Flexible work at Harvard

Q: Can all employees apply for a flexible work arrangement?
A: Any employee may submit a proposal for a flexible work arrangement to his or her supervisor.

Not all jobs are suitable for such an arrangement, however, and depending on the nature or location of a particular job, some types of alternative work arrangement may not be appropriate. Further, a history of poor performance might be a reason for denial. (In some cases, however, a flexible schedule might alleviate the root causes of problems like excessive tardiness or absenteeism, and result in improved performance).

Supervisors/managers are encouraged to give consideration to requests and grant them where they meet the needs of both the University and the individual.

Q: I am an employee who requested a flexible schedule previously and was turned down. May I try again?
A: You may try again. But first consider why your proposal was denied before. (If you don’t fully understand the reason your proposal was denied, ask your supervisor to clarify the business or performance reasons.) Then do some research and determine if you can build a case for an alternative that might work for your particular situation. Ask your supervisor/manager to consider
your new proposal and to discuss other alternatives.

Q: Will a flexible work arrangement affect my pay and benefits?

A: If the schedule results in the same number of hours per week, your pay and benefits will not be affected.

If a new work schedule results in fewer hours worked your pay and leave accrual will be pro-rated consistent with your percent time worked. Regular employees remain eligible for benefits if they work half time or more.

Q: Do I have to give a reason for wanting a flexible work arrangement?

A: Requests for flexible work arrangements should be evaluated on how business needs will be met and how the work will get done, as well as on an employee’s likelihood of success with the arrangement, based on his or her recent past performance.

Your reason for requesting an alternative schedule is not a required part of the proposal. But it may be helpful to your supervisor to understand your reasons, particularly if he or she is evaluating the requests of several employees within a department, or if a disability or health concern is at issue, and you are invoking either the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in your request.

Managers should not deny a flexible work arrangement based solely on an employee’s reason for requesting it.

Q: What if my supervisor says “no” to my proposal?

A: The University is not obligated to grant flexible work arrangements to any employee, except in some cases involving the ADA. Each proposal should be considered on its own merits. Make sure you clearly understand the business reason(s) that your supervisor/manager gave you when he or she was unable to approve your proposal.

Several neutral parties are available to consult with managers and employees to refine flexible schedules for their mutual benefit. These include: your local HR office; the Office of Work/Life Resources, whose staff coaches employees and managers; union representatives, who coach employees and educate managers; the University’s Disabilities Coordinator; the Disability Claims
Unit and the Office for Labor Relations, which work with managers and employees; the University Ombudsman Office; the Harvard Medical School Ombuds Office (serving Longwood Medical Area); and the Harvard Medical School Center for Career Renewal.

Q: Is there a limit to the number of people in one area who can submit proposals?

A: Each request should be reviewed on its own merits. A supervisor/manager should first assess the needs of the department or unit as the foundation for approving a flexible work arrangement. Since it is important to provide coverage to meet the demands of the office, it may be useful to establish a process for handling multiple requests before any alternative work schedule program is implemented. Often teams can work together to find alternatives that will work for the whole group.

Q: Can I change my schedule if it’s not working out for me?

A: To request a different flexible work arrangement (e.g. change from compressed work week to job sharing), a new written proposal should be submitted to your supervisor/manager for consideration. A written request should also be given to your supervisor/manager if you would like a return to your previous work schedule. This is not always possible. For example, in some cases budgetary limitations may eliminate opportunities to increase hours (e.g. if you have been part-time and want to return to full-time, your hours may have been reassigned.)

Q: Can my supervisor change my flexible schedule back to a regular schedule at any time?

A: Your work schedule is subject to change based on business needs. Your supervisor/manager will try to provide you with reasonable notice before altering the current arrangement.

Q: What role should an employee’s reason for requesting a flexible work arrangement play in whether or not I grant a request?

A: When the employee’s request is based on a health or disability accommodation issue, you must follow specific procedures.

For other circumstances, employees are not required to give a reason for their requests. Sometimes, especially if family finances or other, private family issues are the reason, an employee
may not wish to do so. In the case where an employee doesn’t reveal the reason for the request, a supervisor must evaluate the request on the business case only.

A supervisor or manager should not deny a request based on an employee’s reason (or perceived lack of reason). Neither should it be based on a supervisor’s relationship with or assumptions about the employee. It should be based on the business needs of the unit.

Many employees will volunteer why they are requesting a flexible work arrangement. Knowing the reason for an employee’s request can help you, especially as you evaluate multiple requests. It can be useful to know the parameters of each employee’s flexibility, so that if their proposals don’t mesh, you can work together to generate alternative solutions. For example, if two employees request a compressed work week with Fridays off, it can help to know that one person is hoping to attend a class at a specific time and the other wants one day to do volunteer work, but doesn’t care which day it is.

Q: I am a supervisor. I have inherited a group of employees who currently have a diverse range of flexible work arrangements. I may need to change these or I may not – but first I need to get handle on them. Where do I begin?

A: Refer to Managing a flexible work arrangements for general policies and guidelines, which also apply here. In addition:

- **Document what work arrangements are currently in place.** Get it all on paper. A chart or spreadsheet showing each person’s schedule can help you visualize where there may be gaps as well as suggesting logical parameters for core hours, staff meetings, and so on.
- **Compare what’s in place to your schedule principles.** Do bandwidth and core hours emerge? Is there any evident overlap in the current set of work arrangements? Are there significant gaps?

Documenting and analyzing the schedules are only the first steps. You will also have to assess performance. If the work isn’t getting done to a satisfactory degree, you should revisit whether alternative work arrangements are the cause – or could be part of the solution.

If you need to make changes to an employee’s schedule, try to provide employees with reasonable notice before altering the current arrangement.