

Workplace Flexibility Case Study
Ward's Furniture and Flexible Schedules
by Ken Giglio

Company: Ward's Furniture Appliance Co.

Company profile: Ward's Furniture is a family-owned retail operation in Long Beach, CA, that sells household furniture and appliances to the general public. The company also sells appliances to property management companies. It has been in operation since the 1940s and has 17 employees, four of whom are women. The average age of its workers is approximately 34. There is a core group of employees who have been at Ward's for between five and 17 years; the others have been with the company for less than two years.

Program profile: Rather than having a formal flexibility policy, Ward's Furniture handles flexibility requests on a case-by-case basis. For instance, the company worked out an arrangement with one employee to do much of her work from home so that she could care for a child with special needs (see Personal Profile, below). Of the company's 17 employees, Ward's has worked out some sort of flexibility arrangement with about a dozen of them. The company has seen a jump in the number of flexibility programs it has arranged over the past five years. As long as Ward's is able to coordinate its schedule to make sure the store is appropriately staffed, flexibility requests are approved.

The Challenge: The company began to look at flexibility options for its employees as a way to retain valuable employees. Specifically, Ward's wanted to be able to keep its office manager on board despite greater family demands. Ward's has since been able to extend its flexibility offerings to other employees.

Benefits to Employees: The company says it attempts to treat every one of its employees like family. And, as a result, employees are able to feel more connected to their jobs and still be free to attend to personal matters outside of work. For instance, some employees use their flexibility at work to be more active in their children's lives, including spending time volunteering in such activities as their school PTA or Boy Scouts.

Benefits to Employer: Ward's Furniture says there is no question it benefits from the flexible work schedules it is able to set up. It ends up being able to retain many employees who would no longer be able to keep working at the company. It says those employees, in addition to remaining loyal to the company, are more dedicated and productive as a result. It all adds up to a stronger bottom line for Ward's Furniture. In addition to minimal costs associated with hiring new employees, and strong productivity ratings for its workers, the company has enjoyed 5 to 10 percent annual increases in sales during periods in which nearby competitors have struggled or shut down.

Lessons Learned: Ward's Furniture President Brad Ward says he has learned that being able to accommodate employees with flexibility is not only good for the employee but for the employer as well. He says he realizes for some employers that it might be a hard

transition to make, but he suggests trying to rely less on scheduling responsibilities and more on getting the job done.

Personal profile: Maria Whitney has worked at Ward's Furniture for 17 years, including the last four as office manager. She is also the mother of four children, including a six-year-old who is autistic. Shortly after that child was born, she asked the company if she could set up a more flexible work schedule, a request they granted. Now, she spends 2 days a week in the office and works an additional 6 to 8 hours a week from home, where she does most of the billing. "Having a flexible schedule helps me a lot," says Maria. "I'm able to take care of my family's needs at home, as a mother, and I'm able to provide some material things for my family as well, since I work." She says she probably wouldn't have been able to stay in her same job if she didn't have such a flexible work schedule. "As a mother and as a worker, I really wish there were other businesses that would be able to do this for other workers – to do whatever it takes to have flexible schedules."

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