

How To Make Shift Work Family Friendly

by JENNIFER LUDDEN

The last in a three-part series

March 17, 2010

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On Aug. 10, 2005, Vickie Underwood was nearing the end of her shift, overseeing the production run at a printing plant near Atlanta.

"At the time, I had been working at the plant for over 22 years with an unblemished work record," she says.

When she got off at 3 that afternoon, Underwood needed to hurry home to register her kids at two different schools and sign up the youngest for aftercare. The county was holding a one time all-day registration, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., to accommodate working parents — which is ironic, considering what happened at 2, with an hour to go in Underwood's shift.

"I was asked to work three hours mandatory overtime. I mentioned to them that I had to register my kids for school, and they told me that I couldn't leave," Underwood says.

Underwood had worked last-minute overtime dozens of times before, but on this day she said no. Since school registration is mandatory, she didn't really think she'd get in trouble. In fact, her bosses skipped right over any disciplinary measure and fired her. Underwood says her family was devastated and dumbfounded.

"My family was like: 'Huh? How could this happen?' And it was almost like, 'No, they had to fire her for something other than her kid,'" Underwood says. "No one wanted to believe that's what I was actually fired for."

Underwood fought a year without pay before finally getting her job back, and she was lucky to have a union backing her up.

'There's A Lot Of Flexibility ... It's Called Quitting'

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Work-life experts say cases like Underwood's happen a lot because of the unpredictability so many low-wage and hourly workers face: schedules posted just days in advance, rotating schedules, unexpected overtime some days, while other days they can show up only to be told business is slow, they should go back home — without pay.

"I always say, there's a lot of flexibility in those jobs, but it's called quitting," says Joan Williams, head of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California.

While much of the focus around job flexibility has centered on an elite cubicle culture who can work from Starbucks on their laptops, Williams says low-wage workers often need it more. First, they actually have to be at the store, hospital or factory. What's more, a disproportionate number are single moms, yet wildly variable schedules mean they essentially have to be on-call at-will.

"We're certainly familiar with this at the top of the income heap with executives, investment bankers and lawyers," Williams says. "But a recent study showed that even for minimum-wage jobs, employers put a premium on someone who says, 'I'm always available.'"

Getting A Little Understanding From Managers



Enlarge

Jennifer Ludden/NPR

So in today's 24/7 economy, can a low-wage workplace be family-friendly?

"Every job, even an hourly job, can have some flexibility," says Ellen Kossek of Michigan State University.

She's helping conduct a [National Institutes of Health study](#) that's taking on the hardest cases for flex work. Kossek believes the key is making sure that managers understand what their employees are up against, and she used a chain of Michigan

Tina Stachowicz is the customer service manager at the Family Fare grocery in Bryon Center, Mich. During a flexibility training program, she noted each time she said hello to employees, asked about their family or changed the schedule to accommodate a personal conflict.

hello to their staff or solicited information about personal conflicts with work.

"We'd have one question, if you're asking about their family," says Tina Stachowicz, a customer service manager who participated. She says she also asked about "sporting events with the younger ones, because a lot of them are in sports. How's school going, that type of thing."

Can Flexible Work Make You Healthier?

When you search for risk factors for cardiac disease, obesity or any number of ailments, you likely won't see "your job" listed in any medical manual. But Lynne Casper, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, believes the link should be obvious.

"Our lives have sped up," she says. "We don't have down time. This is a public health issue."

A few years ago, when Casper was at the National Institutes of Health, she helped launch a [wide-ranging study](#) to explore the health impact of flexible work — or lack of it. Researchers surveyed employees at Best Buy headquarters, which had implemented an aggressive flexible work program, and also at grocery stores, hotels and nursing homes. They asked who had the most accommodating managers and matched that information against a range of health measures. Lisa Berkman, a social epidemiologist at Harvard University, says the results were striking.

Employees with the most rigid managers "had about a two-fold risk of having two or more cardiovascular risk factors. And the amazing thing was that they slept about 30 minutes less per night than people whose managers were more open and creative."

One study also included family members of employees. It found that on days when a parent reported a work conflict with a manager or co-worker, their children had a higher level of cortisol, an indicator of stress.

The NIH is now expanding its study, conducting research at a telecommunications company and a chain of nursing homes. Berkman says the results could show that "how work is designed causes poor health. And that has implications for businesses and their bottom line."

A five-minute break would allow a cashier to call her child "even if it wasn't when her official break was, but when she knew the bus got home," Kossek says.

At a Family Fare grocery south of Grand Rapids, Mich., Tina Burgess worked part time for 13 years, juggling her hours around raising two young boys. Shortly after she took part in the flexibility study, a full-time front office job opened up. Burgess wanted the benefits that came with that job, but there was a problem: it started at 5 a.m. Her husband left for work at 5:30, so Burgess needed to be home to get her children to school. Her manager worked it out.

Making It Work

These days, Burgess does start work at 5 in the morning, counting up sales from the day before and readying the cash registers for the day ahead. Her teenage sons keep their cell phones on their pillows, and every morning at 7 she calls to wake them.

One day earlier this year, Burgess has to call her son Aaron a few times. "He went snow boarding yesterday, so he's probably wiped out," she says, shaking her head with a smile. She tries her other son, and a sleepy-sounding Jordan picks up. "Hey, mom."



grocery stores to test her theory.

In half the stores, she had managers watch a video on flexibility, then asked them to keep a notebook and mark down each time they said

Managers were also asked to be role models, so they'd talk about leaving work early themselves to see a child's school play, for example. Researcher Kossek says such small things can have a big impact.

"If you work for a workaholic or someone who acts like they don't have a family, you feel reluctant to talk about your own personal needs," Kossek says.

The managers would also note each time they helped someone resolve a conflict, perhaps by switching around the schedule.

Good For Workers And Employers

The NIH wanted to know whether this kind of flexibility at work can improve employee health, so they matched manager flexibility against various measures of employee well-being. Kossek says those with the most accommodating managers "had better physical health reports, better sleep quality, higher job satisfaction, and less stress over work-life conflicts."

The NIH researchers are expanding their study to a group of nursing homes, hoping to convince companies it's in their best interest to be accommodating and that it's just not that hard.

Kossek says it could mean posting schedules farther in advance, making it easier for workers to trade shifts or cross-training more people for the same job — or simply easing rules on cell-phone use.

"Hey, Aaron's not answering his phone so you

Tina Burgess opens the front office at 5 each morning at the Family Fare grocery in Byron Center, Mich. About two hours later, she returns home briefly to help her two sons get ready for school.

wanna get him up?" Burgess asks.

Burgess starts brewing the complimentary coffee just inside the front doors, checks in with a

colleague, and at 7:15 heads out for the short drive home.

At the house, the sleepy boys gather their things in the living room while Burgess packs lunches and hands out after-school spending money. Then, with a quick "I love you," she's back out the door.

Burgess used to take the boys to school, but her oldest recently got his license. As she drives back to work, she muses that they could probably manage without her now. Still, she says this small ritual is important to her.

"Sometimes in the morning, I get a feel for if it's going to be a bad day," she says. "Maybe they want to say something before they go to school. If I wasn't there, they wouldn't be able to."

comments

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Recent First



Janelle Edwards (jedwards2) wrote:

I worked at a library, you wouldn't really consider this shift work but with all the nights and weekends it really was. My boss wasn't flexible and didn't even want us to switch shifts without approval. There was so much micromanagement it was unbelievable. My stress level was through the roof with all of this. I quit. I was one of the lucky ones, I don't have to work but wanted to too. Such a shame, I have a family, I can't work all nights and weekends I would never see them. This article was inspiring to see. I really agree that your boss and their ability to have a flexible schedule for you affects your health.

Thursday, March 18, 2010 9:18:23 PM

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

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roberta keeler (rrk1961) wrote:

I work at a low wage manufacturing job, my husband works as a truckdriver, the only reason I don't leave, I carry our insurance and they are very flexible. When my son was young I could go to work after he went to school and be home before he got home. When I need time off if he was sick I could get it. Now he's older but if I want to take a long lurch for some reason I can or take a day of here and there it's no problem. But I also work hard when I'm there and they know it. As long as the work is getting done it shouldn't matter when you come in or when you leave. We don't get paid much so having this benefit is what keeps us there.

Thursday, March 18, 2010 6:34:38 PM

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

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Shea Nash (SDN) wrote:

I'm glad they are doing studies like this. This story meant a lot to me. I worked for Wells Fargo as a teller last year. The money wasn't great and the expectations were high. I thought my managers were the best when they let me take all of my paid vacation in one three week chunk so that I could commercial fish in Alaska and make enough money to pay for our new baby and make a down payment on a lease for a bigger house. My managers seemed very understanding, they even discussed with me the possibility of being promoted so I could afford it all. However, my son was born two months later with transposed arteries on his heart, a condition that required open heart surgery within the first week of life and required him to be kept in NICU for a month. Children's is 90 miles away from home. Wells Fargo refused to let me have the time off to be with my son in the hospital because they had already made an exception for me. I was three weeks shy of a year at my job, so I could not apply for state family medical leave. I lost my insurance. They said I couldn't stay on with WF, not even working at WF in Seattle. I've been unemployed since. Managers need to know that this isn't right. They would expect more for themselves from a company.

Thursday, March 18, 2010 6:07:37 PM

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

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Jess P (JessP) wrote:

The real tragedy is that the mother feels the need to work instead of be with her kids full time. Reduce your spending, give up the kids cell phones, give up cable.....we have traded family time for material goods that we don't really need. Maybe I'm just old fashion.

Thursday, March 18, 2010 11:18:39 AM

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

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Linda Hultman (Falls_Angel) wrote:

I was appalled when I heard an adult voice answer the phone when I heard this story on the radio. Has she ever heard of an alarm clock? We made our daughters be responsible for their

own getting up, getting ready and making their lunch. These guys are going to make awful husbands in the future, having a mother who leaves work to come home and fix them breakfast and lunch. If she wants some "special time" to talk to them, she could find some other way to do it. Even my mother, who spoiled my brother, used to just pour his cereal and then go off to work. (I saw her do it one day when I was home from college. I laughed.)

Don't get me wrong. I tried to be home most days for my kids, too. I have to say though, they enjoyed the days I wasn't home; it gave them some private time. They probably wouldn't have liked it if I was never home when they got home from school, particularly before they could drive.

OTOH, as long as her work doesn't care, and as long as she's not expecting someone else to fill in for her while she's gone, what's it to me?

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 5:51:54 PM

[Recommend \(4\)](#)

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Christina S. (CEES) wrote:

I find it a little ridiculous that they had to conduct a study to determine what is painfully obvious. Flexibility, concern, compassion, acknowledging workers personal and family needs and being respectful certainly creates a better workplace and happier, more productive workers. Common sense and little business savvy should tell employers and companies that, no study needed!

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 4:20:50 PM

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Maya B (Kaath) wrote:

@Jacob: I think the point was she wanted to be there for them at the start of their day. Teenagers only look like adults on the outside, inside they're often questioning their own existence, battling stress and depression and trying very hard not to show it. Her comment about giving them a time and place to talk to her was the real point.

Teens need their parents just as much as younger kids, just in a different way - I know, I have a seven-year-old and a sixteen year old. And when my oldest was in his early teens I made a special point of being there for him after school and I'm darned glad I did too.

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 3:27:32 PM

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

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Rebecca Hansbrough (spidergirl24) wrote:

Interesting how the workforce stories all involved mothers. Tina Burgess leaves work at 5am while her husband leaves a half hour later but can't check up on the kids? By the time I was 11, I made it out the door to school and picked up my kid sisters from daycare on the way back home. You'd think if a teenager is old enough to drive, he should be able to get out of bed or the husband could check up on him.

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 3:24:31 PM

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bendit liike beckham (gv045) wrote:

Raise the minimum wage so that the poor don't have to work so much. Its inhumane to see a person working 2 shifts just so that they can survive.

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 3:15:48 PM

[Recommend \(4\)](#)

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Jacob M (JacobM) wrote:

"I think the mom of the teens needs to give her kids some more responsibility."

AMEN!!! I was laughing so hard when I heard this story on the radio. Are you kidding me? Is her 16 year old son still in diapers?

Wednesday, March 17, 2010 2:01:05 PM

[Recommend \(5\)](#)

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