

◀ HOME WORK
Beth Morris went part time to be with her children more.

With flextime, less can be more

Some employers are finding that part-time arrangements pay off in improved recruitment and retention of talented workers—and in greater productivity despite shorter hours.

By *Charlotte Huff* | PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG PULS

BETH MORRIS MARCHED into her supervisor's office prepared to resign. It was 1993, and she was a project manager at Eli Lilly who had devoted 15 years to the company. She was 39 years old, pregnant and the mother of a toddler. "I had a lot invested and so did the company," she says. Morris wanted to reduce her

schedule to four days a week after maternity leave so that she could spend more time with her children.

"I had gone in there completely prepared to sell, sell, sell" the idea, she says. And if she wasn't heard, she was "absolutely ready to walk out the door."

To her surprise, her managers were immediately receptive. "It was a nonevent," she recalls.

Eli Lilly had introduced a part-time schedule the previous year but hadn't yet made the work option available to employ-

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ees at the manager level, says Candice Lange, director of workforce partnering. Morris became one of several employees who helped test-run the approach, learning to juggle teamwork and project responsibilities during a shortened workweek.

Eli Lilly has since expanded the part-time option to all employees, Lange says. Now about 5,600 of the company's 22,600 U.S. employees—25 percent—work some kind of flexible schedule, including 360 people who work part time.

Whether high-profile success stories like Morris' represent more anecdotal than actual change is a matter of debate. Figures on part-time trends are limited. A sluggish economy can quickly erode family-friendly policies. And for company leaders, short-term challenges involved in changing schedules can loom large—from redistribution of

the workload to fair handling of promotions and benefits.

"I do think there are lots of organizations who are quite ambivalent (about part-time schedules), honestly," says Lisa Levey, an expert on work/life issues at New York-based Catalyst, a nonprofit research firm. "There is a real bias that changing the way we work means less effectiveness."

But others describe a recent upsurge of interest in part-time work schedules among business executives that, observers predict, will only quicken. Shifting demographics, the mobility of the modern office and a legal climate sympathetic to employees' work/life concerns will force even recalcitrant employers to revisit—and, yes, sometimes shorten—the traditional workweek.

What companies are discovering is this: Part-time policies can pay off in better recruitment and retention of talented employees, says Ellen Bravo, former executive director of 9to5, National Association of Working Women, who recently authored a report about part-time initiatives at 15 Wisconsin companies.

Managers are learning to think more creatively about how work can be organized and job success achieved, Bravo says. Executives are talking "about the value of retaining talent and the value of continuity in organizational know-how and how that adds to quality, productivity and customer satisfaction."

WORKING TO LIVE

The demographic pressures on tomorrow's workforce are significant, beginning with the gender breakdown.

Women compose more than half of college graduates and hold nearly half of professional and graduate degrees, according to U.S. Department of Education figures. And their dominance will only increase, the nonprofit Center for Work-Life Policy in New York reports in an analysis of Education Department data.

During the next decade, the number of women holding post-college degrees will grow by 16 percent, compared with 1.3 percent for men.

But it's not just women who are concerned about work/life balance. Younger employees poised to fill the shoes of baby boomers also don't want to be defined by job title alone, according to a study conducted by the nonprofit Families and Work Institute for business coalition the American Business Collaboration.

Sixty-eight percent of college-educated men ages 18 to 57 coveted jobs with increasing responsibility in 1992, but only 52 percent did so in 2002. Among women, the split was 57 percent in 1992 versus 36 percent in 2002.

And companies ignore employees' family-life concerns at their own risk, says Joan Williams, an American University law professor and longtime advocate for workplace flexibility. The college's Program on WorkLife Law, which Williams directs, has documented 170 cases, most since the early 1990s, in which

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MAKING THE CASE FOR FLEXIBILITY

BEING A GREAT PLACE TO WORK has long been part of the mission at London-based Eversheds. Now leaders of the international law firm, with some 4,000 lawyers and staffers across Europe and Asia, want to encourage their employees to enjoy a better life, too.

In 2002, Eversheds introduced a flexible work program, called Lifestyle, that's open to all employees. It allows employees to flex their weekly schedule, as long as they can make a business case that their job responsibilities can be covered. Job-sharing, reduced hours or a compressed week are among the options, says Elaine Aarons, a labor attorney who heads the employment team in Eversheds' London office.

The law firm hadn't been opposed to flexing hours previously. Aarons, also a partner, has been working a four-day week for 15 years. But the program formalizes the work option, Aarons says. Nearly 600 employees work a flexible schedule, half of them enrolling after Lifestyle was announced. "It's really about insuring that we have the best talent," Aarons says. "We think as time goes on, flexibility is an area of increasing importance to people."

In the first year, attrition among male and female employees declined from 21.5 percent to 17 percent, Aarons says. It's also believed that more women are returning from maternity leave, though precise numbers aren't available, she says.

The schedule requests are handled by human resources, rather than direct supervisors, to make sure they're evaluated uniformly. And employees aren't required to specify why they're requesting a new schedule, Aarons says.

As the program moves forward, the firm is learning new ways to measure employee productivity beyond just billable hours. An attorney may have fewer billable hours because he or she is more efficient, Aarons points out. And thus the firm reaps increased client loyalty—feedback that can be picked up on client surveys.

Europeans pride themselves on a family-friendly working culture, but a 2004 survey by the magazine *Legal Business* found that only 68 of the 3,600 partners at the top 10 U.K. law firms worked part time. Nineteen of those 68 are at Eversheds. "I thought U.K. law firms were more progressive than U.S. law firms," she says. "I wasn't so sure when I saw that (article)."

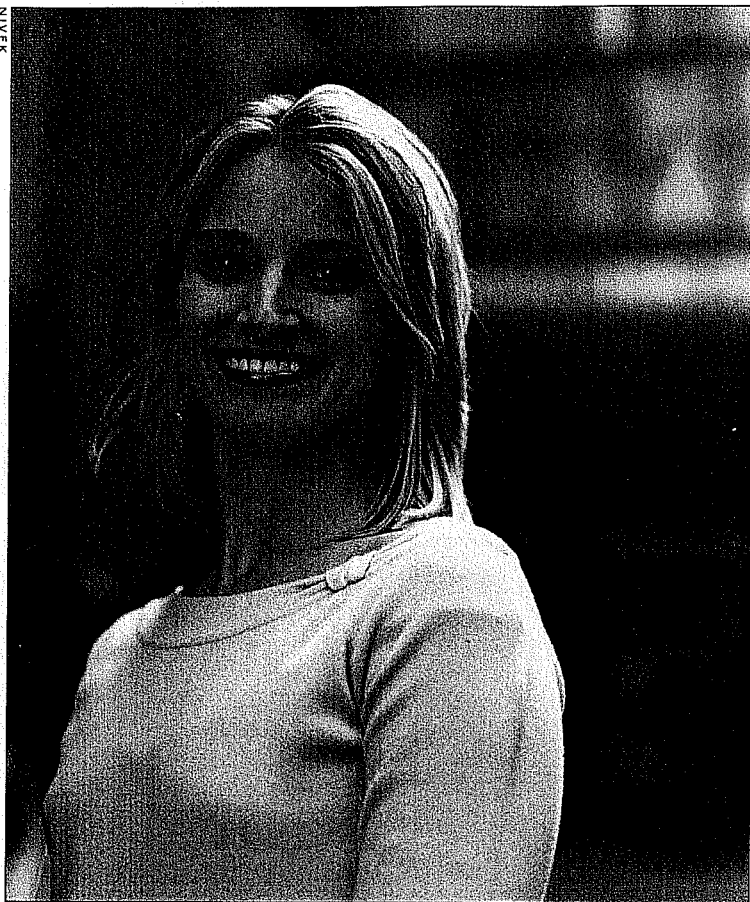
"We think as time goes on, flexibility is an area of increasing importance to people."

Aarons, who lives the juggling act, concluded this interview after 10 p.m. London time. The mother of three had spent the evening with her children and was clocking in a few more hours before retiring for the night.

—C.H.



Elaine Aarons



With flextime, less can be more *continued*

"Increasingly, they have to start looking at it as a risk management issue as well."

GONE FOR GOOD

Ernst & Young's flexible work options, launched in the mid-1990s, grew out of a stark reality. While the firm's recruits were split evenly between men and women, attrition was higher among women as they reached their midcareer stride. Consulting firms face a similar challenge, says DeAnne Aguirre, a senior vice president at Booz Allen.

By the time a talented woman has finished her MBA and devoted three to six years to the road-warrior lifestyle, she's reaching both her career prime and her now-or-never decision to have children.

"It's at that time that our voluntary attrition doubles for women against men," Aguirre says. (She doesn't want to release statistics because she says they are proprietary.) "It's something we see as a huge business problem."

Fifty-hour-plus weeks also are common for those rising in the ranks of law, medicine and business. Faced with the inherent constraints of a 24-hour day, 37 percent of professional women—often mothers—voluntarily drop out of the workforce for a stretch of time, according to a survey of 2,443 professional women and 653 similarly educated men published in March in the *Harvard Business Review*.

The survey emerged from the Hidden Brain Drain

task force, a coalition of 19 U.S. and U.K. companies and law firms—Booz Allen and Ernst & Young among them—that joined with the Center for Work-Life Policy in 2004 to develop better ways to retain female and minority talent.

The absence of employees from the workplace isn't long. The average exit period is 2.2 years, the survey reports. (Twenty-four percent of men also step out of the workforce, a decision that is more likely to be driven by a career change than family concerns.)

But don't expect these women to come back knocking on your company's door. Only 5 percent say they would be interested in returning to their former employer.

For the companies involved, that's a huge loss, says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the Center for Work-

◀ **FLEX APPEALS**
Jennifer Maler works 30-hour weeks to leave time for other pursuits.

Life Policy. "In many cases, these are people of high performance," she says. "They'll be back again working within the same (business) sector, but working with the competition."

The turnstile of talent doesn't come cheap. The bill at law firms to replace a single attorney is between \$200,000 and \$500,000, according to American University's Williams. Ernst & Young estimates that the firm is out 150 percent of the departing employee's salary, says Maryella Gockel, flexibility strategy leader at Ernst & Young.

Aguirre says her firm can lose hundreds of thousands of dollars in recruiting and training costs alone, a figure that doesn't count lost billable hours.

And hours do matter. Two-thirds of women report that flexible work options were extremely or very important, the survey shows. In fact, flexibility is more important—tapped as a powerful motivator by 42 percent of female respondents—than earning a big salary. Fully 82 percent of women gave reduced hours a high priority.

That's why firms resistant to change miss the point when they insist that there is no business case for allowing lawyers to reduce their billable hours, says Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of Flex-Time Lawyers in Philadelphia, which provides career guidance for lawyers seeking work/life balance.

"The question should be, 'Is this lawyer talented enough that she is worth accommodating?' Because if she is, the firm is better off if she's working 75 percent rather than not at all."

RETHINKING WORK

Within the past two years, Booz Allen has broken some client projects into smaller pieces to enable employees—primarily women before and after a pregnancy—to temporarily dial back their hours and travel schedules, Aguirre says. If women decide after maternity leave that they want to cut back to, say, an 80 percent schedule, they can be permanently assigned to internal Booz Allen projects.

Aguirre says it's still too soon to track retention trends, including whether more women return from maternity leave.

But Ernst & Young has identified a slight retention increase as more employees have taken advantage of flexible work options. About 10 percent of the company's 23,000 U.S. employees, including 27 percent of women

**With flexitime,
Less can be
more** continued

at the senior management level, work some type of flexible schedule, Gockel says. At least two-thirds of those choosing flexibility work reduced hours.

Now 76 percent of women are still with the company four years after they were hired, compared with 72 percent in the mid-1990s, according to an Ernst & Young spokeswoman. The rate peaked in 2001, with 80 percent of both women and men staying with the company.

And employees don't have to plead family responsibilities to qualify. Jennifer Maler, a 30-year-old tax manager, has been working 30 hours a week since 1999 in order to pursue her dance and modeling interests. "I didn't want to just sit at a desk," she says.

Don't slip up, though, and call Maler and her colleagues part-timers. During the pre-April 15 crunch, Maler can easily clock 40 to 50 hours a week. It's a short week, she says, compared to colleagues pushing 60 hours.

Eli Lilly's Morris also has handled international conference calls from home and worked Fridays during crunch periods. "That's part of the flexibility one has to have when you work reduced load—acknowledging that there will be ebbs and flows in the workload," she says.

POLICIES INTO ACTION

Talented employees often will perform even better on a flexible schedule, Gockel says. But if the employee's performance is average, cutting hours isn't going to boost their performance, she says.

If employees are interested in reducing their hours, a variety of issues should be discussed first. Are the job and team good fits for their request? Are they willing to ramp up during busy periods? And do they realize that curtailing their hours may place them on a slower promotion track?

Above all, part-time initiatives must be applied equitably and managers must be well-trained to handle the logistical challenges, Bravo says. Useful strategies, such as job-sharing and cross-training, ultimately can make it easier for businesses to cover staffing gaps during vacations or unexpected illnesses.

"The key here is not seeing this as a fringe policy, but an essential way in how work is done," she says. "We need to do this not as a favor to women, but as a better

way to do business."

Supervisors often will report that part-time employees can match, or nearly so, the output of a full-time employee, Eli Lilly's Lange says.

"These individuals tend to come to work as though it's the day before vacation," she says. "They know they are going to be here for a short period of time. They work very productively. They don't spend as much time on things that don't have value."

Sometimes employees will push themselves too hard, driven in part out of loyalty to the company for making the schedule accommodation, says John Featherstone, a senior human resources director in Sun Microsystems' iWork Solutions Group. About 1,800 of Sun's nearly 32,000 employees work a reduced schedule, an option that works well if managers and employees are realistic about what objectives can be accomplished in a shortened time frame, Featherstone says.

"I think the biggest challenge is identifying what you are going to take off their plate," he says.

As managers and employees become adjusted to the new schedule, the instant-access nature of e-mail and cell phones can help, preventing employees from falling too far out of touch during their "off" days.

"I say this a little reluctantly, quite honestly," Levey says, concerned that supervisors might abuse that easy access.

In the end, it's the supervisor's comfort level that can make or break a part-time position, Lange says. At one point, Eli Lilly officials tried to isolate which job positions would be best-suited for a reduced schedule. The job description, as it turned out, was less important than the supervisor's attitude, she says.

"If the supervisor doesn't feel satisfied unless they have access to that person at any time, he or she may not be comfortable with that kind of arrangement," Lange says.

NOT THE MOMMY TRACK

Several years after Morris ratcheted down her schedule, company officials approached her about moving into a supervisory role. The offer came with one stipulation: She must return to a five-day week. So the Morris household switched schedules. Doug Morris, also an Eli Lilly employee, reduced his hours, taking Fridays off to be with their children.

The surest indication that reducing hours doesn't carry a stigma is when more men request it, Williams says. Progress in that area has been slow. The mailing list for the New York and Philadelphia chapters of Flex-Time lawyers is 1,500 strong, but no more than three dozen men are on it, Henry says.

Still, there are some promising signs. Ernst & Young's 2005 data shows that 20 percent of employees on flexible schedules are men, compared with 13 percent in 2001.

Too often, though, various fear factors, including concerns about job loss or missing promotion opportunities, will discourage talented employees from voluntarily downsizing their schedules, particularly in a tight job market, Levey says.

Until more employees follow pioneers like Morris, company leaders won't learn that fewer hours can translate to more loyalty and retention benefits for the bottom line.

Workforce.com
Booz Allen's novel program for alumni: workforce.com/booz

THE FAMILY VALUES SHIFT

Gen-X employees work as many hours as baby boomers but are more family-focused overall, according to an analysis published last year by the nonprofit Families and Work Institute for the American Business Collaboration, a consortium of U.S. companies.

	Gen-X (ages 23-37)	Boomers (ages 38-57)
Do you put work first?	13%	22%
Do you put family first?	52%	41%
Are you dual-focused?	35%	37%
Weekly hours worked in 2002	44	45
Number of workday hours father spends with children	3.4	2.2

