

# Ambivalence is Not a Strategy

## Employees Sense Waning Commitment to Work Life Flexibility

### About the Research

This is the second in a series of research reports based on a December 2013 **ORC International** telephone survey of a national probability sample of 556 full-time U.S. employees with a +/- 4 percent margin of error. The survey and research reports are the most recent installment in a biennial series of “reality checks” that have monitored the national progress of issues related to work life flexibility from the individual’s point of view since 2006.

For the survey, “work life flexibility” was defined as having flexibility in when, where and how you work. It allows you to flexibly allocate time and energy between your work life and personal life.

### The Short Story: Ambivalence is Not a Strategy Employees Need Guidance

In this report, we clarify the current state of workplace flexibility from the employee’s perspective. As in previous years, new trends have again emerged that require attention. Most notable in late 2013, more than 4 in 10 full-time employees surveyed reported that their employer’s commitment to work life flexibility may have waned from the previous year, despite an overwhelming majority of respondents saying they had workplace flexibility.

It’s not just Yahoo, Best Buy and Bank of America that have sent mixed signals on flexibility over the past year. Despite the fact that almost all full-time employees had some type of work life flexibility in 2013—with nearly a quarter reporting that their level of flexibility increased over the prior year—these same full-time workers see and sense employer ambivalence toward flexibility in when, where and how work is done. Ambivalence, however, is not a strategy. Organizations need to be intentional and deliberate about what type of flexibility works for their business, and then help their people use it effectively; however, that is not happening.

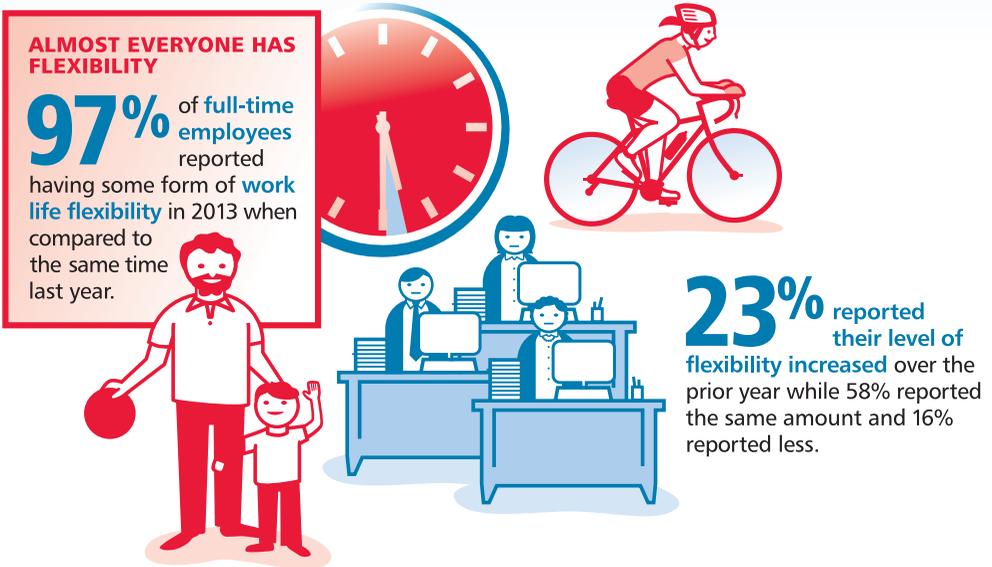
We found that a majority of employees did not receive training or guidance on the most effective ways to manage their work life flexibility for optimal personal and business wellbeing and performance, which affected how employees perceived their organization’s commitment to more flexible ways of working.

We also found a majority of respondents continued to struggle with obstacles that kept them from using or improving that flexibility including some noted increases in certain issues such as increased workload or no time for flexibility. This lack of effectiveness hurts

both business and people. Further, when compared to 2011, an even larger majority of full-time workers surveyed believe employee loyalty, health and performance suffer in workplaces without work life flexibility.

The way we live and work is changing and how well we each manage that change can affect health, wellbeing and business performance. Work life flexibility, or fit, is not only key to employee health and wellness, but also an important factor in sustainable business success. With a better understanding of this new reality, employers can empower their people to take personal accountability and action for success and develop informed strategies that suit the unique needs of their business and their workforce.

## Key Findings: Almost Everyone Has Work Life Flexibility



Work life flexibility is not a disappearing anomaly. As was the case in 2011, almost all respondents said they had some form of flexibility in 2013 (97%), with no significant difference between the levels reported by men and women. The ability to be flexible in how, when and where you work and to allocate time and energy between your work and your personal life has NOT decreased. In fact, the number of full-time U.S. workers who said their level of flexibility increased was higher in 2013 (23%) when compared to 2011 (17%).

Among those who have any work life flexibility, the majority of flexibility in 2013 was informal and occasional (55%) such as occasional changes in schedule or your work location other than your employer's office, while the remainder (42%) had a formally agreed upon arrangement with their employer.

**When thinking about the amount of work life flexibility you CURRENTLY have, do you have...(choose one)?**

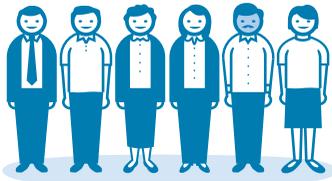
	2013 TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN
Work life flexibility	97%	98%	97%
■ More work life flexibility than at this time last year	23%	25%	19%
■ Less work life flexibility than at this time last year	16%	17%	14%
■ Or, about the same	58%	55%	64%
Don't have any work life flexibility	2%	2%	3%

	2013 TOTAL	2011 TOTAL
Work life flexibility	97%	98%
■ More work life flexibility that at this time last year	23%	17%
■ Less work life flexibility than at this time last year	16%	15%
■ Or, about the same	58%	66%
Don't have any work life flexibility	2%	2%

## Perceived Waning Employer Commitment

While almost all respondents may have said they had some type of flexibility in 2013, there appears to be an eroding confidence in employer commitment. Respondents were equally split between the 46% who described their employer's commitment to work life flexibility as strong and the 45% who described it as possibly weakening.

**BUT THERE IS AN ERODING CONFIDENCE IN EMPLOYER COMMITMENT**



**4 in 10**

More than perceive a **waning commitment** to flexibility **from their employers.**



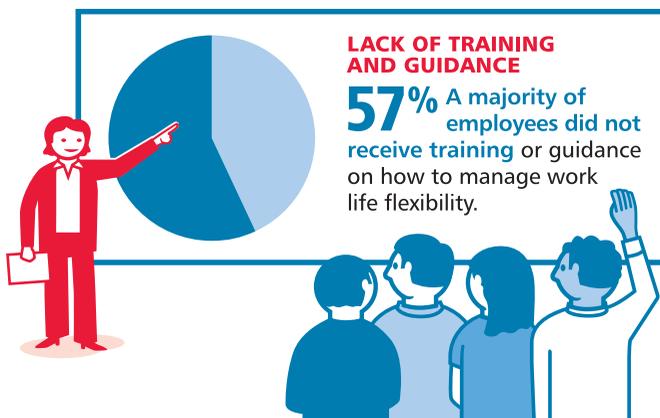
In the past year, several high profile companies ... reduced or eliminated certain aspects of work life flexibility, such as telecommuting. In light of these decisions, how would you describe your employer's commitment to work life flexibility? Would you say? (Choose one.)

	TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN
Your employer still has a strong commitment	46%	47%	45%
Your employer is committed for now, but that could change	20%	20%	21%
There are signs and you hear rumors about decreasing flexibility	5%	5%	5%
It is evident that your company has reduced flexibility	20%	19%	22%
Don't know	8%	8%	7%

## No Guidance or Training for the Majority of Workers

One reason for this eroding employee confidence is that nearly 6 in 10 respondents said they did not receive any guidance or training to help manage their work life flexibility, compared to only 40% who did receive such support.

Those who did receive employer training were significantly more likely to say their employer had a strong commitment to work life flexibility (58%) versus those who did not receive guidance (38%). Conversely, those who indicated they did not receive training/guidance were significantly more likely to say it is evident their company reduced work life flexibility (25%) than those who said they were trained (14%).



	TOTAL	DID Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training	DID NOT Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training
Your employer still has a strong commitment	46%	58%	38%
Your employer is committed for now, but that could change	20%	19%	21%
There are signs and you hear rumors about decreasing flexibility	5%	4%	6%
It is evident that your company has reduced flexibility	20%	14%	25%

## Obstacles to Work Life Flexibility Continue

### OBSTACLES TO FLEXIBILITY

**62%** reported **obstacles to using or improving their work life flexibility** in 2013—essentially unchanged from 2011.



Just as they did in 2011, a majority of employees in 2013 reported obstacles to using or improving their work life flexibility. Besides increased workload/lack of time, 28% of respondents noted financial/job security concerns as obstacles with millennials (35%) more concerned than their older colleagues. One in five employees (20%) cited worries about the impact on their career paths or that others wouldn't think they worked as hard. For 18%, it was the struggle to manage work and personal life schedules and 16% worried their boss would say no.

It is unrealistic to expect employees to manage and leverage work life flexibility as effectively as possible when most said they received no guidance or training. It's not enough to simply offer someone the option to work flexibly, hand them a laptop and expect them to know what to do. Technology alone is not a strategy, nor should it be the sole tool supporting the flexibility in how, when and where work is done and the allocation of time and energy between work and the other parts of life.

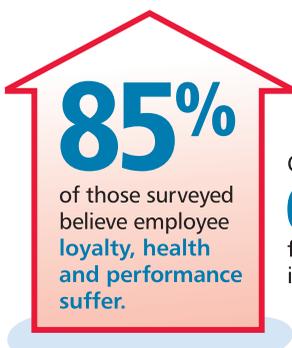
Which of the following describe reasons that may have kept you from using or improving your work life flexibility? (Choose as many as apply.)

	TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN
<b>Total</b> —Anything kept you from using or improving your work life flexibility	<b>62%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>64%</b>
■ Your workload has increased or you have no time for work life flexibility	<b>37%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>44%</b>
■ You might make less money or lose your job	<b>28%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>28%</b>
■ You might hurt your career and/or worry others will think you don't work as hard	<b>20%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>20%</b>
■ You struggle with how to manage your work and personal life schedule and priorities together	<b>18%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>18%</b>
■ You worry your boss would say no	<b>16%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>15%</b>
Nothing has kept me from improving my work life flexibility/ I am satisfied with my level of work life	<b>35%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>33%</b>

A strategy that sets clear objectives and expectations, overcomes obstacles and maximizes workplace flexibility should be as important to a business as a strategy to develop new products or identify new markets. And, like all critical business processes, guidance and training are essential.

## More See Negative Impacts Without Work Life Flexibility

**HIGHER NUMBERS CITE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF NO FLEXIBILITY**



Only **66%** felt this way in 2011.



More than ever, the need for an intentional strategy supported by effective guidance/training is critical as a higher number of respondents in 2013—85% up from 66% in 2011—cited negative impacts of workplaces that don't support work life flexibility. A majority agreed employee loyalty (68%), health (64%) and performance (64%) would suffer.

That majority extended across all demographic groups. There was no significant difference between men and women, people with kids and without kids, and single respondents and those with more than one person in the household.

**Please complete the following statement about possible consequences of a work environment without work life flexibility. Without work life flexibility...(choose as many as apply).**

	TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN
<b>Any</b> —Possible consequences of a work environment without work life flexibility	<b>85%</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>85%</b>
■ Employee loyalty and morale are affected	<b>68%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>68%</b>
■ Health is affected—you're stressed, or lack time for exercise and other healthy habits	<b>64%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>70%</b>
■ Performance including engagement, creativity and productivity is affected	<b>64%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>68%</b>
Lack of flexibility has no effect	<b>12%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>11%</b>

It is important to note that the perceived impact on health when an organization doesn't offer work life flexibility is the one area where training and guidance has a significant, somewhat surprising, impact.

Specifically, respondents who did not receive training or guidance from their employer on how to manage work life flexibility were significantly more likely to say health is affected in a workplace when flexibility is not offered (70%), than among those who did receive training or guidance (57%).

A sense of control, or the perceived lack of it, may be the reason why. Respondents who did not receive training or guidance on how to manage work life flexibility from their employer were significantly more likely to report "your employer" alone controls your work life flexibility (as opposed to "you control" or "you and your employer control"), than those who did receive training or guidance. Conversely, respondents who did receive training are more likely to report either "you control" or "you and your employer" share control over your work life flexibility.

In other words, employees who receive training express greater control over their level of work life flexibility. And this, in turn, could translate into an increased sense of control over health-related activities (e.g. stress reduction, exercise, healthy eating).

Please complete the following statement about possible consequences of a work environment without work life flexibility. Without work life flexibility...(choose as many as apply).

	TOTAL	DID Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training	DID NOT Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training
<b>Any</b> —Possible consequences of a work environment without work life flexibility	<b>85%</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>86%</b>
■ Employee loyalty and morale are affected	<b>68%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>70%</b>
■ Health is affected—you're stressed, or lack time for exercise and other healthy habits	<b>64%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>70%</b>
■ Performance including engagement, creativity and productivity is affected	<b>64%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>64%</b>
Lack of flexibility has no effect	<b>12%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>11%</b>

Which statement most applies to you? (Choose one.)

	TOTAL	DID Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training	DID NOT Receive Flexibility Guidance or Training
Your employer controls your level of work life flexibility	<b>23%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>28%</b>
You have some degree of control over your level of work life flexibility	<b>76%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>72%</b>
■ You control your level of work life flexibility	<b>18%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>16%</b>
■ Your employer and you share control of your level of work life flexibility	<b>58%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>56%</b>

## A “Get Started” To Do List for Organizations

Organizations need to analyze how, when and where employees are working now, and how those employees could be working differently based on the realities of their particular jobs and the strategic objectives of the business. They should then use those findings to tailor a strategic approach to work life flexibility that improves productivity, reduces costs and increases employee morale and engagement. This includes providing comprehensive “how to” guidance and training that helps employees capture the work life flexibility available to them and partner with their manager and team to do their best, on and off the job.

---

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Flex+Strategy Group/Work Life Fit has shown hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals new ways to manage work, life and business. Founder Cali Williams Yost is an internationally recognized flexible workplace strategist and author that has been shaping the global dialogue on these issues for nearly two decades. Learn more at [www.worklifefit.com](http://www.worklifefit.com). For news release and media interviews, please contact [pam@superpear.com](mailto:pam@superpear.com).

This research was made possible with support from **Quest Diagnostics**, the world’s leading provider of diagnostic information services, a premier provider of lab-based employer wellness services, and an award-winning healthy employer of more than 40,000 people.



The findings and analysis in this report are solely those of Flex+Strategy Group/Work Life Fit.