

## MAKING THE CASE: THE FLEXIBLE JEWISH WORK PLACE

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In recent years, the growing tension between professional and personal life has become a subject of concern in American society. Current books and articles document the broader effects of overwork and overtime. Working people at every rank and in every sector are struggling to pursue career goals while managing individual and family responsibilities. These challenges are exacerbated by the rise in dual-career families, single parent households and those caring for elderly parents. At the same time, younger professionals are entering the workplace with higher expectations for work-life balance.

The Jewish community is no exception to these larger trends. To support their organizational missions, at home and around the world, Jewish organizations need to attract and retain talented professionals. In the corporate arena, flexible work arrangements are surfacing as important tools for employee recruitment and retention. Flexibility also offers an opportunity for Jewish organizational leaders to think about new ways to structure work and measure performance. In this process, they may discover that flexibility can enhance organizational effectiveness while serving as a powerful incentive for cultivating talent in the Jewish community.

## ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS OF FLEXIBILITY

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Research by Catalyst, the leading organization working with businesses to build inclusive environments and expand opportunities for women professionals, has demonstrated that flexible work arrangements are central to the recruitment, retention and advancement of women. Flexibility benefits employees and employers, by supporting work-life quality and organizational effectiveness.

- **Recruitment**

A comprehensive flexibility policy gives organizations an edge when competing for desirable employees. In Catalyst surveys, women and men report that they target employers who offer formal flexible work programs, and they evaluate the degree to which the prospective job accommodates personal needs.

- **Retention**

Studies show that companies with family-friendly policies are more successful at retaining employees, and that employee retention contributes to increased productivity. Recent research conducted by the Center for Work-Life Policy (2004) strongly suggests that companies that offer reduced hours, flexible job design, on-off career ramps and removal of the stigma attached to non-standard work arrangements reported greater success at retaining women professionals.

- **Dollars Saved**

Increasingly, employers find that flexibility is directly linked to the bottom line. Job turnover can cost up to 150% of a single annual salary, in terms of decreased productivity by the former employee and the expense involved in recruitment and training for the new employee. Successful work-life programs often pay for themselves by retaining a more stable workforce.

- **Reduced Absenteeism**

Absenteeism disrupts the normal flow and agenda of organizations, resulting in lost productivity, overtime for co-workers, costs of temporary staff and low morale. Research shows a direct relationship between the lack of workplace flexibility and absenteeism. As flexibility is integrated into the workplace and employees address some of their life needs in a coordinated system, there is a corresponding decline in unplanned absenteeism.

- **Increased Effectiveness and Productivity**

The main benefit of flexibility is a fundamental shift from counting hours to measuring results. By redesigning work and promoting results-oriented performance, organizations move away from reactive, crisis-driven work practices to a more efficient, pro-active model. Moreover, since flexibility highlights leadership skills, such as setting priorities, coordinating teamwork and maximizing communication, managers who address flexibility become more effective overall.

- **Enhanced Job Satisfaction and Commitment**

Employee satisfaction is strongly correlated with job performance, productivity and organizational commitment. Studies addressing work-life balance suggest that organizational receptivity to personal life needs strengthens employee commitment. The most recent Catalyst surveys show that, among women professionals, flexibility ranks higher than salary in terms of job satisfaction and commitment.

## LAUNCHING THE FLEXIBILITY INITIATIVE

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Three critical factors contribute to successful flexibility initiatives in the workplace:

- **Organizational leadership:** The CEO articulates and supports the business case for flexibility.
- **Managerial guidance and support:** Managers and supervisors need training and resources to assess and implement flexible work arrangements.
- **Clear flexibility guidelines and parameters:** Flexibility is a privilege, not a right. Flexibility policies must strike an appropriate balance between the needs of the employee and the needs of the organization.