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The Generational Gap in the Workforce: How Flexible Schedules May Be the Answer

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of flexible scheduling for smaller municipalities to retain and attract talent and compete in a changing job market. The workforce is evolving, and with each generation that enters the market there is a push for a stronger work-life balance. Smaller cities can meet these generational expectations as well as retain the skills and talents of retiring generations by offering flexible schedules. Flexible schedules may be the answer for small municipalities to stay relevant while staffing their organizations.

Flexible Schedules

We all watched as the world changed during the height of the COVID pandemic. It forced many organizations to evaluate and change how they approached their day-to-day business activities. The municipal world was forced to update many outdated procedures and explore other ways of doing business, which would have rarely been considered prior to COVID. This, coupled with the changing attitudes and expectations of generations X, Y, & Z, have given outdated business practices a push into the future. On top of varying our services in the cyber world, my city now looks to flexible work schedules to stay current in a quickly evolving job market.

It's important to understand why moving in this direction is vital to the future of our success in retaining and keeping dedicated employees as well as attracting talent in a changing market. A restrictive work schedule is slowly becoming a thing of the past, so how do small municipalities adapt and still provide the services needed to operate a city with a limited staff? What are the benefits of flexible schedules? With set business hours and many positions having only one full-time and one part-time person in its department, granting employees the freedom to set their own hours is not an option at this time. So how do small municipalities overcome this challenge? Let us explore these questions and look at the benefits as well as the setbacks of creating a more flexible work environment that works for all generations.

Though complete flexibility does not work in small cities, understanding how to adapt and create an environment that gives certain measures of flexibility is key. A flexible schedule can manifest in many ways, according to an article published in "Square" by Kaitlin Keefer, such as flex time, working remotely, working part-time, and parental leave.¹ The article by "Humanity," titled "Why Flexible Work Schedules are Beneficial for Both Employees and Employers," discusses compressed workweeks as another option to give some flexibility.² Each one of these options offer something different.

- Flex time gives employees the ability to set their own schedules; they can come and go as they please if they work the required hours.
- Working remotely is just that—the ability to work from your home.

- Working part-time might be a better option for valued employees who simply do not have the need or time to work full-time. This option helps retain employees that might otherwise be lost.
- Parental leave is nothing new, but there is room for improvement that offers employees and employers mutual benefits.
- A compressed workweek allows employees the option of working longer days to stockpile a day off during the week.

For small cities, a compressed workweek might be the solution to retain and recruit employees. This is the best option for the city I currently work for.

Compressed workweeks would allow us to offer the face-to-face services our citizens expect during our allotted business hours, with an additional hour Monday through Thursday to extend our services, while allowing employees two additional days off per month to pursue life outside of work. Due to our staff restrictions, this would be the only option of keeping the doors open 5 days a week while still offering some flexibility to our employees. This change is becoming increasingly appealing as the local school district looks at options to compress their school week to four days. By adding one more business hour Monday through Thursday, employees could use their additional days off as they wish. Having the option of a compressed schedule could also give the city a competitive edge while recruiting.

According to a blog dated August 23, 2022, by Caroline Forsey, “a recent study by Qualtrics found a whopping 93% of employees feel the way they work has fundamentally and forever changed since the pandemic, with the most favorable changes being flexible schedules.” According to the same study, “43% of employees feel their work-life balance has increased over the past two years, along with their overall happiness and job satisfaction.”³ This article also discusses the good and bad of a flexible schedule. Some of the pros are being able to adapt your schedule to fit your family’s needs, indulging in self-care and passions outside of work, working during your most productive hours, avoiding rush hour traffic, a sense of autonomy, and your city can recruit and retain better employees. The list does not stop there; employees with flexible schedules take fewer sick days, produce more, work longer hours, have happier home lives, feel a strong work-life balance, experience less stress and better health, and have a sense of control over their lives.⁴

With all change, there is a potential downside that needs to be evaluated and explored. Working from home can blur the lines between work and home, create communication issues, and introduce a sense of isolation for many. Setting your own schedule or working remotely takes great discipline and structure and without a keen awareness of this, issues may arise. It also can be difficult to create a bonded team and coordinate meetings with everyone setting their own hours or working remotely. Because of these potential setbacks it is important to understand that a flexible workplace may not work for everyone. There are many who prefer the traditional workweek, and that option should be offered if possible. In the next few years, the U.S. workplace will see almost an equal percentage of workers between 4 generations. Balancing each generations’ needs will be vital to the success of your organization and the employees that work there.

With an ever-growing age-diverse workforce it is important to evolve and change to stay competitive and attract up and coming talent and retain the valued employees currently on your payroll. “Zurich Insurance” published an article “How will Gen Z Change the Workplace?” on June 24, 2022, that estimates generation Z will account for 27 percent of the workforce by 2025.⁵ Generation Z range in age from 12 to 25 and were born around the turn of the century or shortly

after. The chart below displays the current makeup of the U.S. workforce according to an article published in “LiveCareer,” by Don Sjoerdsma.

- The Silent Generation (born before 1946) – 2%
- Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) – 25%
- Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) – 33%
- Millennials (Y) (born between 1981 and 1996) – 35%
- Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) – 5%⁶

According to this research, the workforce will change greatly in the next few years. Millennials already make up the largest percentage of U.S. workers, and an even further shift will take place with Generation Z making up 27% of the U.S. workforce by 2025. Each generation has its own unique expectations based off their experiences growing up of what the workplace should look like. The questions that need to be asked are: how do we gain a better understanding of each generation? What skills do each bring to the job? How do we create a workplace that respects and retains the older generations, while attracting and recruiting the younger? What positions can have flex hours, part-time hours, remote schedules, or compressed workweeks? How can this benefit all of us? In order to accommodate 4 different generations in the workplace we must gain an understanding of each and create options that look to the future, while respecting the past.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are the product of a post-war society. They are a large generation that experienced the rise of the middle class. With so many of them coming of age around the same time, they fought for resources and opportunities. They also have a strong belief in equality and petitioned for the rights of minorities and women to join the workforce. They believe in a traditional workplace setting and will more than likely resist the opportunity of a more flexible schedule. They grew up in a world where computers were not a part of their early childhood and early workplace development. In fact, the next generation brought technological change to the workplace, therefore, Baby Boomers had to adjust greatly to a tech driven world, and many do not have a strong connection to technology. Sally Kane published an article on October 4, 2022, titled “Baby Boomers in the Workplace” on “Liveabout.com” which describes them as:

...Extremely hardworking and motivated by position, perks, and prestige. Baby Boomers relish long work weeks and define themselves by their professional accomplishments. Since they sacrificed a great deal to get where they are in their career this workaholic generation believes that Generation X & Y should pay their dues & conform to a culture of overwork. Baby Boomers may criticize younger generations for a lack of work ethic & commitment to the workplace.⁷

Despite the love of a long workweek (in a more traditional setting), there could be great benefits for them, and the workplace, to consider alternatives to their work schedules in the future. Part-time work could offer them an option to retirement as they get ready to make those major decisions about their future. By presenting them the benefits of working from home or in-house, part-time may encourage Baby Boomers to remain in the workforce a little longer and share their vast knowledge with the generations that follow.

Generation X

Generation X is 25% smaller than the previous generation according to the same article published by Sally Kane.⁸ This generation is often referred to as the “latch-key” generation and values its independence. They are viewed by some as the forgotten generation since they are sandwiched between the two larger generations of Baby Boomers and Millennials, but make no mistake; this generation is anything but forgettable. They grew up before the dawn of the internet, but they had to adjust and adapt to advances in technology as they came into the workplace. They have spent their entire professional lives embracing the internet and tech world according to the “HR Exchange Network” article “Why You Can’t Afford to Ignore Generation X in the Workplace.”⁹ Because they are sandwiched between the Boomers and Millennials, they had the unique upbringing of experiencing both generational worlds. Due to this they can identify with and serve as a bridge between the two generations. Generation X is considered the most technologically connected generation. They grew up in a time when divorce was on the rise or both parents worked, and they have lived through multiple recessions, therefore, they had to learn to be self-reliant. Because of their experiences, they can be skeptical and often take very little at face value. This generation watched the rise of 24/7 news and mass communication unfold right in front of them. Generation X has “an entrepreneurial mindset and work hard, play hard thinking” according to “HR Exchange Network.”¹⁰ They have the most money and debt of any generation according to “Business Insider.”¹¹ They also have great conflict resolution, computer skills, face-to-face skills, a strong desire to learn, improve, evolve, and are not afraid to switch jobs to achieve the work-life balance and compensation they desire. Because of their experiences, they learned early on to adapt to their environments. Hunt Scalon Media conducted a survey in July 2017 of what matters to Generation Xers. The top priorities for the motivation for changing careers are job satisfaction (66 percent), a better work-life balance (60 percent), reward packages (50 percent) and flexible working hours (42 percent).¹² Generation Xers value a work-life balance and would adapt and thrive in a more flexible workplace environment. Generation Xers are the second largest generational workers in the U.S., slightly behind the next generation of Millennials.

Millennials

Millennials (Generation Y), according to “villing.com” article by Leslie Langfeldt, are Gen X on steroids. The dividing line between these two generations is so blurred, many of the characteristics are similar.¹³ They get a bad rap, but each up-and-coming generation is often viewed with a level of disdain from the generations that preceded them. They are the first generation to have internet, cell phones, and digital communication during their childhood, therefore, they are tech savvy and driven. They are efficient and prefer to utilize email, text, or social media when communicating. This generation made mental health a priority – it is now a subject that is not taboo to discuss and address. They are self-confident, ambitious, strive for a work-life balance, and are attracted to learning and development over financial rewards. They have been nurtured in their home environment. “Success in Millennials careers is not as important to them as their family and their friends are,” according to “Generation Y in the Workplace” in “Talentor.”¹⁴ Because of being coddled at home, they do well being mentored at work and crave feedback and reassurance on a regular basis. This generation had it easier than the generations before them and due to that are often perceived as arrogant and entitled, but in truth they know there is value in what they bring to the table, and they are not afraid to ask compensation for it. They currently make up the largest

portion of the U.S. workforce. They are hard-working, feel their voice matters, optimistic, celebrate diversity and flexibility, and have high expectations. Like the generation before them, they are not afraid to leave an organization to find the right balance between work, their passions, and their home life. They believe in flexible work schedules. This generation is pushing the envelope even further than Generation X and forcing positive change on how we view the workplace.

Generation Z

Generation Z will change the workplace drastically over the next few years based off their experiences and expectations. They are the largest and most ethnically diverse generation in American history according to Andrew Meola's "Generation Z News: Latest characteristics, research, facts" of "insiderintelligence.com," and they will be the first to enter the workforce that never know life without the internet, smartphones, and all out digital communication.¹⁵ The "insiderintelligence.com" article also says they "most closely mirror millennials on key social issues and political issues, but without much of the optimism."¹⁶ Because of constantly being connected to the world around them they've had a lifetime of absorbing problems and tragedies. According to the article published October 4, 2022, by "Zurich.com," they are the first global generation.¹⁷ Overall, as a generation they have the highest levels of anxiety and stress concerning their future. They are the first generation that feels they will not do better than their parents. They also care the least about money of any generation before them. Instead, they want to make meaningful change and leave the world a better place. They value flexibility, mental health support, diversity, inclusion, and environmental issues. They will have no problem leaving a job that doesn't meet their demands or share their ethics. They function and communicate differently than any generation before them. This generation is highly competitive, collaborative, pragmatic, and care deeply about the world around them. A flexible workplace is not just a nice thing for this generation, it will be a must-have for many. Generation Z will push the workplace further away from what is viewed as traditional. With this generation, flexibility will become the norm, not the exception.

We Are Here, Where Do We Go?

Out of the four generations in the workplace, three want more flexible conditions that allow them to create a strong work-life balance. The desire for this level of flexibility increases with each generation. We cannot stop it. The future is not coming, it is here, and it is time to embrace it. Municipalities need to take a long, hard look at how to modernize and become more attractive to recruits. What we do is noble and can enact great change in our communities, which is highly attractive to the younger generations. Reevaluating our benefits, perks, and flexibility could make all the difference. We need to continue to grow, evolve, and adjust along with the world around us. We've seen great changes in the past few years with Zoom, neighborhood apps & electronic mapping. Since COVID, more and more of our trainings, meetings, and services are online, which is becoming the standard business practice. Your organization's ability to adopt a flexible mindset could greatly benefit the Boomers as well. It could help redefine retirement by offering part-time work (either in-house or remotely) that retains that generation's knowledge and experience in the workforce a little longer than before. Change can be an exciting opportunity to grow and experience life in ways we never have before. Technology, along with shifting generational views,

are introducing us to a path of living that seemed unimaginable 10 years ago. By offering the option of flexible work schedules, those who want it can embrace it, while others can still maintain their more traditional schedule. It doesn't have to fully be one way or the other. Embracing these changes could maximize both our work and personal experiences and enhance the qualities of our lives, while keeping us competitive in an increasingly changing world. Yes, there will be setbacks, but we've adapted and changed when forced to in the past. This time, let us embrace the change and create a workplace that works for all of us!

Notes

¹ Kaitlin Keefer, "How Flexible Schedules Make Employees Happy and Productive," Square Capital, LLC, June 6, 2018, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://squareup.com/us/en/townsquare/benefits-of-flexible-schedules>.

² "Why Flexible Work Schedules are Beneficial for Both Employees and Employers," Humanity, April 24, 2018, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://humanity.tcpssoftware.com/blog/why-flexible-work-schedules-are-beneficial-for-both-employees-and-employers.html>.

³ Caroline Forsey, "Flexible Schedules: The Pros, Cons, & Surprising Outcomes," Hubspot Blog, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/flexible-schedule>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "How will Generation Z change the workplace?" Zurich.com, June 24, 2022, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.zurich.com/en/media/magazine/2022/how-will-gen-z-change-the-future-of-work>.

⁶ Don Sjoerdsma, "A Statistical Look At Millennials in the Workplace," LiveCareer.com, 2022, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://livecareer.com/resources/special-reports/stats/millennials-in-the-workplace>.

⁷ Sally Kane, "Baby Boomers in the Workplace," Liveaboutdotcom, October 7, 2019, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://liveabout.com/baby-boomers> 2164681.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Francesca Di Meglio, "Why You Can't Afford to Ignore Generation X in the Workplace Anymore," HR Exchange Network, November 11, 2021, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://hrexchangenetwork.com/employee-engagement/articles/why-you-cant-afford-to-ignore-generation-x-anymore>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hillary Hoffower and Andy Kiersz, "Meet the typical Gen Xer, American's 'forgotten middle child' who earns more than anyone else but has the most debt at \$136,000," BusinessInsider.com, November 5, 2021, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/typical-gen-x-debt-net-worth-income-earnings-caregiving-stress-2021-8>.

¹² Hunt Scanlon Media "Generation X Remains a Dynamic Workplace Phenomenon," Huntscanlon.com, July 25, 2017, accessed October 7, 2022, <https://huntscanlon.com/generation-x-remains-dynamic-workplace-phenomenon/>.

¹³ Leslie Langfeldt, "Gen X: Adaptable, Flexible & Reachable," Villing & Co, www.villing.com, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://villing.com/articles/generation-x/>.

¹⁴ Sabine Steiner, "Generation Y in the Workplace," www.talentor.com, March 2016, accessed October 7, 2022, <https://talentor.com/blog/generation-y-in-workplace>.

¹⁵ Andrew Meola, “Generation Z News: Latest characteristics, research, and facts,” InsiderIntelligence.com, January 5, 2022, Accessed October 7, 2022, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/generation-z-facts/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “How will Generation Z change the workplace?” Zurich.com, June 24, 2022, accessed October 4, 2022. <https://www.zurich.com/en/media/magazine/2022/how-will-gen-z-change-the-future-of-work>.