

Los Angeles Workers Speak:

The Employee Case for Flexibility in Hourly, Lower-Wage Jobs



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The National Partnership for Women & Families and Family Values @ Work convened a discussion group of 14 workers who are paid modest wages on an hourly basis. This short report provides a snapshot of the challenges these workers face and the kinds of flexibility they see as most valuable.



Introduction

Hourly, lower-wage workers are much less likely than salaried, professional employees to have workplace flexibility. Many are required to work in shifts that are unpredictable and constantly changing; they may be asked to work overtime with little notice; and they seldom have leeway to arrive late, leave early, or take time mid-day to deal with family or medical emergencies. These workers typically risk workplace discipline or job loss for taking time off when they are sick or need to care for a sick child. Any flexibility they have is often at an individual supervisor's discretion and provided on an inconsistent basis.

These workers say that having flexibility at work, with managers who understand their needs, would enhance their employers' productivity and profitability as well as their own well-being. While sympathetic to their employers' need to cover work shifts, they say that the government and businesses need to do a better job of providing basic flexibility and workplace protections.

Workers' Key Challenge #1:

Being both productive employees and responsible family members in work environments that offer little or no flexibility.

Like members of most working families in the United States, discussion group participants constantly juggle work with family responsibilities. Workers describe caregiving arrangements that require significant coordination with relatives and other caregivers. For example, a young retail associate whose mother has a chronic anxiety disorder shares responsibilities with her sister, a frozen yogurt server. "My sister helps take care of my mother while I'm working and I do the same," she explained. The sisters often have to scramble to get their mother to the hospital. One of the sisters has encountered resistance from her employer because, she says, when it comes to caring for her mother, "the workplace sees it as a personal issue and not as an emergency."



Discussion group participants included:

- An usher and security guard at music venues
- A sales associate at a large women's clothing chain
 - A server at a frozen yogurt shop
 - A preschool teacher at a community center
- A case manager at a transitional housing facility
- A client services assistant at a medical lab
 - An assistant to a small business owner
- An assistant at an L.A. County office

WORKERS' CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES SPAN GENERATIONS.

Discussion group participants included:

A 25-year-old single mother who cares for her 5-year-old autistic son

Two daughters who share caregiving responsibilities for their older mother and stagger their retail and food service shifts to provide continuous care

A widow who cares for her young children and elderly mother while relying on her 19- and 20-year-old children for backup

Married, divorced, and foster parents who care for children ranging from 11 months old to teenagers

A widowed clerical aide at a non-profit described the patchwork of help she depends on from her older children to care for her youngest: “My 20-year-old son works part-time, mainly at night, and I also have a 19-year-old daughter. They’ll pick my five-year-old daughter up from daycare.” In the mornings, “I have to be in at exactly 8 o’clock. If I didn’t have the support of my older kids, I couldn’t do it.” The same woman has a 73-year-old mother with multiple health problems. The family has hired a daytime caregiver, but “me and my kids take the nights so [my mother] can have someone there.”

“My job is flexible for school—they’re all for it. But when it [comes] down to me...hav[ing] to rush home because my mom has to go to the hospital and has no way to get there on her own, they make me wait until an hour before clock-out time or say they can’t let me go at all,” said a 21-year-old retail associate.

Women say they would benefit if their partners were better able to help manage family caregiving responsibilities, but point out that many men lack flexibility because employers do not recognize that they need it. One worker whose direct supervisor has questioned her need to stay home with a sick child explained, “My husband’s job is not flexible at all.” It would make “my life much easier if it were. Even when I [gave birth,] they didn’t want to let him go.”

Several workers express great anxiety about losing their jobs, and many have had their hours cut. Workers perceive an acute power imbalance between themselves and their supervisors and worry that saying “no” means risking adverse consequences. The widowed clerical aide explained that her hours had been cut from 40 per week to 30, but her workload had not decreased. “We put in a lot of ‘voluntary’ time,” she explained. “We get told things like, ‘If you can’t handle it or it’s too much work for you, maybe we can find someone else.’” Staying past 5:45 p.m. is not always a viable option, she said, but she feels constant pressure from her supervisor to stay. “If I need to work overtime, I do it to keep my job,” she added.

A former hardwood flooring sales associate shared that her supervisor would “rant and demean” her when she ran into problems. “He’d say, ‘You’ll lose your job if you’re not here.’ He ruled under fear.”

The pressure workers feel is intensified when their spouse or partner is out of work. “Work overtime” is what one non-profit case manager and mother of four does in her spare time—her husband lost his job last year and the family budget is stretched thin.

Workers’ family obligations heighten their anxiety about job loss and workplace retaliation. A preschool teacher described her tenuous position: Although her supervisor sometimes gives her 15 or 20 minutes leeway in arriving at work because she is the only teacher with young children, “she’s constantly on me,” monitoring attendance and tardiness. The teacher worries that her kids will get sick on a day when there’s no substitute available. In a previous job, she had even less flexibility. If she got a call from her child’s preschool notifying her that her child was sick, her supervisor would ask why someone else couldn’t take care of the child. “I’d worry, ‘what will happen tomorrow?’” she recalled. “Will he take it out on me?” Some workers have seen co-workers lose jobs or have their hours and benefits cut because of family obligations or illness. One described an older co-worker who was caring for his chronically ill wife and was eventually laid off. It “makes you fearful,” she said.

Unpredictable scheduling causes extra stress and undue financial strain. More than one-third of discussion group participants said they had shown up for work

Workers are willing to be creative about making up time and getting their work done when they are able to take care of their families first.

After a medical lab assistant received a write-up for refusing to work overtime because she had to pick her son up from daycare, she approached her supervisor's supervisor. She offered to extend her hours on the front end of the day so that she could leave by 4 p.m. and avoid future overtime demands.

only to be told to go home or wait for a later shift; some incurred unnecessary child care and transportation expenses as a result. Several workers described current or former jobs in retail stores and restaurants where changes occurred just before the start of a shift. For example, a former department store cashier described her frustration at routinely arranging child care for her two children and taking a bus across town only to find that her manager had changed her shift: "I'd say, 'I just checked online this morning!' It was minimum wage, but I needed the money."

Another worker described difficulties with a child care subsidy program. Her constantly fluctuating work hours meant she often needed to find child care on short notice and at odd times, yet the subsidy program required her to report her child care schedule in advance.

Mandatory overtime causes significant challenges for workers, particularly those with child care or other family responsibilities. In some cases, overtime requests correspond to a workplace emergency. For example, a case worker in a transitional housing organization explained that when a food delivery comes in, she has no choice but to stay—and scramble to find someone to pick up her child—to keep the food from spoiling. Even though she said she "feels bad" leaving her child, she knows her boss will hold her accountable for anything that goes wrong if she leaves.

Other times, however, workers are asked to stay with little notice when there is no apparent urgent need; they risk penalties if they refuse. Some discussion group participants had been written up for refusing overtime. Others said that even if penalties aren't immediate or likely, last-minute requests put them in an awkward position. One participant explained that if she refuses overtime, she is "not written up but ... [is] attacked emotionally. They're always riding you."

Workers' Key Challenge #2:

Uncertainty about whether they will be allowed flexibility on the job when they need it—and, if so, whether they will experience negative consequences for using it.

Workers who have some flexibility at work say they often feel like they are skating on thin ice with their employers. The clerical aide whose older children watch the younger child explained, "If the younger one has a fever, the older ones don't [feel comfortable watching] her. If I call in, [my boss] will say, 'Why can't the older ones watch her? You're not sick.' An older worker described her experience with a supervisor who asked for detailed information before approving a request for time off for a medical appointment—including the name of the doctor and what the appointment was for.

A preschool teacher described how the primary flexibility in her workplace comes on Wednesdays, when a substitute is available. "Luckily my kids haven't gotten sick. If it wasn't a Wednesday, I would definitely worry."

Access to paid time off to deal with personal illness or a sick child or parent is rare—and when sick time is available, workplace cultures often discourage or penalize use. In the worst cases, workers go to work sick because they fear being fired. "I would rather work sick and get paid than take a day off because of the fear of losing my job," explained the clerical aide. Others are forced to incur costs in order to stay employed after an illness. For example, a frozen yogurt server described calling in sick for an evening shift after staying home all day with the flu. After refusing her supervisor's demand to come in, she was told she had to see a doctor that evening to get a note or she would be fired. Most discussion group participants don't have health insurance, so being required to visit a doctor for a flu or severe cold can be costly. "It seems ridiculous to pay to see a doctor for a one-day stomach bug if you know you will be okay," one worker said.

**WHAT IS THE BEST
WAY TO MAKE
WORKPLACES
FAMILY-FRIENDLY?**

“Health insurance [for] all employees whether full- or part-time.”

“Allow flexible scheduling and time off.”

“Allow employees to leave to care for children or elderly.”

“Allow children to come to work if they do not disturb anyone... Child care on premises.”

“Work flexibility should be mandatory. Everyone...should be able to deal with personal issues and keep their job at the same time.”

“Give an employee the room to take care of a child when they are sick.”

“More time, less pressure and fear on workers, especially in ‘remedial’-paying service jobs where the turn[over] rate is quick and easy.”

“Child care consideration and help with transportation.... Incentives for being on time and consistent day to day.”

“Better understanding would make the employees and employers closer and friendlier.”

Many who have paid sick days are unable to use them without being penalized or pressured. A medical lab assistant said that a previous employer provided four paid sick days each year but discouraged employees from using the time. “Even though you have them, it goes against your attendance [record],” she said. She described going to work sick with a mask on to avoid infecting her co-workers. The same worker was ultimately terminated for using all of her sick time to help obtain an autism diagnosis for her five-year-old son. “I said, ‘This is not a common cold, it’s serious—it will affect his whole life,’” she explained, but she lost her job anyway. A former worker in a facility for people living with HIV/AIDS commented, “They don’t want you there [if you’re sick,] but they made you feel guilty.”

Key Solution:

Workplace policies that provide flexibility to workers in a consistent way and reflect workers’ needs and commitments on the job and at home—and managers who create positive work environments.

Workers who are satisfied with their workplaces often attribute their positive feelings to supervisors who treat them with respect. Treating all employees as valued members of the organization is particularly important. “I’m part-time and don’t have status,” explained an administrative assistant, “but [my boss] doesn’t have bias or [show] favoritism. He is nice to everyone.” The actions of organizational leaders are also important. A non-profit case manager described herself as feeling “encouraged” and “supported” by the executive director of her organization because he “sees himself at the bottom” and is there to support everyone who helps to “make the organization run.”

Workers who have had experiences in workplaces with and without flexibility note improvements in employee loyalty and productivity when workers have some control over their schedules. A worker whose lack of flexibility in a previous job led her to experience debilitating anxiety praised her current supervisor and said that in workplaces where supervisors have “respect for everybody...you want to work harder for your boss.” A mother of a young child applauded a prior employer for being “very flexible” and “with that, I was able to be more productive as a mother, student and employee,” she said. Flexibility “bring[s] more productivity and [leads to] a more giving environment so you want to give back a lot more.... It works out for all of you,” noted a worker whose former workplace offered no flexibility.

Workers favor a greater role for government—working with businesses—to ensure that employees can meet basic personal and family needs. Employees say that workers will benefit from greater awareness of existing laws, including the Family and Medical Leave Act. An administrative assistant at a home health care company applauded her employer for helping staff members understand their legal rights. Another administrative assistant commended her employer for telling her about California’s paid family leave insurance program when she was pregnant with her second child. Others felt they had to find out on their own. “They don’t act like they want people to know about it,” one woman said.

Because of the difficulties they have getting and using paid sick days, all workers in the discussion group favored greater government action to make sure employees have job-protected paid sick time to use when they are sick or have a sick child. Workers also say that government and business should work together to assure greater access to affordable, quality child care.