

Self scheduling and flexi-timing at work - 09 Mar 2010

Written by Rita Aggarwal

Tuesday, 09 March 2010 16:38 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 March 2010 16:41

As my asthma got worse and my health problems began to escalate I was worried about my work status and my future career development. I have had to decline many good corporate offers as an HR manager in my youth due to my physical condition and my ensuing temperament. Since I had been exposed to 'freedom and flexitime' at work in my earlier brush with social work in an NGO in a village I felt suited to only such a work environment. My stint at the NGO exposed me to an ideal work environment with total flexibility in terms of job profile, number of hours and the schedules you would like to maintain. After the initial few months of disorientation to experiencing freedom for the first time in work as I was so terribly used to living a scheduled life dictated by either the college or institutions I worked for or my home, I discovered the joys of self scheduling.

I experienced the pleasures of doing the tasks that I enjoyed doing and also making my own schedules. Each member in the core team of less than two dozen members made their own schedules and planned their own projects in consultation with others. Each was responsible for their work and did not need to report to anyone. Self discipline and self motivation was the chief hallmarks of work behaviour. Those who could not fit into this type of atmosphere left with confusion and frustration because nobody would dictate terms to them! And we think that people want more control over themselves! Far from it! It seems majority population would be happy following orders and dictates set by others. But this is also not true one would agree.

Entrepreneurs like me make their own schedules of work and can re-schedule their work as per their convenience. Flexible timing is a big advantage for me. At times when one has to balance issues related to personal life, health needs and other family commitments it is easy for me to adjust my dates and my timings. Since all cannot be entrepreneurs flexible timings at work is important for people with health issues and other important commitments. For women who need to balance the home and work it has added advantages.

There are studies to show that there are health benefits for people who have some sort of control over their work timings. Dr. Clare Bambra of Durham University in the UK and her colleagues identified 10 studies involving a total of 16,603 workers that compared employees who had flexible work conditions with a group that did not. Four studies focused on self-scheduling policies that allowed shift workers to help control the rotation of their work hours. Three found evidence of health benefits. In one study airline maintenance workers' systolic blood pressure dipped by an average of six points after seven to eight months, while their resting heart rate declined by an average of 6 beats per minute. Two studies examined the effects of partial or gradual retirement, finding that workers who chose that type of retirement -- rather than having it forced upon them -- reported better emotional well-being over one year than workers who had less control over their retirement. The benefits found in the studies included lower blood pressure and heart rate, and better quality sleep and less fatigue during the day.

A flexible work schedule might, for instance, make it easier for people to find time for exercise, said Bambra. Earlier, studies have found links between high job strain and stress and increased rates of heart disease, depression and other mental health concerns. Researchers define high

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job strain as work that is demanding but allows employees little to no control over how they work. So there is an increasing interest in whether there could be health benefits from non-traditional work conditions -- like self-scheduling, "flexitime," telecommuting from home etc.

She and her colleagues conclude that employers and policy makers can consider self-scheduling and gradual retirement to be "plausible means" for promoting employee health. They would like to propose the theory that "control at work is good for health," say the researchers. I could not agree with them more.

Publihed in Hitavada Future - 09 March 2010