5-2019

The stigma that keeps consultants from using flex time

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TheFlex Time

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MAY 02, 2019

Part-time options at McKinsey & Company. Mass Career Customization and 3-4-5 travel schedules at Deloitte. Predictable Time Off at Boston Consulting Group.

Management consulting firms offer some of the best workplace flexibility policies, including benefits like paid leaves and sabbaticals. Most employees, however, don't take advantage of them. This seems like a missed opportunity, especially since management consultants continue to experienceextremely high levels of work-life conflict, leading to problems such as low satisfaction and high turnover.

Research suggests that "flexibility stigma" explains this disjuncture between the policies offered by firms and their limited uptake by employees. People fear that taking up these benefits — e.g., paid parental leave, part-time or compressed workweeks, extended leaves of absence, local or virtual projects to temporarily decrease travel, and ad-hoc periods of increased flexibility — will lead to them being seen as less committed to work.

We interviewed 50 management consultants working at five prestigious firms based in the United States, asking them broadly about their careers and personal lives to understand the challenges they face. We learned that in addition to stigma, these professionals also avoided flexibility policies in order to maintain a sense of personal control: they preferred the freedom to manage their work-life balance as they saw fit, rather than opting into a company policy. (Our sample was half men and half women, half married or engaged and half unmarried, and 60% had been in consulting for fewer than five years.)

The problem is that this perception of greater control didn't seem to alleviate their work-life conflicts. Our interviewees told us about many family sacrifices, health problems, and suffering relationships due to their busy work schedules. When asked why they didn't try the flexibility benefits available to them, they dismissed them as unusable. For example, one consultant was unable to visit her father on his deathbed because a client demanded her presence in another city. Rather than accessing a flexible work option, she reluctantly conformed to the request. She continues to carry intense regret about the outcome but emphasizes that the decision was her own choice, which gives her a sense of agency rather than victimization.

Why would employees seek to preserve this feeling of control at the expense of their own well-being? Four main reasons stood out.

First, the consultants we talked to stressed that work-life balance (and related policies) are simply incompatible with the job of consulting. Regardless of gender or parental status, they firmly believed that their jobs were inherently demanding and that their organizations could not become more family-friendly. This belief is particularly striking coming from consultants, who manage change in organizations for a living.

They often glorified the requirements of the work, including exceedingly long hours, extended business trips, and weekend work, despite the work-life imbalance generated by them. They viewed a proclivity toward overwork as a natural characteristic of consultants — part of their "constitution," as one person told us — a belief that tends to paint those who prioritize their family over their jobs as less suited for the profession.

One study participant Rita (all names are pseudonyms) told us, "I've been in enough different jobs to know that there's certain things that go with the job, and you can't really change it. You're never gonna have consulting and not have travel." Even though she herself did not travel when her kids were young, instead working mostly on local projects, she rejected that solution for her peers.

Second, consultants prided themselves on managing work-life conflicts on an individual, as-needed basis. Despite the breadth of programs offered, consultants in our sample emphasized that managing work-life balance is fundamentally a personal issue. They strongly believe that their "natural" suitability for consulting means that they can — and should — find their own solutions. Most participants rejected firm-offered flexibility policies, saying that a "one-size-fits-all" approach does not help alleviate the unique conflicts faced by different people.

Ron told us, "When I hear of big programmatic solutions to work-life balance, I approach them with some suspicion… Every person or couple's or parent's recipe has different ingredients and different cooking times and different-size ovens."

Third, consultants framed work-life decisions as choices. Most of the people we talked to used a language of choice (i.e. "tradeoffs," "compromises," "choices") to describe how they managed the balance between their professional and personal lives. This language of choice helped convince consultants that their current situations accurately reflected their current preferences.

James, for example, has cancelled many vacations with his spouse and children in order to meet — and exceed — workplace demands. Reflecting, he says, "I have the choice to work here … I sacrifice family time because I see an opportunity to make a career advancement.'" He believed that taking holiday meant *not* advancing. But reframing these immutable demands as choices helped him to reclaim a sense of agency in an otherwise disempowering situation.

Fourth, consultants emphasized their option to leave. Because they see the structure of consulting work as unchangeable, they try to manage their own work and life within it. They emphasize that, if they're ever unable to do so, they can always exit the industry. James, for example, noted that, when he no longer wants to give up family time for his job, he can leave consulting. Many others highlighted quitting as an option. This is, of course, reflected in the high turnover and "up-or-out" culture of the industry.

What organizations should do

So what should organizations do?

Flexibility programs remain important. Research has shown that they can raise employee satisfaction, health, and productivity, reduce turnover and have material bottom-line financial

impacts —if people use them. Here are ways to make it easier for consultants and those in similar industries to do so.

Broaden success metrics. Leaders must rethink what it takes to succeed at their organizations. Instead of offering benefits that do not fundamentally change expectations, they can build flexibility into their guiding logic. When billable hours are a key metric in employee evaluations (as they were in many of the firms we studied), programs that promise fewer hours are problematic. Better metrics might include performance, quality, and client and team satisfaction. Project assignments, evaluations, and advancement decisions should be less contingent on work-life sacrifices, including intensive travel.

While most firms offer some form of 360 evaluations (i.e. subordinates evaluating their superiors), they differ in weighing these for promotion and compensation decisions. Those that actively value feedback from lower-level employees may hold leaders more accountable for fostering improved work-life balance.

Although global staffing models, which routinely assign consultants to faraway projects, are quite common, firms can also choose to instead emphasize local and regional staffing, which could result in consultants experiencing reduced work-life conflict.

Change the culture of "natural" overwork. Organizations should also work to tone down the rhetoric of natural suitability for consulting and the glorification of overwork. These paint long hours and face time as essential, even moral, components of elite professions. Instead, leaders can emphasize quality of hours over quantity. Research has shown it is possible to challenge and change these pervasive norms. Local managers also have substantial discretion in creating team cultures. They can encourage their own employees to take time off for personal needs and to share responsibilities.

Frame flexibility as a shared organizational value. The mantra of personal choice encourages individualized approaches to work-life conflict, which, research suggests, are not particularly successful in creating better outcomes. Instead, firms can communicate a shared responsibility, emphasizing that they are committed to helping employees find balance and well-being and do not expect their people to bear that burden on their own.

Pervasive work-life challenges are best addressed through organizational changes. By following these steps, organizations can make progress in alleviating these conflicts and providing solutions employees can use more effectively.

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