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Flex time for outside activities can help business

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG 07.09.08, 2:13 PM ET

NEW YORK - Matt Dornic gives his employees flexible work hours so they can pursue graduate degrees or even to work a second job. Steven Rabinowitz encourages his staffers to do pro bono work, although he knows that such extracurricular activities might lead them to quit for a better job elsewhere.

While it's still pretty much the norm for American workers to mold their lives around their bosses' schedules, many small business owners are giving employees flexible work hours, allowing them to take part in outside activities such as grad school, charitable work or second jobs. Company owners who give their workers such leeway say they're not just being considerate, they're doing something that makes good business sense.

"The only way to compete for these top candidates is to give them flexibility to go back to school or to pursue outside activities, or to find a way to supplement their income," said Dornic, president of 3 Dog Agency, a Washington, D.C.-based public relations firm.

Dornic said one of his staffers is currently in school, so she works a five-day week, including two half-days.

The fear that stops many owners from accommodating employees' outside activities is that productivity will suffer - and in this economy, productivity is more critical than ever. It can be hard for an owner to trust that staffers who are pursuing a degree, doing charitable work or holding down another job will be truly dedicated to their primary employment.

"I find it to be exactly the opposite," Dornic said, explaining that by being flexible, "you increase productivity by so much."

Some companies are able to be more flexible than others - it can depend on the type of business, and whether it needs to have a specific number of workers onsite at any time. But Kevin Oakes, CEO of Institute for Corporate Productivity, a Seattle-based human resources networking company, says a small company's ability to be more flexible is what makes it more attractive to many workers.

At his own firm, "it doesn't matter to me when or where the work gets done, as long as it gets done," Oakes said.

Moreover, Oakes is well aware that staffers often sacrifice their personal time when the job demands it, working late into the night or on weekends. "I don't think you have license to expect flexibility from your employees unless you're willing to give it," he said.

Some owners are concerned that helping staffers continue their education will only lead to the employees' quitting to take other jobs once their schooling is done. Oakes is willing to take the chance on his most valued workers.

“Is it somebody that you think is going to stay with you for a long time? I’d bend over backwards,” he said.

Many company owners have a harder time with an employee who wants flex time to do other work - although in the current economy, it wouldn’t be surprising for more workers to try to get second jobs because of strained household budgets. But many owners believe flex time will in the end only strengthen a company.

Rabinowitz, co-owner of Rabinowitz-Dorf, a Washington D.C.-based PR firm, and his partner Matt Dorf routinely give staffers time not only to pursue their education but to do outside pro bono work. Rabinowitz, who is himself a part-time instructor at Johns Hopkins University, believes that giving employees time for other activities creates a better work atmosphere.

“A good workplace environment begets good work,” he said, and explained further that the company’s policy “makes us very attractive to prospective employees.”

Rabinowitz said staffers’ tenures with his firm tend to be very short because of the nature of the PR business in the nation’s capital. And the experience they gather in their pro bono work can also lead them to other positions. But, rather than try to stop them, he encourages them, knowing they will remain part of his network and that he’ll get business opportunities from them in the future.

So, he says of being flexible, “it’s also smart business practice, because you get back what you give.”