



DEEP DIVE

Flexibility offers caregivers a way to work amid COVID-19

The solution is difficult to implement in some settings, however, which raises questions about access and equity.

By Katie Clarey

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When schools, day cares and other institutions shuttered in response to the coronavirus, workers' caregiving duties exploded. Spring passed. Summer is almost over. And now, with the school year beginning, many workers are seeing their care conundrum go unresolved.

"The reality is parents and caregivers have been doing this now for five months, and they're throwing in the towel," Initialized Capital Partner Katelin Holloway said. "With school closures continuing into the fall, they can do the sprint but they can't do the marathon."

This leaves parents and other caregivers with a choice, said Holloway, who previously served as Reddit's VP of people and culture. They can expand the circle of people with whom their families interact, securing in-person care and educational services, or they can quit their jobs. That choice creates a tremendous burden, Holloway said.

The institutions employing caregivers inherit this problem. As the novel coronavirus made its way into the U.S., real estate and rental marketplace Zillow grappled with how to respond to the situation and all its ramifications both from a customer and employee perspective. "Like everyone, we faced a tremendous challenge,"

Zillow VP of Organizational Operations Meghan Reibstein said. "It was almost the unthinkable happening all around us." From the beginning, as school and day care closures marked the virus' stateside arrival, Zillow included caregivers in its response.

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Katelin Holloway
Initialized Capital Partner

Zillow turned to flexibility, a strategy many employers tapped to enable parents and other caregivers to work. It is no simple task to introduce flexibility to established workflows. The concept, however, applies more naturally to a professional workforce, sources told HR Dive. It is more difficult to implement for shift workers who must work on site, which gives rise to questions of equity.

Where flexible work is able to thrive, it may bring lasting change that could benefit both workers and employers.

To find flexibility, listen

Many employers are struggling to resolve the issues the pandemic has created for caregiving employees, Deluxe Corporation Chief Communication and Human Resources Officer Jane Elliott said. But a common strategy has emerged: flexibility. Holloway and Reibstein made similar observations, and their respective employers have implemented such practices.

Flexible work takes many forms, and specific practices emerge when employers listen to the needs of their caregiving employees. "Ask parents what they need," said Mikaela Kiner, founder and CEO of HR services provider Reverb. "You don't have to have the solution. You just have to be good at asking the questions."

Holloway suggested a similar approach, lobbying for employers to stage stay interviews. If employers proactively reach out and ask what caregivers need, they may find ways to support them "before anyone quits," Holloway said. "If we can do that and get ahead of it, we can weather the storm and hopefully retain some of these good parts when the care systems return."

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Mikaela Kiner
Founder and CEO, Reverb

Likewise, Deluxe Corporation, a business technology company, created an employee resources group for working parents. Elliott said she hopes the group will generate ideas Deluxe can use to support its members.

Flexibility meets predictability

Flexible work demands a highly individualized approach, Holloway pointed out. A schedule that works for one caregiving employee won't work for another. To implement flexibility, employers need to centralize and consolidate work, said Kiner.

To do this, employers may opt to record meetings. "If you tell a parent to have flexible work hours but to make sure to attend certain meetings, that may blow the entire thing up for them,"

Kiner said. The mother of two elementary-aged children may need to skip her 11 a.m. meeting to direct school activities. But if the meeting is recorded, she can log on when the kids are playing to catch up on what she missed.

Similarly, employers can enforce organized communications by making sure conversations about certain topics happen in one place, Kiner suggested. A business using Microsoft Teams, for example, may ask that all conversations about one project happen on Teams, rather than across its suite of communications tools. Similarly, all the information about the project can be stored there, too.

Such solutions create predictability — a key element of flexible work, Kiner said.

Benefits may also enable flexibility. Some employers are transitioning benefits the pandemic rendered at least temporarily useless — like commuter benefits — to support caregivers, Holloway said.

Zillow offers 15 days of backup childcare through Bright Horizons, in addition to 10 days of caregiver leave on top of PTO, sick leave and discretionary time off, Reibstein said. "It recognizes that being a caregiver right now is very difficult," she said.

The company is also examining reduced schedule programming with the mindset "that this is a particularly unusual time," Reibstein said. She said Zillow hopes flexibility will be enough to enable caregivers to work but recognizes it may not always suffice. "People have to have extra time off as a caregiver," Reibstein said, noting she doesn't know if or when such a policy will take shape. "We have to be having the conversation regularly about the balance of work and family life."

Communication enables flexibility

Flexible workplace practices will only work when they're defined and accessible — "not just for your caregivers, but for their peers and managers," Kiner said. In fact, it's impossible to over communicate when it comes to implementing flexible work, Elliott said. "Over communicating is key, and communicating in different mediums is key," she said.

Because of the individualized nature of flexibility, strong communication may require some coaching, as it depends on many parties making sure they understand each others' needs, Reibstein said.

Zillow encourages both managers and direct reports to communicate. Her team includes several workers with caregiving duties, and they've needed to clue each other in on their needs each week. "It's become a part of the dialogue in a beautiful kind of way despite the terrible situation that's brought it here," she said. "It's a more regular dialogue about what you need for your family life."

The challenge of shift work

It's easier to implement flexibility in a professional workforce, Elliott said. Generally, it doesn't matter where or when professional workers get their work done — it just matters that it's finished on time, she said. Hourly or shift workers need flexibility just as direly, but it's more difficult to achieve.

Two-thirds of Deluxe's workforce are hourly. Some work in a call center, selling Deluxe products and providing customer care. Many are engaged in production work across Deluxe plants.

When schools began to close in March, Deluxe pivoted quickly to flexibility. "We scattered shifts. We used to have two or three shifts. Now we have six or seven," Elliott said. "Nothing was

formalized — we did this quickly so our employees could have support. Now we are trying to formalize it so it's easy to maintain."

Deluxe dedicated a taskforce to devising flexibility among its hourly workforce. The company has explored job sharing, which has been "very helpful," Elliott said. "A lot of folks in plant life are familiar with doing multiple jobs," she noted.

As with any flexible measure, communication remains important, although strategies may differ for hourly workforces. Shift workers may only glance at their emails once per day, Elliott noted, while professional staff typically sit in front of their computers for hours. But many sites will have designated places where they post information. "That goes a long way," Elliott said. Still, changes to established processes — especially those that involve attendance rules — need to be communicated thoroughly.

Accessibility and flexible work

When workplaces began halting on-site operations in March, the Economic Policy Institute released findings that notably fewer Black or African American and Latino or Hispanic workers had access to remote work options compared to their Asian and White counterparts.

Sixteen percent of Hispanic or Latino workers and nearly 20% of Black or African American workers were able to work from home, according to its analysis of data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Meanwhile, 30% of White workers and 37% of Asian workers were enabled to telework, the report said. The same data, collected in 2017 and 2018, found that Hispanic or Latino workers were also less likely to have access to flexible schedules.

Similar trends are visible in BLS data about who holds roles in management, professional and related occupations, which may

have greater flexibility and access to remote accommodations. A 2018 analysis showed 54% of employed Asian workers were in management, professional and related occupations. Forty-one percent of employed White workers, 31% of employed Black or African American workers and 22% of employed Hispanic or Latino workers were in such roles.

More Asian and White workers work in management and professional occupations

% of employed people of each race/ethnicity in each occupation

White

Management, professional, and related	41%
Sales and office	22%
Service	16%
Production, transportation, and material moving	11%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	10%

Black or African American

Management, professional, and related	31%
Service	24%
Sales and office	22%
Production, transportation, and material moving	16%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	6%

Asian

Management, professional, and related	54%
Sales and office	17%
Service	17%
Production, transportation, and material moving	10%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	3%

Hispanic or Latino

Service	24%
Management, professional, and related	22%
Sales and office	21%

The possibility of lasting change

The flexibility employers introduce to caregiving employees during the pandemic may create lasting benefits for both parties, multiple sources said. "If we can retain some of this flexibility, I think there are long term gains here," Holloway said.

The push to incorporate flexibility embodied Zillow's corporate values, Reibstein said. "It's the welcome challenge of evolution,"

she said. "There are new normals and we can't go back to the way things were because this has been eye opening in so many dimensions." Zillow recently announced it will offer remote work options indefinitely, a policy that is intended to maximize the flexibility around work, Reibstein said.

Flexibility is one way employers can ensure workers are happy, healthy and engaged, especially amid the pandemic, Elliott noted. "There are a million studies that show if you've got an engaged workforce, they'll become a high-performing workforce," she said. "At Deluxe, we want a high-performing culture."

Despite flexible work and other solutions employers introduce, the pandemic may change workforce composition, Elliott said. She would not be surprised to see more workers making use of part-time options a year from now, nor would she be shocked to see more families transitioning to one income.

Still, employers have an incentive to respond to the caregiving employees who face tremendous challenges. "While it's not our responsibility as an employer to solve this, we need to lean in and up to help," Elliott said. "At the end of the day, our people are our most important aspect. I think most companies think that."

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly identified Jane Elliott's title. She serves as Deluxe Corporation's chief communications and human resources officer.

Clarification: In a previous version of this article, Deluxe Corporation was described inaccurately due to an editing error. Deluxe is a business technology company.