

Conversations with the Experts

The Custom-Fit Workplace



Nanette Fondas

Bio: Nanette Fondas is co-author of *The Custom-Fit Workplace: Choose When, Where, and How to Work and Boost Your Bottom Line* (2010). Formerly a professor at premier universities including Harvard's Radcliffe College, Duke's Fuqua School of Business, and the University of California, Nanette now writes about the economics and sociology of work, organizations, and management in national newspapers, magazines, and blogs including *Psychology Today*, *The Huffington Post*, *Ms.*, and *MomsRising*. Winner of a best paper award from the Academy of Management, Nanette's writing was featured in the "50 Visionaries" issue of *Utne Reader*. Nanette is a mother of four children, a Rhodes Scholar, and a Doctor of Business Administration from Harvard Business School.

An Interview with Nanette Fondas
by Judi Casey

What is the custom-fit workplace? How is a custom-fit workplace different from flexible work arrangements or part-time work?

The custom-fit workplace is an integrative idea to help employers and employees work together to end the tug-of-war between jobs and life outside of work. It's a way to solve work-life conflicts that is good for business and, at the same time, good for people, their families, and their communities.

The custom-fit workplace does, indeed, include flexible work arrangements and part-time work. These are the basics of custom fit. But in thinking about all the research, writing, and practice in the work-life area, we realized that there are other innovative work practices being developed to promote win-win work-life solutions. For example, we were very intrigued by the concept of ROWE ([Results-only Work Environments](#)) and the newly emerging [babies-at-work](#) programs. From our work at [MomsRising.org](#), we knew that mothers especially are creatively utilizing contract work and on-demand placement firms that are springing up to employ them on their own terms (for example, working from home during the hours that their children are in school but still taking advantage of their professional skills).

We also realized that the media attention on mothers who "opt out" of paid work would be better directed to the creative ways that parents and others make lane changes during their lives, because the workforce is so diverse now that we have young, old, fast-track, slower-paced, single, parent, newcomer, and veteran workers in it. For example, some baby boomers want to retire gradually before fully retiring, and over 90% of women who take time out from paid work return later to the workplace.

We also knew that telecommuting would play a large role in the custom-fit workplace. My co-author, Joan Blades, is an expert on working virtually, having founded [MoveOn.org](#) and [MomsRising.org](#)—both entirely virtual organizations. The idea of a completely virtual business unit or organization is foreign to most people. Many people know of someone who telecommutes as part of a flexible work arrangement, but the idea of an entire unit, group, or company working virtually is new.

So the concept of a “custom-fit workplace” is meant to be an umbrella that includes flexible work arrangements but also these other workplace innovations that are being developed and implemented.

Why do we need custom-fit workplaces? Why are they important, especially during the current economic downturn?

We need custom-fit workplaces because work is not working for many people in the United States. Today we are in a difficult business environment. The recession was deep. Businesses are struggling. Workers are unhappy, stressed, and at their limit—“just barely hanging on.” We really are at a juncture. Everyone knows Americans work hard, put in long hours, and take little vacation. Women have entered the workforce over the last 40 years and boosted American productivity. But now there’s no more to squeeze out; there are limits to productivity pushes. A crisis may be bubbling up. In a 2009 survey, 55% of Americans—across age and income levels—said they are not satisfied with their jobs. More than half! We’re not taking advantage of the human resources capabilities that we have in this country. We need to do things more intelligently, differently.

The custom-fit workplace suggests some ways to work smarter, including ways to be respectful of workers’ responsibilities outside of work. We believe this will make the country more competitive by utilizing our labor force better, motivating people, and watching productivity soar. The United States has always been a country of solutions; businesses have always found ways to change, respond, adapt, and find new ways of doing things to meet the challenges of a crisis. That’s what we need now, and we hope the book inspires people to adopt some of these practices and develop new workplace innovations, too.

Are custom-fit workplaces just for employees? How can custom-fit workplaces benefit employers?

Custom-fit work arrangements are great for employees, but they are also great for the bottom line. We found an enormous amount of evidence and research out there—academic papers and internal corporate reports—that shows the value of incorporating various flexible, family-friendly, customized work options. The way I describe the business benefit is to think about a virtuous cycle. When a business offers custom-fit and other work arrangements that employees need and value, people want to work there and the company can recruit top talent. When people are given flexibility and other custom-fit work options, they feel trusted and empowered to do their jobs, so they work harder and give much more than the minimum. They are energized when they feel competent, appreciated, and fairly treated. This energy translates into increased quantity and quality of output—and ultimately leads to improved productivity and profitability. It also translates into worker commitment and loyalty, which reduces turnover and the cost of recruiting and training new employees. This improved employee performance and cost reduction boosts the financial performance of the firm, which in turn enhances its ability to recruit the best talent possible—and the cycle starts all over again.

Readers of *The Network News* are no doubt familiar with the hundreds of studies that demonstrate the connection between employee morale, job satisfaction, and commitment as well as outcomes such as productivity, retention, turnover, and profitability. In the book, we discuss these relationships and cite the studies to provide the “business case” for the custom-fit workplace.

What would you recommend to employees, supervisors/managers, and senior leaders who want to get started creating custom-fit workplaces?

As a start, I’d first tell them to remember that the phrase “custom fit” is a reminder that no one size fits all when tackling the challenge of managing work and life. Remember, we’re humans, we’re meant to work together, and we’re meant to figure out how to work together in ways that don’t destroy our humanness. People have families as well as caregiving and citizenry responsibilities. The solutions we offer in the book may work for some situations but not others. Big companies, for example, may have flexible and virtual work arrangements already in full force but not have considered an infants-at-work program. Small mom-and-pop businesses know full well the value of offering a part-time schedule to a valuable worker they don’t want to lose, but they may be unfamiliar with the ROWE concept.

In the book, we do ask managers and executives to take the lead and champion new ways to work. It’s difficult

for an employee to ask for a new work arrangement if he or she perceives that management is not open or informed about it. Managers, really, are on the front line of work-life conflict when it arises for employees. They often are the key agents in making the change. One of my favorite scholars on this topic, Ellen Ernst Kossek, says to “clean up your own backyard.” That really captures it. Don’t wait for a major companywide change. Create the micro-culture that supports customized ways of working that create business results. Then other business units and managers will mimic your success, and the practices will spread.

Can you describe organizations with successful custom-fit arrangements? How have they created a workplace culture—not just a program or policy—that supports custom-fit workplaces?

The most well-known example is SAS Institute in North Carolina. From its inception as a statistical analysis company—and now a software company—it founder, Jim Goodnight, did not want employees to have vacant lives outside of work. The standard workweek is 35 hours, employees have control over their work schedules, and they have an enviable menu of benefits to create a work-life fit, such as three to four weeks of vacation, unlimited sick days to care for themselves or a family member, health and fitness centers, and learning centers for child care. Goodnight says that employees are the company’s greatest asset and that the custom-fit policies are an investment. There is no doubt that SAS has created a culture and not just implemented a set of policies. It is studied by scholars and heralded in the business press, for example, by [Fortune magazine](#) in 2010 as the best company to work for in the United States. And its financial performance has been great for more than 30 years. In 2009, its revenues exceeded \$2.3 billion, up 2.2% from 2008.

We describe many other companies in the book that are utilizing one or more of the custom-fit options, including Jet Blue, 1-800-Contacts, AT&T, IBM, University of California, Best Buy, Gap Outlet, [MoveOn.org](#), and even the Girl Scouts of California.

With so much research demonstrating the benefits of workplace strategies such as custom-fit, why is there so much resistance to these ways of working?

There is resistance because change is difficult for people, for organizations, and for investors in businesses. Industrial organization has, for the most part, been top-down, authoritative, hierarchical, and rigid. The custom-fit workplace is a grandchild of human relations theory. It is based on ideas of trust and valuing the worker as a whole person. It could potentially eliminate some layers of management or, at a minimum, change the way managers manage.

When people are given some control over their work lives, they feel empowered, satisfied, and motivated. Organizational behavior theorists have known this for a long time. But it is now becoming apparent how to connect the dots, so to speak, between work-life issues, job satisfaction and commitment, and organizational outcomes such as business performance (what we describe as the bottom line impact of custom-fit workplaces). It’s an exciting time, really, to be looking at workplaces, because the need to change and evolve is apparent, given the realities of technology, demographics, and globalization. Management and business will have to be open to new ideas to stay competitive. I’m actually very “bullish” that American companies will adopt custom-fit practices as well as design new ways to create a custom-fit workplace.

If you’d like to share some ideas or stories about how your organization or research is enabling people to create a custom-fit, please visit our website: [CustomFitWorkplace.org](#).

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