the essentials

The Guide to Field Guide to Flex Work

✳ Bloomfire

Strategies, guidance, and insights from leading brands on how businesses can adapt to—and ultimately thrive—to the new work norm.

| First Edition | Two-Thousand Twenty |

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work + life balance

The Future of Flex Work Is Here.

productive focus

The eight-hour workday has its roots in the Industrial Revolution and gained popularity when Henry Ford implemented eight-hour shifts in his factories in the 1920s. While there have been dramatic technological advancements that have transformed the workplace over the last century, the expectation that workers report to a physical location for eight hours (or longer) persisted well into the 21st century.

But that's now rapidly changing and giving rise to the new norm of flex work, a model that gives employees more flexibility to work, where, and how they can do their job most effectively.

Flex Work vs. Remote Work: What's the Difference?

There is some overlap between flex work and remote work, though there are notable differences that distinguish the two.

Remote work refers to the practice of working outside of a corporate office. It could mean working from

home, a coffee shop, a co-working space, or even working while traveling. Remote employees may work during a set of agreed-upon core business hours or they may have the freedom to set their own schedule.

Flex work is a model that gives workers flexibility in determining when and where they work. An employee might choose to work remotely part of the time—or even full time—in a flex work environment. Ideally, employees are able to help determine elements of the work environment and schedule that are most conducive to their productivity.

What is Flex Work?	A Helpful Tip

Flex work is a concept and new operating reality for businesses that are not constrained by any definitive physical workplace location. Businesses that adopt a flex work model are powered by a not-always-centralized workforce of employees who can successfully work when, where, and how they need.

flex working

Our New Business Reality

There are many reasons why it makes sense for businesses to embrace flex work:

- The majority of employees prefer flex work over the traditional office-based work model[1]
- Flex work allows employees to be more productive
- Businesses can reduce overhead costs
- Businesses aren't restricted to one geographic area when hiring employees
- Companies and organizations can avoid unplanned disruption to their business and operating continuity
- Communication and collaboration technologies make it easy for team members to connect with one another from anywhere
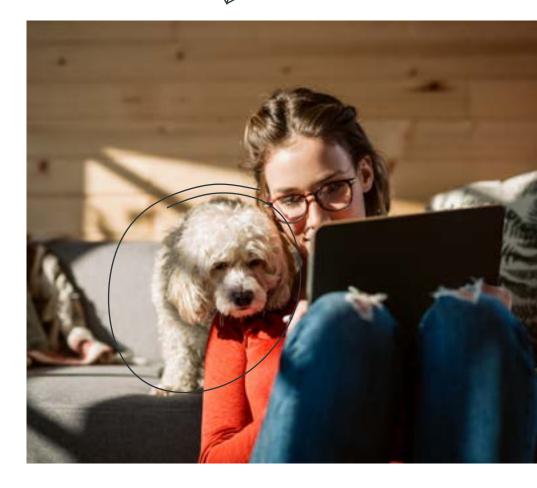
But even with the many compelling reasons to adopt a flex work model, much of the world didn't see a widespread working shift until the COVID-19 pandemic forced a significant portion of the workforce to begin working from home immediately. The pandemic not only forced many employees to work remotely, but it also led employers and their workers to embrace more flexible operations to accommodate and balance a broader range of responsibilities.
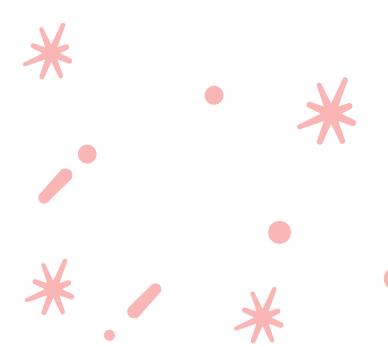
While the circumstances that drove many organizations to quickly adapt to flex work were unprecedented, they proved that the flex work model could be successful on a large scale. As a result, flex work is poised to become the new business reality for many organizations going forward.

Organizations that plan to embrace flex work long term have a greater responsibility than ever before to enable—and empower—decentralized teams to work productively. In this guide, we'll explore the essential considerations for organizations shifting to flex work and the key ingredients for success.

comfortable environments

The Realities of Flex Work: Benefits and Considerations

productivity

The notion of flex work has been building longer than most people realize. As early as 1967, a German aerospace company allowed employees to work on flex time—that is, working during a core set of hours but choosing their starting and stopping times to reduce traffic congestion, tardiness, and absenteeism.[2]

Even though flexible remote work began gaining traction with access to broadband, portable devices, and SaaS applications, widespread employer arrangements for flex work have remained relatively low. In 2016, 43 percent of Americans reported working from home occasionally.[3] In 2019, 90 percent of U.S. workers surveyed by Global Workplace Analytics said they'd like flex work arrangements, with the ability to work on collaborative tasks in an office and concentrative tasks at home.[4]

While the technology to enable flex work has become easily accessible, the status quo of the centralized workplace and stigmas about remote work productivity have held some organizations back from making flex work arrangements widely available.

However, the COVID-19 global pandemic dramatically accelerated the trajectory of flex work culture. Almost overnight, millions of employees globally began working from home out of necessity. 42 percent of Americans who did not telecommute previously quickly adapted to working remotely.[5] And while some experienced the natural growing pains of suddenly shifting to a new operating model, many also discovered benefits that made the new norm of flex work appealing.

The shift to remote work amidst the coronavirus pandemic, which some news outlets dubbed "the world's largest work-from-home experiment," caused many businesses to reconsider their policies around both remote and flex work as people sought out work-life balance. As Greg Caplan, CEO of work-travel company Remote Year, explained it: "Companies that don't allow remote work already are going to have to continue supporting it going forward, now that they have proven to themselves that it works."[6]

As companies continue to adapt and expand their flex work arrangements, both businesses and employees have opportunities to reap the benefits.

Benefits of Flex Work for Employees

One of the top benefits that today's job seeker is looking for is the ability to work where they want, when they want. In fact, 31 percent of job seekers rank flexible work arrangements as very important when considering a job, according to a LinkedIn global talent survey.[7] The desire for a flexible work environment is even stronger for employees who are already accustomed to flex work: a 2019 Buffer survey found that 99 percent of remote workers wanted the ability to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of their careers.[8]

It shouldn't be surprising that flexible work arrangements are in demand, considering some of the many benefits for employees:

Time Savings

Cutting out the daily commute can offer huge time savings, especially considering the average American commuter spends close to an hour in transit every workday.[9] Additionally, having team members working in different locations encourages teams to think critically about how much time they're

spending in meetings. According to Tanner Frevert, CCX Insights and Customer Voice Manager at Capital One, working remotely led his team to "reassess what needed to be a meeting" and what could be conveyed more efficiently in different ways.

Increased Productivity

Having the option to work from home or choose their hours of work allows employees to reduce interruptions and increase productivity on projects that require their full concentration. One Stanford study found that a Chinese company that conducted a nine-month work-from-home experiment saw a 13 percent increase in productivity for employees who were allowed to work remotely.[10] Another study found that while people perform "dull" tasks better in an office setting, they're able to work more productively on tasks that require creativity when working from home.[11]

American Home Shield

"I can focus a lot more at home. I can just kind of tune things out to get work completed."

Dana Leake, Senior Director of Operations

Greater Autonomy

Buffer's State of Remote Work survey found that being able to set your own schedule was the biggest benefit of flex working, cited by 40 percent of respondents. Flex work arrangements require leaders to let go of any desires to micromanage and trust employees to get their work done while they're out of sight, ultimately giving employees a greater sense of autonomy. What's more, multiple studies have linked greater employee autonomy to greater job satisfaction.[12]

Less Burnout

When employees are more satisfied with their job, they're also less likely to get burnt out and leave for another job. Flex work isn't a magic bullet that can completely eliminate feelings of burnout, but it can help by allowing employees to work when and where they feel the most productive, rather than requiring them to sit at a desk from 9 to 5. Flex work can also help combat the negative effects of poor work-life balance, something that impacts approximately 80 percent of workers experiencing burnout.[13]

Benefits of Flex Work for Businesses

While flex working is often viewed as a perk for employees, it's much more than that. Flex work has the power to deliver significant, long-lasting benefits to businesses. For many organizations, these benefits are likely to be the catalysts that cause them to pursue a long-term flexible work structure.

Ensured Continuity of Operations

As the COVID-19 global pandemic proved, businesses that can let employees work remotely need to be prepared to do so in the event of unplanned disruptions. Three-quarters of people who can work remotely say that they could continue to work in the event of a disaster, as opposed to just 28 percent of people who can't work remotely.[14]

Reduced Overhead Costs

Global Workplace Analytics estimates that employers save an average of $11,000 per half-time telecommuter (i.e. someone who splits their time between their home and office) per year. These savings reflect a combination of factors, including increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, better disaster preparedness, and lower real estate costs.

Reduced Employee Turnover

The greater autonomy that employees experience with flexible work arrangements promotes greater job satisfaction and reduces the risk of turnover. According to Global Workplace Analytics' estimates, a company of 500 people that allows employees to work remotely half the time could save close to $400,000 a year due to increased retention.

Access to a Larger Talent Pool

When employers aren't limited to hiring job seekers in specific geographic areas, they can tap into a much larger talent pool. And companies that offer flexible working arrangements are likely to attract more overall job candidates—and a more diverse talent pool—than those who require employees to work in an office. LinkedIn found that 22 percent more women than men cite flexible work arrangements as very important when considering a job, and 83 percent of professionals with a disability or chronic illness say that the ability to work remotely enables them to contribute to the workforce.[15] Flexible work arrangements can also help attract candidates who live in rural or economically disadvantaged areas, have a partner in the military, or provide in-home care for a family member. There are many different reasons employees may need or want flexible

work arrangements, and making flex work part of a company's culture can help bring in new skills, perspectives, and creativity.

Considerations When Shifting to Flex Work

While there are many benefits to flex work, the shift requires new considerations and adaptations to enable employees and employers to be successful. By acknowledging potential challenges, businesses can better prepare to address and overcome them.

Trusting Employees and Teams

85 percent of business leaders surveyed by the International Workplace Group said they saw increases in productivity as a result of flex work. [16]However, some managers who are used to seeing their direct reports in person may struggle with the idea of letting employees work remotely some or all of the time.

Even as flex work becomes more widely accepted, leaders at all levels of their organizations will need to work hard to promote a culture of employee trust and autonomy. Leaders will need to get used to evaluating employee performance on outcomes rather than time spent at a desk.

casual fridays

Feelings of Isolation

Some employees who extensively or exclusively work from home can feel isolated, especially if their team members work together in the same location. In Buffer's State of Remote Work study, almost 20 percent of remote workers cited loneliness as the biggest challenge of working from home.

One way to help address this is to encourage employees to split their time between working from home and working from an office, when safe and appropriate. When team members are working remotely, regular video calls—both for formal meetings and informal check-ins, such as virtual team meetups—can help employees feel engaged and connected to one another.

Remote Work Privilege Equality

In workplaces where some employees have flexible work arrangements and others are required to be in an office, employees provided with few flexibility options can become unsatisfied if not resentful. Whenever possible, employees should be provided consistent options for flex work arrangements to avoid perceptions of unequal treatment.

IT Infrastructure

Flex work requires companies to equip employees with technology that allows them to work from anywhere. Employees need to be able to access company systems, necessary hardware, software, data, and knowledge remotely.

Along with this access, training for employees who may be unfamiliar with any new technology is essential, and IT departments must be prepared to offer remote technical support to employees working outside of the office.

IT infrastructure challenges are relatively easy to resolve but must be considered up front when adapting to a flex work environment.

In the rest of this guide, we'll explore how your business can overcome the potential challenges of flex work and establish a flex work culture that allows employees to be productive, collaborative, and innovative.

Digitally Transforming Your Business for Flex Work

technology needs

Ensuring employees are set up to work effectively from anywhere is paramount for a flex work model, and to succeed at this, companies must equip team members with the right technology tools and guidance on how to properly use them.

The Essential Flex Work Tech Stack

As companies adopt flex work, they must evaluate their tech stacks to ensure teams have the necessary tools to communicate and collaborate. There are a core set of essential tool categories that support flex work, and the choice of best options or groupings should take into consideration potential increased usage, integrations, or changes in the way team members use these tools when they're remote.

Video Conferencing

Video conferencing software, such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, or GoToMeeting, allows employees to collaborate and connect more dynamically and to better interpret communication or feedback that can be less clear via email or chat.

Video can also help facilitate social gatherings for coworkers who can't physically be in the same place. For instance, when Washington state-based Sound Credit Union shifted to remote work, they used Zoom to host virtual meetups where their team members could catch up, play games, and do trivia.

Real-Time Chat

Internal chat platforms like Slack and Microsoft Teams empower employees to have quick, real-time conversations—both one-to-one and with larger groups. Chat platforms also help minimize unnecessary emails, facilitate collaboration, and even give dispersed teams a virtual watercooler to gather around.

Project Management

Project management tools like Asana and Trello help organize projects and orchestrate activities for both cross-functional teams and individual contributors. Project management tools are particularly essential for flex work settings to ensure detailed deliverables, assignments, and ownership are clear.

File Sharing

File storage platforms like Google Drive, OneDrive, and Dropbox are necessary for employees to easily share versioned and collaborative documents.

> **"Socializing with our work family over video has helped us boost morale and keep everyone engaged."**
>
> Bree Long, Digital Systems Analyst

These allow team members to collaborate on a range of document types in real time or asynchronously.

Knowledge Management

Cloud-based knowledge management platforms like Bloomfire act as a continually-growing virtual library of employees' collective knowledge. These platforms place knowledge and insights at the center of their organizations and make all content searchable so that employees can quickly find what they're looking for, no matter where and when they're working. An effective knowledge management platform should eliminate the need for employees to seek out specific subject matter experts and instead empower everyone to access and discover needed information.

MetLife

MetLife Delivers Critical Updates to Remote Workers During COVID-19 Crisis

When their workforce went completely remote during the COVID-19 crisis, MetLife's marketing team leveraged their Bloomfire knowledge engagement platform to ensure their employees could always access the knowledge and information they needed to make informed decisions. MetLife used Bloomfire, which they call their insights engine, to cleanly categorize all COVID-19 syndicated, internal, and news content within one centrally available resource. They created a content calendar with their insights engine at the center, allowing them to distribute crisis research and video content at a time when information was moving quickly. They also used Bloomfire to create a global newsletter highlighting COVID-19 findings, which became a key resource across markets.

"Bloomfire allowed us to be flexible and agile as needs shifted and changed due to the fast pace of this crisis." -Steven Karunphand, Knowledge Management & Operations, MetLife

Connecting Teams to Information Through a Knowledge Management Platform

A knowledge management platform should serve as the central information hub in any flex work tech stack. While different organizations use knowledge platforms like Bloomfire in a variety of ways, the functional and strategic purposes they serve consistently include the following:

1. *Colleagues from different areas in the company can contribute content and relevant information that becomes accessible to others in the organization.*

2. *Any content or information added is indexed and optimized to become easily findable by employees seeking related information in the future.*

3. *Users can intuitively seek out and find the most directly related and relevant information and insights needed to do their jobs best—by way of keyword search, browsing categories, and engaging with employees to find timely information or answers to their questions.*

4. *Users can provide comments or additional contributions, or ask new questions to ensure their organization can continuously fill in existing knowledge gaps and increase the collective intelligence across teams and departments.*

What Flex Work Communication Looks Like for Comcast Business

When Comcast Business quickly transitioned all employees to remote work, it began leaning on a few essential tools for communication and collaboration. Slack was their go-to chat app, with different channels allowing them to organize conversations around different topics and projects. Microsoft's project management platform, Planner, provided a visual tool to track and manage tasks. Bloomfire, which Comcast Business uses as a searchable digital library for market research, became an essential tool for sharing regular updates, articles, and forecasts with hundreds of stakeholders across the company. Christa Chaffinch, Market Research and Planning Manager at Comcast Business, says that her team also set up weekly check-in meetings with a round robin structure. "We each talk about one big win from the week before, what our main goals for the coming week are, any obstacles to meeting our goals, and how much 'extra capacity' we have. There's a very strong culture within the team of transparency and communication," she says.

Having one central source for company knowledge has become critical for organizations dedicated to enabling their employees to work more effectively. And in the age of flex work, a knowledge management platform helps team members find information whenever and wherever they're working, while allowing organizations to preserve and continue growing their collective intelligence —a major strategic advantage.

Providing Flex Work Training and Handbook Guidance

Providing Training on New Tech

Technology tools offer helpful solutions for a decentralized workforce, but it's equally vital to provide related training for employees who may not be familiar or fully comfortable with the entire tool set. IT and training teams—and any other teams responsible for managing software or employee training—should be prepared to provide virtual training sessions and documentation for employees who need to be brought up to speed on new tech or need a refresher on existing tools that may now have increased use. Security training sessions should also be held to teach flex workers best practices for protecting sensitive data when they're working remotely.

Creating a Flex Work Handbook

In moving to a flex work model, it's important to set clear policies so that everyone understands what is expected of them. Consider creating a flex work handbook that can live in your knowledge management platform and act as a single source of truth for flex work guidelines. If you're part of the leadership team responsible for establishing flex work policies and creating the handbook, consider the following questions:

- *Can everyone do their jobs outside of the office? If not, what makes a position eligible for flex work?*

- *Will you ask employees to be available during core "office hours?"*

- *If team members are going to split their time between the office and their home, are you going to ask them to be in the office a certain percent of the time?*

- *What modes of communication do you expect team members to use when they're working remotely?*

- *How will employees' productivity be measured?*

- *What steps do employees need to take to comply with security protocols while working remotely?*

- *What tech support will be available to employees who are working remotely?*

American Home Shield Takes Their Contact Center Remote in One Week

The customer service department at American Home Shield (AHS) faced a big challenge when they temporarily pivoted to remote work: they needed to get 1000 contact center employees at their Memphis headquarters up and running from their homes as quickly as possible. They also needed to shift to virtual training for new contact center agents with as little disruption as possible. AHS successfully transitioned their contact center to fully remote in about one week, and their training team put together a virtual training plan in just two days.

The sudden transition to remote work actually had some unexpected benefits for American Home Shield's contact center and trainers. "I'm seeing new folks visiting the classroom and showing an interest now that it's virtual," says Mia Juerges, Director of Training. "Different trainers from different locations can drop in and see how different classes are being facilitated. Those opportunities weren't available before."

Setting New Hires Up for Success in a Flex Work Environment

As new hires join, they'll need to understand any flex work policies and how they can operate successfully. In some cases, new hires may go to an office or corporate location for onboarding, to complete training, and to meet team members in person. In other cases, new hires may be working fully remotely. Managers onboarding remote team members should go through the same process they would with in-office team members while also taking the following steps:

1. *Introduce new hires to the flex work handbook (this is essential for both in-office and remote employees).*

2. *Make sure they have access to the hardware and software they need to work from anywhere.*

3. *Send them a welcome package with company materials and branded gear.*

4. *Go over specific team expectations around flex work.*

5. *Ensure they understand what and where to find different types of information needed to do their job, along with points of contact if what they need is not available.*

6. *Set up video conferences with team members, and if applicable or possible, provide a virtual tour of the office.*

7. *Make training materials available on demand.*

8. *Schedule regular video check-ins.*

Virtual Collaboration: How Teams Can Innovate When They Aren't in the Same Room

Note taking

As teams adjust to working in decentralized ways, a larger question around modes of working arises: How can dispersed teams collaborate as effectively as teams working together in an office?

For people comfortable with gathering in the same room to discuss topics or workshop ideas, recreating this kind of collaboration in a virtual environment may seem challenging. Video conferencing has opened new doors for collaborating in real time remotely, but it's only part of the solution.

In addition to leveraging video's power for interpersonal connection and engagement, employers should embrace the right mix of synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. A combination of solutions allows team members to benefit from and build off each other's knowledge to effectively create the same collaborative process and outputs.

The Right Technology Can Power the Collaborative Process

Half of the equation for successful collaboration is having a process and the right outlets to promote continuous employee engagement, feedback, and innovation. Defining points in the process and identifying the best technology to support them can actually result in more effective collaboration. By clearly communicating best practices for the ways each tool should be used for collaboration, employers will enable employees to stay aligned and engaged.

The exact technology mix and model may differ depending on specific needs of the business and ways of working across teams, but below is a sample snapshot showing how teams can map out different technology platforms and their intended use for collaboration.

Capital One

"When you're virtually meeting with someone, you have to work a lot harder to read people and read rooms."

Tanner Frevert
CCX Insights and Customer Voice Manager

Channel	Timing	Best For	Not Ideal for
Email	Asynchronous	Formal or long messages, one-to-one communication, providing reference files and assets with detailed context	Group brainstorming, real-time communication
Chat Platform	Synchronous	Quick questions, watercooler conversations, one-to-one or one-to-many communication	Detailed knowledge transfer, preserving knowledge
Video Conference Platform	Synchronous	Team meetings, group brainstorming, presentations, virtual social events	Preserving knowledge
Project Management Platform	Asynchronous	Tracking project progress, organizing tasks, resource and file management	Real-time communication, detailed knowledge transfer, preserving knowledge
Knowledge Management Platform	Asynchronous	Detailed knowledge transfer, preserving knowledge, one-to-many communication	Real-time communication

Bloomfire

How Capital One Communicates Across Dispersed Teams

Because Capital One has corporate offices across the U.S. (as well as in London and Toronto), their team members are used to communicating with coworkers in different locations. But when all their employees had to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, department leaders realized they needed to take additional steps to keep everyone connected and engaged. Senior leaders began scheduling more meetings to communicate with the people who laddered up to them, and turning on webcams for meetings became the norm. Team members found the ability to see coworkers in their home environments actually helped build empathy and the ability to understand all the different types of people working within the organization. And an unexpected benefit they discovered in working remotely was that because leaders were emphasizing overcommunication, information was often able to travel more quickly. "*In the office, people might wait to share information until they see someone that they have a meeting with in the afternoon. When everyone's working remotely, I think people are a lot quicker to send an email or upload content to Bloomfire so things can happen quickly.*"
- Tanner Frevert, CCX Insights and Customer Voice Manager, Capital One

Encouraging Openness and Promoting Safety for Idea Sharing

The other half of the equation for effective collaboration is creating a working environment in which team members feel they can share input and ideas that will be taken into consideration without negative repercussions. This is referred to as "psychological safety," which Harvard Business School professor Dr. Amy Edmondson defines as "a climate in which people are comfortable being (and expressing) themselves."[17]

In a two-year study of its employees, Google found psychological safety was the most important dynamic for its most effective teams.[18] The safer team members felt around one another, the more willing they were to admit mistakes, partner on projects together, and take on new roles.

In an office environment, employees often build a sense of safety and comfort sharing ideas as they get to know each other in person. But a flex work model doesn't have to mean sacrificing trust and psychological safety. For example, the American Home Shield team learned to become more intentional about scheduling check-ins and creating a virtual environment for informal watercooler moments after transitioning to working fully remote.

In many cases, working with remote team members can actually strengthen trust and bonding, as the physical distance requires everyone to be more mindful about how they communicate. When international flooring company Tarkett was forced to shift its employees to work fully remotely, employees found the frequency of conference calls between team members (especially calls with video) increased, which resulted in more collaboration. *"We talk so much now that we feel like we've gotten to know each other a lot better. Some projects have gone faster because people are able to meet more often. And on a personal level, it's been cool to watch our team grow together."* Kinsey Terry, Marketing Sales Support Manager, Tarkett

American Home Shield

"So much of how you build relationships and trust with your teams are some of those informal walk-by-their-office moments or by catching them on the floor and having a quick conversation."

Dana Leake
Senior Director of Operations

AGIA
AFFINITY

How AGIA Maintained a Culture of Collaboration & Connection While Working Remotely

Like many companies, AGIA went fully remote for the first time during the COVID-19 crisis. After a week, Tammy Shelman, Vice President of Member Services at AGIA, began hearing that some associates were feeling isolated due to shelter-in-place orders and their new home office setup. To help associates feel connected to one another when they couldn't be together in person, Tammy and her team decided to use their Bloomfire community as a virtual watercooler. "We primarily use Bloomfire for product and policy content, but during this period of remote work, we thought we would leverage it to build personal connections," says Shelman. She and her team encouraged employees to share text and picture responses to prompts such as "new home office digs," "What's for lunch today?" and "How do you stay active during the day?"

Hunter Williams, Supervisor of Performance Improvement at AGIA, adds that one of their directors also started posting regular video updates in their Bloomfire community. "This allows him to communicate more creatively, and we've been seeing a lot of engagement in the comments," says Williams.

DraftKings Boosts Their Market Research Collaboration

DraftKings realized early on that they needed to centralize their insights and get their internal stakeholders to engage with research projects, regardless of whether team members were working remotely or out of their Boston headquarters. In 2018, they began using Bloomfire as their central research library, allowing stakeholders from every business unit to access research findings, engage with the research teams, and learn more about market research in general. In addition to significantly increasing the visibility of existing research assets, they've also seen an increase in stakeholders expressing interest in being involved in research projects and using customer data to make decisions.

"Our research and user-facing teams now have a better idea of what we're all working on, and we can collaborate more because there's more transparency in what's going on around the organization." -Annie Corbett, Senior Manager, User Research, DraftKings

Strategies to Encourage Flex Team Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Effective knowledge sharing is essential when team members are spread out across different locations. Use the recommendations below to help build a psychologically safe culture and keep teams connected no matter where everyone is working.

1. *Define and document how you will use different communication channels so that expectations are clear.*

2. *Promote knowledge sharing from the top down. Executives and team leaders should regularly share updates and content across their organizations.*

3. *Identify meetings that can take place over video to create deeper connections with team members.*

4. *Look for small ways to reward team members for sharing their knowledge.*

5. *Look for opportunities for new hires to provide input so that they become comfortable with the culture of knowledge sharing.*

6. *Create digital spaces where coworkers can socialize and bond over non-work topics.*

7. *When possible and applicable, allow employees to share their knowledge through the medium that's most convenient for them (e.g. video, audio recording, slide deck).*

Enabling Employees to Access Information and Insights

gain access

Even if flex work employees have access to a powerful tech stack and can collaborate with co-workers in different locations, they can't do their best work if their employer isn't empowering them with on-demand access to their organization's collective knowledge. When crafting a knowledge management strategy conducive to flex work, employers need to take several factors into consideration:

- *Employees don't always have the ability to walk over and quickly find a co-worker when they have a question or need information on the fly.*

- *When employees don't keep the exact same working schedule, there may be periods when they're unable to get a prompt response necessary for their work.*

- *Dispersed teams may not always be able to gather in the same physical location for working sessions or brainstorms.*

- *Employees working at different times and across different locations won't have as many "watercooler encounters," or organic, unplanned opportunities to learn from co-workers, discover new connections, and strengthen bonds in an informal environment.*

Fortunately, all of these challenges can be address with a good knowledge sharing strategy. To ensure that information continues to flow smoothly in a flex work environment, organizations can:

- *Encourage employees to document anything that might benefit their co-workers, from standard operating procedures to best practices learned through years of experience.*

- *Guide employees to ask and answer all questions in a central repository or knowledge management platform where everyone can benefit from the information exchanged.*

- *Make time for virtual "watercooler" gatherings that bring together employees from across teams. When interesting learnings come out of these informal gatherings, employees should be encouraged to document and make them accessible to others.*

- *Give all employees access to the documented knowledge of different teams & departments*

When everyone across an organization creates a habit of documenting knowledge and sharing it in ways co-workers can easily access, employees will be able to tap into—and add to—their company's collective intelligence.

Sharing Information Across Teams and Departments

When creating a knowledge management strategy to support flex workers, employers need to think beyond just making sure employees have on-demand access to their team or department's collective knowledge. Democratizing information throughout the entire organization prevents knowledge silos and empowers everyone to leverage every resource available to better perform and innovate.

Knowledge silos—which occur when information doesn't flow freely between departments, teams, or employees—aren't just unique to companies with flex work models. A 2006 McKinsey study found that only 25 percent of senior executives felt their organizations were successful at sharing knowledge between departments.[19] And in 2019, Workfront's annual State of Work Report revealed that 86 percent of knowledge workers don't have a clear sense of what their colleagues are working on.[20]

Left unchecked, knowledge silos can cause many issues, including:

- *Lack of alignment around company goals and vision*
- *Lack of trust between departments*

Insperity

"Insperity has invested in building out a central repository employees can leverage to find information on how to do their job and solve ongoing client issues. More recently, virtual collaboration has become a critical component for our internal teams to curate breaking news, legislation updates, and interpret information to help customers navigate their business service options during the dynamic time of COVID-19."

Alicia Brewer, Product Manager

- *Redundant work by different teams*
- *Inefficient handoffs between teams*
- *Missed opportunities for cross-functional innovation*

It's becoming increasingly critical for company leaders and department heads to promote cross-functional knowledge sharing. While each department might have their own group or hub within the company knowledge platform, they should make sure the information in their hub is accessible across the organization.

Below are a few examples of how department-specific knowledge can be shared in a company knowledge platform to benefit the larger organization.

Market Research

Market research teams can publish final reports and insights related to research findings to their corporate knowledge management hub so that stakeholders from different departments can gain a deeper understanding of their target buyer's behaviors and motivations . Stakeholders can search for and discover research at any time, rather than needing to ask specific individuals—missing opportunities to apply relevant findings to their decision-making process.

Marketing & Sales

Marketing can eliminate one-off requests from the sales team by publishing assets for sales reps to help educate buyers and close deals. Centralizing sales and marketing knowledge can also help employees in other departments better understand the messaging their organization uses to communicate with consumers, prospects, or customers.

Customer Service & Support

Customer service and support departments can build a growing customer FAQ library and centralize all customer-facing information, making it easier for reps to find the information they need to help customers and resolve issues. Centralizing knowledge also helps employees have visibility into the questions and issues customers are sharing, which can fuel new ideas for everything from new service offerings and marketing materials to product improvements.

Human Resources

HR can more easily make employee handbooks, onboarding guides, training materials, and other essential policy documentation available on demand. Not only can this cut back on repetitive questions and information requests that HR departments field, but it can also ensure employees always have direct access to up-to-date company policies and guidelines so they don't waste time or productivity waiting for answers.

Information Technology

IT departments can create searchable libraries of how-to guides, tech support documentation, and on-demand video training for employees. This self-serve documentation is especially valuable for employees who may not have easy access to IT personnel when working outside of standard business hours or from non-centralized locations. It can also cut down on the number of requests for standardized assistance IT specialists receive, giving them more time to focus on complex challenges.

Jackson Hewitt
TAX SERVICE

Jackson Hewitt Centralizes Knowledge to Support Field Operations

With nearly 6,000 tax advisory offices across the U.S., Jackson Hewitt has long recognized the need and benefits of centralizing knowledge from across the business. Because employees who support field operations work at different locations and across different time zones, centralizing knowledge in a cloud-based platform is essential to ensure all employees can access and use information when and where they need it. "Standardizing systems and information, and establishing consistent ways to communicate that information, has been critical in making it more effective for employees to access the right knowledge to do their jobs successfully." -Jen Savage, Manager of Knowledge Management & Social Media, Jackson Hewitt

Delivering On-Demand Training in a Flex Work Environment

The demand for flexible workplace learning is high: while 87 percent of remote workers say that they get regular workplace training, 67 percent say that they feel they need more.[21] And considering that 94 percent of employees say they would stay at a company longer if there was an investment in their ongoing learning, on-demand training must be a priority for companies that want to retain their flex workers.[22]

An office or classroom setting is not what makes training successful—it's how that training is actually delivered. Below are strategies to help organizations deliver effective training to employees and remove barriers associated with location and schedule limitations:

House All Training Materials in One Place

If employees have to navigate multiple platforms and dig through cluttered shared drives, they are unlikely to find all the training materials they need. Accessing training materials should be as frictionless as possible for employees. Organizing all training materials in a centralized platform suited for content and knowledge discovery guarantees employees will always know where to go to access those materials and be able to easily find and consume them at their own pace.

Organize Training in Digestible Installments

Break longer training units into series with digestible installments so that employees can more readily fit in learning regardless of schedule or learning style. Many learning and development professionals recommend keeping training courses in the 15-30 minute range.[23]

Take Advantage of Video

Training videos are ideal for conveying complex information, including demonstrations that might be difficult to understand without audio-visual components. Video can deliver a similar experience to classroom training, help humanize the content, allow employees flexibility in where they learn, and cut down on the cost of in-person training.

Provide Checkpoint Quizzes

Checkpoint quizzes, which employees can take after completing a training unit, help employees measure their comprehension and give trainers a way to ensure their trainees are progressing. Low scores on checkpoint quizzes can help trainers identify where additional training or resources may be needed.

Provide Personal Touches

Keep team members engaged by providing opportunities to connect directly with trainers, both in person and virtually. For example, trainers could

Dominion Energy

"Dominion's employee base is naturally dispersed with a large number of field representatives. To help equip our essential workers with safety and training content to do their jobs safely, we are meeting users where they are and providing them information in a way they access it. The onus is no longer just on supervisors to push knowledge out—all employees are empowered and able to find content themselves."

Garrett Braun
Communications Specialist, Power Delivery Safety and Training

offer both in-person and virtual office hours, where they keep a video conference meeting room open for trainees who have questions. Trainees could also be invited to submit questions within their company's knowledge management platform when asynchronous communication is more appropriate.

Lubrizol Delivers Insights at the Speed of Business Decisions

As an essential business during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lubrizol knew it was imperative to provide on-demand access to knowledge and insights for their distributed team members. Using their insights engine, Catalyst, they created COVID-19 series for each business unit so that business leaders, marketers, and innovation teams could be updated weekly with the rapidly evolving information they needed to know. In addition to sharing COVID-19 information, Lubrizol also empowered decision-makers to engage with and communicate with one another about these updates.

"By streamlining the information, we can also take our efforts a step further into implications. We provide context, calls to action, and make it digestible to help teams act quickly and make strategic business decisions. This tailored, market-centric approach allows nuanced and actionable information to get to key decision makers: C-suite, business line leaders, general managers, marketers, and innovation teams. This new approach is highly valued because insights without action is just information."-Dan Stradtman, VP, Consumer & Marketing Insights, Lubrizol

Ensuring Information Is Never Lost

All organizations—but especially those with a flex work model—need to have institutional knowledge preservation built into their strategy. No individual employee should be the "gatekeeper" of important institutional knowledge—both because it limits that information from being accessible to others and because knowledge can literally be lost forever when personnel leave the company.

Knowledge preservation should be a proactive endeavor and instilled as a regular behavior across the organization. When everyone gets into the habit of documenting and sharing their knowledge in the course of their regular work, knowledge preservation will occur naturally and not require a heavy lift by any individual employee.

The following strategies can help make the process of preserving knowledge simple and seamless:

1. *Document standard operating procedures for knowledge sharing. Make sure employees understand the expectations for what types of knowledge and information they should share and where that information should live.*

2. *Whenever possible, allow employees to share knowledge in the format that is most convenient for them. For example, some employees might prefer to record a how-to video demonstration rather than writing a how-to guide.*

3. *Record video or audio Q&A sessions with subject matter experts that can then be exposed for a larger audience on-demand.*

4. *Ask managers and heads of departments to lead by example, contributing their own knowledge to the company knowledge platform whenever possible.*

5. *Encourage employees to ask questions in the company knowledge platform to help identify knowledge gaps that need to be filled.*

6. *Consider developing a reward system for employees who contribute to the company knowledge or learning hub, reinforcing the idea that sharing knowledge is a positive experience.*

Ultimately, making it simple for employees to access, provide, and preserve knowledge removes unnecessary barriers and empowers the entire organization to leverage needed information and insights.

What's In Store: Flex Work Is Only Going to Expand

There's no denying that both employers and employees have permanently shifted how they think about the workplace. In April 2020, 74 percent of CFOs surveyed by Gartner said they planned to move at least 5 percent of previously on-site employees to permanently remote positions.[24] And 66 percent of workers believe the traditional office will be obsolete by 2030. [25]

Not only is more work being done remotely, but it's also being done on flexible schedules that break the 9 to 5 mold. As employers recognize that performance is not directly tied to time physically present at an office, employees are increasingly being provided the flexibility to work where and how they can be most effective.

As flex work expands, it's important for organizations to recognize needed steps to empower a decentralized workforce with the tools and processes to do their best work. In addition to arming employees with the technology they need to work from anywhere, employers need to demonstrate trust and model a culture of knowledge sharing that allows employees to communicate and collaborate effectively. And employees at all levels of the organization need to recognize that knowledge contributions and proactive communication are part of the foundational expectations in every work environment going forward.

Building a successful flex work operating model requires commitment on the part of both employers and employees, but the positive impact on morale, productivity, and business efficiencies make it overwhelmingly worthwhile. The future of flex work is here, and the sooner organizations adapt to reflect that, the faster they will realize the long-term value to their business that comes with it.

Appendix

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