution
5. Loss of connection

## **Addressing the Fears**

## **Myth #1: Loss of Control**

Executives are often worried that they'll open Pandora's box and set a dangerous precedent if they allow some employees to work flexibly. They worry that if they let a few employees work from home, then the office will always be empty and no one will be working. The answer to this is *structure* and *clarity*. We can virtually guarantee that any organization that correctly designs and implements their flexibility policy will not lose anything.

To maintain control and smooth operation of your organization, it's imperative that you set standards and clearly communicate them. Organizations should provide clear guidelines on the types of flexibility offered (for example, remote work, reduced hours, asynchronous schedules, job sharing and/or compressed work weeks) and create a centralized approval process for flexibility to ensure that the system is equitable. It is also helpful to have a calendar system for tracking when and where each team member is working. You must also commit to training everyone on these standards — from those working a flexible schedule, to those supervising them, to all other coworkers. Education and training will help your team avoid “flex stigma,” where employees are disadvantaged or viewed as less committed due to their flexibility. Training can also help organizations to ensure that successful systems and structures that support flexibility are maintained.

## **Myth #2: Loss of Culture**

While you may not see every employee every day, and you may not be able to have lunch with people every day, culture does not have to suffer with a flexible work initiative. However, it is essential that teams meet either in person or via video conference on a regular basis. At the Alliance, we recommend that companies and firms first define what culture means to their individual organization and then determine how they might maintain this culture in a hybrid or virtual environment.

Many organizations with whom we've worked reported that they found creative ways to maintain culture during months of remote working during the pandemic. Many Alliance members organized social functions like virtual exercise classes, cooking classes, happy hours, and team-building exercises to maintain community. Additionally, it's important to take advantage of the days when everyone is physically present to develop relationships, participate in events, and spend one-to-one time with colleagues.

### **Myth # 3: Loss of Collaboration**

As long as teams that are working a flexible schedule commit to regular meetings and consistent communication, then collaboration will not be compromised. It's important for all team members to maintain contact (even if it's online), keep tabs on all projects, and be responsive to emails and phone calls. We always recommend that remote teams also meet in person occasionally to maintain personal contact and relationships. For collaboration to be successful, remote employees must not be held to a higher standard than those working in the office. Additionally, technology should be used to enhance collaboration. For example, when companies are bringing teams together for brainstorming sessions, virtual breakout rooms can facilitate small group collaboration and help to ensure that all voices are heard. Some organizational leaders have also incorporated regular virtual office hours for unscheduled feedback and informal collaboration.

### **Myth #4: Loss of Contribution**

We have often heard leaders say: "If employees are not physically at their desks in the office, then how will we know that they're actually working?" But with endless distractions available on computers these days (from online shopping, to Instagram, to Facebook, etc.) you really don't know what your employees are doing at their desks, even if they are in the office. In fact, they could be searching for a new job (that offers flexibility!) right before your eyes. It's important to clearly communicate what is expected of each individual and trust that they

will complete the job within the expected timeframe. All employees should be evaluated on the quality of their work and their ability to meet clearly defined performance objectives, rather than on time spent in the office.

### **Myth #5: Loss of Connection**

Technology now enables people to connect at any time of the day in almost any location. Meetings can be held through a myriad of video conferencing applications. Additionally, calendar-sharing apps can help to coordinate team schedules and assist with knowing the availability of team members. Even networking events can now be done virtually. For example, one of our team members created a system for scheduling informal virtual coffee chats between partners and associates to maintain opportunities for networking and mentoring during the pandemic.

It's important to know what your employees and stakeholders prefer in terms of in-person, hybrid, or virtual-only connection. In a recent survey conducted by BNI of over 2,300 people from around the world, the networking organization asked the participants if they would like their meetings to be: 1) in-person only, 2) online only, or 3) a blend of online and in-person meetings. One third of the participants surveyed said that they wanted to go back completely to in-person meetings. However, 16% wanted to stick with online meetings only, and almost 51% of the survey respondents were in favor of a blend of meeting both in-person and online. This is a substantial transition from the organizational practice prior to the pandemic, with a full two-thirds of the organization saying that they would prefer some aspect of online meetings to be the norm in the future.

A recent 2021 KPMG CEO Outlook Pulse Survey found that almost half of the CEOs of major corporations around the world do not expect to see a return to “normal” this year. Perhaps a silver lining of the pandemic will be that corporate leaders have overcome their fears

of the 5C's and will now understand how flexibility can benefit their recruitment and retention efforts — not to mention productivity and profitability.

## MM

**Manar Morales** serves as President & CEO of the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance, a think tank that collaborates with organizations to develop non-stigmatized flexible work policies that promote inclusive work cultures and help to advance more women into leadership positions. The Alliance provides practical research-based solutions, training workshops, and strategic advisory services that increase organizational effectiveness through diversity and flexibility.

## IM

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