

Background

Some university faculty and staff have family or other responsibilities that may conflict with standard work schedules. Institutions such as McMaster University in Canada work to “[remove] or [minimize] the adverse effect of barriers in the work environment or in the method of doing work, which prevent otherwise qualified persons covered by the [university’s] [c]ode from achieving expected outcomes of a job.”¹ This includes accommodations associated with disability, illness, family status, and religious observance.

Description

Universities including McMaster University and the University of Michigan offer eligible employees the option of flexible working schedules. This could come in the forms of telecommuting, arranging flexible starting and closing times, a compressed work week, part-time work, reduced work for a specified period, compensating for time at a later date, swapping shifts or tasks, job sharing, using vacation leave, being granted “accommodation time,”¹ or phased retirement.² At both universities, faculty and other academic staff members must work with their supervisors and/or departments to arrange flexible schedules, requests for which can be made for a single event or a longer-term basis.

In the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University³, employees may design a pre-approved flexible schedule in conjunction with their supervisors. The work day would consist of core time, when all employees must be present, and flexible time, which spans two-week cycles and up to one day off every two weeks. The core and flexible hours vary among the department’s units. To obtain reduced workloads, faculty at McMaster University must work with their departments to ensure alternate arrangements are made to cover the workload gap¹ while faculty at the University of Michigan reduce their teaching responsibilities but are expected to fulfill their other duties.⁴ The reduced workload period does not affect University of Michigan faculty members’ tenure probationary period. Other universities, such as Moi University in Kenya, are working to establish parent-friendly work schedule options for staff.⁵

Results

Reviewers rated this practice as featuring the following gender transformative characteristics:

- Transform family, school, and/or work arrangements so that women are not economically or socially penalized/disadvantaged for caregiving (*critical criterion*)
- Change or attempt to change an imbalance of power or otherwise level the playing field (*critical criterion*)
- Challenge and change common discriminatory gender beliefs or norms (*critical criterion*).

Flexible work schedules can transform work arrangements for faculty and other staff members with family responsibilities and enable them to better integrate their professional and personal lives. This practice also legitimizes caregiving, leveling the playing field

particularly for women faculty. However, no data on results or formal assessments were available.

Summary conclusions

This is a potentially gender transformative practice that facilitates the ability of faculty and other university staff members to be both working professionals and caregivers. More documentation and evaluations are needed to build the evidence on how this practice affects faculty members' work environments and career development.

Reference(s) and source(s)

1. McMaster University. 1998. Policy and Procedures on Employment Accommodation. <http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/faculty/Conduct/EmploymentAccommodation-PolicyandProcedures.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2011).
2. University of Michigan. Work/Life Resource Center, Flexible Work Arrangements: Types of Flexible Work Schedules. <http://hr.umich.edu/worklife/flexwork/types.html> (accessed June 5, 2011).
3. McMaster University, Department of Family Medicine. Rev. 2009. Flexible Working Schedule. Standard Operating Procedures. <http://fammedmcmaster.ca/forms/standard-operating-procedures/DFM002%20-%20Flexible%20Working%20Schedule.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2011).
4. University of Michigan. 2005. Standard Practice Guide 201.93: Modified Duties for New Parents. <http://spg.umich.edu/pdf/201.93.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2011).
5. Telephone interview with Dr. Wanjiku Khamasi, Director, Institute for Gender Equity, Research & Development, Moi University. March 11, 2011.

Other references used in this review

University of Michigan. Work/Life Resource Center: Flexible Work Arrangements. <http://hr.umich.edu/worklife/flexwork/index.html> (accessed June 5, 2011).