

**THE MANUFACTURING EXPERIENCE
FLEXIBILITY APPROACHES
FOR MANUFACTURING
PRODUCTION
WORKERS**

WHITE PAPER
OCTOBER 2023

THE MANUFACTURING EXPERIENCE: FLEXIBILITY APPROACHES FOR MANUFACTURING PRODUCTION WORKERS

Key Findings from the Manufacturing Institute's Flexibility Working Group

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The Manufacturing Institute's Mission: We aim to build, diversify and strengthen the manufacturing workforce for individual opportunity, community prosperity and a competitive manufacturing industry for the future.

As the 501(c)3 nonprofit workforce development and education affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers, the MI is a trusted adviser to manufacturers, equipping them with solutions to address the toughest workforce issues.

As part of the MI's efforts to identify and share innovative solutions to workforce development challenges with manufacturers, the MI convened a working group to discuss approaches to providing flexibility for manufacturing production workers. The MI's unique positioning as both an insightful expert of emerging trends within the industry and an effective implementer of proven workforce solutions provided a framework for conducting root-cause analysis and exchanging creative ideas.

Situated at the nexus of industry, research, education, philanthropy and workforce development initiatives, the MI offers opportunities for manufacturers to hear and learn from one another while providing informed, well-researched recommendations from working groups like those discussed in this white paper to in-person convenings like the [Workforce Solution Series](#) and [Workforce Summit](#).

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Executive Summary

Facing a historically tight labor market, inflationary costs and competing demands on talent in both the workplace and home, manufacturers are exploring workplace flexibility options now more than ever, with 46.8% of companies reporting they are offering flexible scheduling to production workers.² Workplace flexibility, or approaches that allow employees to address personal priorities while meeting business and professional goals, is a benefit that holds high value among workers across industries, including manufacturing. Among workers in industries like manufacturing, 42% say that flexibility is as or more important than pay.³ Further, according to research conducted by the MI, nearly 50% of manufacturing employees cite flexibility as a reason they stay with their employer, with 63.5% reporting that they would look for more flexibility in their next role if they were to leave their current company.⁴

While administrative employees have had access to greater flexibility than production workers generally, manufacturers have been testing and implementing ways to expand flexibility for their production workers in an effort to attract and retain talent. Through convening manufacturing leaders in a series of four working group sessions from March to June 2023, the MI cataloged innovative strategies pursued by companies represented in the working group and formulated a series of recommendations on how manufacturers can best approach workplace flexibility for production workers.

The primary takeaway is that flexible work is no longer a rarity. Rather, it has become a far more mainstream demand from talent across all job types and industries. For manufacturers that want to attract and retain talent effectively, offering workplace flexibility to production workers acts as a crucial differentiator in a tight labor market and can help expand access to various talent pools.

For companies interested in incorporating workplace flexibility to this unique population, the following recommendations synthesize the learnings that emerged from the working group. This set of recommendations should be seen as a starting point for informed, internal discussions on the needs and constraints of each manufacturing operation, rather than a one-solution-fits-all panacea. By evaluating these factors, considering the variety of flexibility approaches presented in this paper and weighing the following recommendations, manufacturers can determine the best way to test and implement workplace flexibility.

² [NAM Q1 2023 Manufacturers' Outlook Survey](#). National Association of Manufacturers. March 2023.

³ [Flexibility: What It Means to Non-Office Workers](#). Randstad. April 4, 2023.

⁴ The Employee Experience: The Role of Culture and Employee Engagement in Workforce Attraction and Retention. The Manufacturing Institute and Colonial Life. Forthcoming 2023.

Recommendations

- Identify the objectives that your company hopes to achieve in providing workplace flexibility by focusing on the challenges that you would like to solve, whether it's increasing the number of applicants or reducing turnover and absenteeism. Establish your baseline by evaluating your company's status on these metrics.
- Define your company's workplace flexibility philosophy. This philosophy should account for the full range of employee types in your organization, including the constraints and needs specific to those populations.
- Determine what flexibility options your company would like to test by assessing your company's production needs and employee priorities and interest in various approaches. Think through what structures you will need to best implement these options.
- Map out a communication strategy to launch your flexibility options with supervisors and production workers. Plan for the potential impacts of implementing these flexibility options on production processes and offer appropriate support. Provide your supervisory staff and production workers with adequate training on policy implementation.
- Consider how you will evaluate the success of the flexibility options that your company wants to test before implementation. Conceptualize a system for tracking the metrics and compare your progress to your baseline.



➤ Introduction

Contending with the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a tight labor market, manufacturers are exploring innovative ways to build a resilient workforce. Increasingly, workplace flexibility, or approaches that allow employees to address personal priorities while meeting business and professional goals, has become a way for employers to convey the value they place on their employees. In recognizing the need to prioritize flexibility in response to talent demand and the competitive market for workers,⁵ manufacturing leaders have also discovered that increased flexibility can be crucial for attracting and retaining workers.

This reality has been reinforced across a number of recent MI studies. Nearly 50% of manufacturing employees report flexibility as an important reason why they stay with their employer, and 63.5% state if they were to leave their current role, they would look for greater workplace flexibility.⁶ Through the MI's investigation of differences in attracting and retaining talent in rural versus urban areas, flexibility again emerged as a major attractor and tool for companies to retain talent.⁷ For rural manufacturers that face constraints, such as limited child care and elder care services as well as accessible transportation in particular, flexibility was an essential tool for mitigating these systemic issues while more comprehensive solutions were developed in partnership with community organizations. Through addressing employee concerns such as child care and transportation, offering flexibility can also demonstrate company values. While compensation remains the primary way that manufacturers engage with their employees, flexibility is the next most common way that companies communicate a culture of community.⁸

While administrative employees have had access to greater flexibility than production workers generally, particularly with remote work more feasible for some functions,⁹ manufacturers are testing and implementing ways to expand flexibility for their production employees. Due to variance in production needs and timelines, companies have found there is no one-size-fits-all solution to offering flexibility in the manufacturing industry. However, manufacturers that have taken on the challenge of offering flexibility to production workers can provide other companies that are interested in increasing flexibility with a roadmap outlining approaches that vary in type and complexity.

To address this knowledge gap, the MI convened manufacturing leaders primarily in operations/management and human resources in a series of four working group sessions from March to June 2023 to learn about different approaches companies have taken to provide flexibility to production workers. Over the course of the working group sessions, 17 manufacturers from a range of different sectors and sizes shared their experiences and lessons learned. This white paper is a synthesis of those conversations, presenting the considerations manufacturers weigh before determining what flexibility options to offer, the types of flexibility manufacturers are testing, the challenges they face and their approaches to assessing the effectiveness of their flexibility policies.

⁵ [The Manufacturing Experience: Closing the Gender Gap](#). The Manufacturing Institute and Colonial Life. November 2022.

⁶ [The Employee Experience: The Role of Culture and Employee Engagement in Workforce Attraction and Retention](#). The Manufacturing Institute and Colonial Life. September 2023.

⁷ [Attracting and Retaining Manufacturing Talent in a Rural vs. Urban Setting](#). The Manufacturing Institute and FORVIS. August 2023.

⁸ [The Employee Experience: The Role of Culture and Employee Engagement in Workforce Attraction and Retention](#). The Manufacturing Institute and Colonial Life. September 2023.

⁹ [Why Flexibility for Non-Office Workers Is Key to an Equitable Workplace](#). World Economic Forum. April 21, 2023.

➤ Making the Decision to Offer Flexibility

Key Takeaway: Companies should collect feedback from employees on flexibility needs and assess the feasibility of these options in terms of meeting production needs before determining which flexibility options to test and implement.

The manufacturing industry faces unique challenges when considering flexibility for production workers. Manufacturers typically handle complex production needs, manage fluctuating demand and often require nontraditional staffing schedules, necessitating a more nuanced approach to flexibility. It is hard to move many of those functions off of the shop floor and into a remote or hybrid environment.

While making the determination on what types of flexibility to offer production workers can pose certain challenges, nearly all of the companies that participated in the working group agreed that offering some form of flexibility is necessary to attract and retain talent in a tight labor market, with one company noting, “We are losing people due to lack of flexibility, particularly engineers.” This recognition of the need for flexibility is not limited to human resources or operations—it flows across departments and upward. Several manufacturers shared that their leadership supported testing flexibility options for production workers, perceiving the value that employees, both current and prospective, place on this benefit.

With support from leadership to assess options, a few manufacturers shared the process through which they arrived at the decision to provide flexibility for production workers. For most, feedback from current employees sparked initial conversations. For example, one manufacturer identified the need for flexibility based on responses to their employee engagement survey over the course of two years.

Another manufacturer conducted a feasibility study to determine how production needs would be met if the company pursued specific options. This company then organized a working group to explore the flexibility options that emerged, which were primarily compressed, 4-day, 9- or 10-hour workweeks. Once the working group prepares its recommendations, the company plans to conduct an employee survey to assess interest. “Before we decide on what flexibility options to offer, we want to hear from our employees. For example, we want to know how many people would like to have a static schedule versus rotational,” a working group participant from this company shared.

Another manufacturer took a different approach, bringing in an outside consultant, Coleman Consulting, to survey the organization while also assessing customer demand. “We wanted to find out what models of flexibility we could implement would also increase our output,” said a participant from this company. Coleman Consulting’s 20-week engagement helped identify the strategies and resources this company needed to move forward with offering flexibility.

Another common reason that working group participants cited for pursuing workplace flexibility was widening talent pools. For instance, one manufacturer identified offering flexibility as a key way to encourage more women to join the manufacturing workforce. A recent MI study supports this reasoning, finding that lack of flexibility is not only the top labor challenge heard from female employees (63.1%), but that this challenge is raised nearly two times more often than from male employees (38.9%).¹⁰

¹⁰ [The Manufacturing Experience: Closing the Gender Gap](#). The Manufacturing Institute and Colonial Life. November 2022.

Additionally, 49.2% of manufacturing leaders cited lack of child care support as a challenge heard from female employees versus only 8% hearing the same from male employees, reflecting the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities like child care and elder care between women and men.¹¹ As child care¹² and elder care¹³ costs continue to rise while availability of such care decreases, individuals who bear these responsibilities—often women, due to societal inequities—have no choice but to exit the labor market. As discussed in the introduction, this challenge can be exacerbated in rural areas in particular. Manufacturers that offer flexible schedules, however, can address these concerns and tap into a significant labor pool, bringing women back into the workforce.¹⁴ In this way, flexibility can be a key differentiator in attracting talent from broader pools.

➤ Approaches to Flexibility

Key Takeaway: With a wide variety of flexibility approaches available to manufacturers, companies should test and assess a range of solutions to identify what works best for their specific workforce and production needs.

Although many companies participating in the working group had reached the decision to implement flexibility for production workers through similar logics, whether through employee feedback or a strategic decision to widen talent pipelines, there was greater variety in the types of flexibility options they tested. The breadth of options discussed by working group participants is similarly reflected in data collected in a recent NAM Manufacturers' Outlook Survey¹⁵ (Figure 1).

¹¹ [Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labour Outcomes](#). OECD Development Centre. December 2014.

¹² [New Childcare Data Shows Prices are Untenable for Families](#). U.S. Department of Labor Blog. Jan. 24, 2023.

¹³ [The Cost of Senior Care Is Rising While Caregivers Are 'Drowning' without Help](#). CNN. April 20, 2023.

¹⁴ [Women Are Returning to the Job Market in Droves, Just When the U.S. Needs Them Most](#). NPR. July 5, 2023.

¹⁵ [NAM Q1 2023 Manufacturers' Outlook Survey](#). National Association of Manufacturers. March 2023.

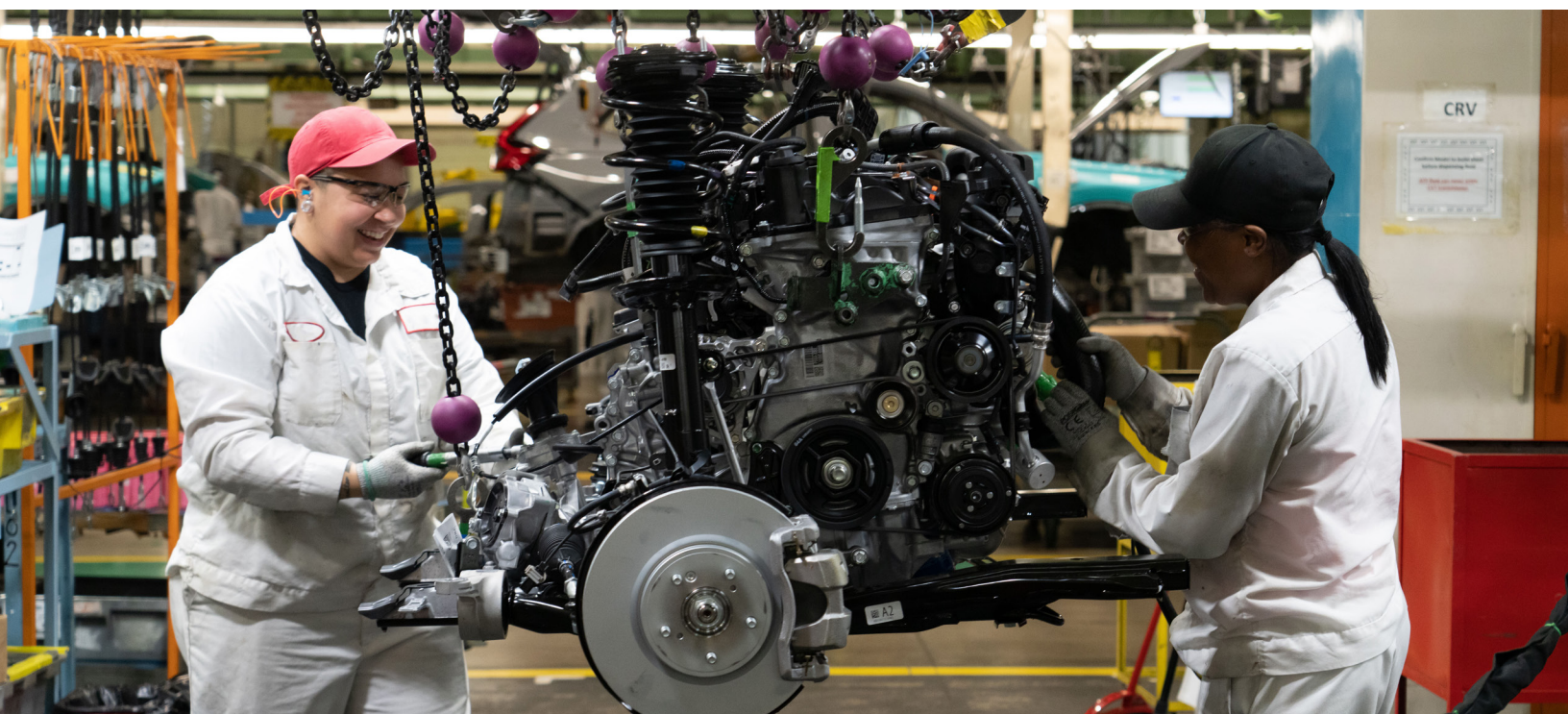
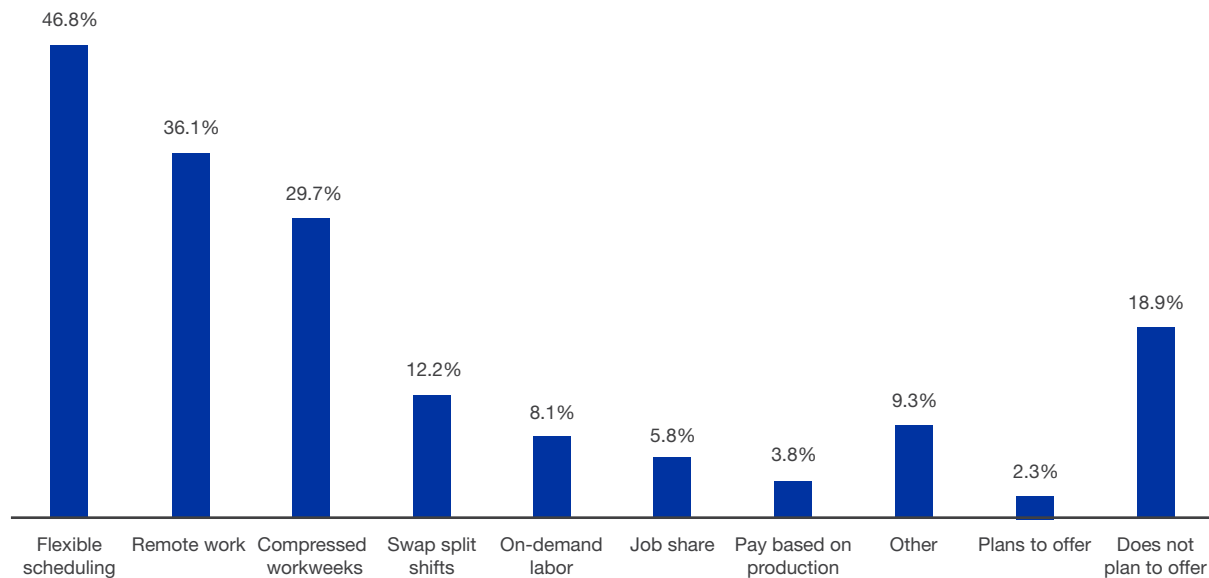


Figure 1: Flexibility Options Offered to Production Workers



Note: Respondents were able to check more than one response; therefore, responses exceeded 100%.

Companies in the working group were at varying stages of integrating flexibility into their workplace policies. Several companies were interested in offering flexibility options to their production workers but were unsure what approach would work best. These companies tended to have informal flexibility policies where workers could request time off or adjustments to their schedules on a case-by-case basis. For example, if production needs are met, one manufacturer lets employees leave early on the day before a holiday. Another manufacturer took a different approach by providing their production workers with the flexibility to work across their different business units based on production needs. As a result, they had seen a significant amount of upskilling.

This manufacturer is also organizing a working group to assess the flexibility options that would work best for its production and employee needs. “We’re exploring 4–9s and 4–10s primarily as well as adding a Sunday second shift and having folks on rotating shifts. We’re planning on surveying team members to see what they are interested in.” Their preliminary discussions with employees have confirmed interest and eagerness for flexibility options. Once flexibility options are determined, the company plans to pilot these offerings, most likely within a six-month timeframe.

Other companies formed teams of floaters who would work flexible schedules. One manufacturer offers shifts in 4-hour blocks to their floater workforce, setting a minimum of 16 hours per week and capped at 29 hours for each employee. As floaters take on different shifts and train up on skills, they can take on a wider variety of shifts. The number of shifts and employees per plant varies. While these positions do not offer health insurance, floaters do have paid time off, options for 401(k) plans and tuition reimbursement in addition to other benefits. Ideally, this manufacturer would like part-time employees working flexible schedules to consist of 15% of their workforce. The floater model, however, did not work well for all companies. Another manufacturer in the working group was unable to meet their production needs using the floater model and was considering other flexibility options.

In a similar vein to the floater model, a few companies supplemented their workforce with gig workers.¹⁶ One working group participant shared how their company structures gig work to be additive to the regular production schedule, with employees able to pick up gig assignments during their downtime and complete tasks according to their own schedules. Another manufacturer augments their workforce with gig contractors or cross training internally as well as pulling from other skilled team members.

Another common model discussed was shift swapping. One manufacturer has begun offering this flexibility option with employees who are able to swap up to a week at a time with supervisor approval. Employees who are swapping must also have sufficient skills to complete the tasks during the swapped shift. A few other companies in the working group offered this flexibility option as well and had seen success.

Other flexibility options discussed included phased retirements¹⁷ and flexible part-time positions. One manufacturer offers phased retirement and has seen significant success with the program. “It’s important for us to keep ahold of the knowledge this group of employees has gained over their tenure at our company,” said a working group participant from this company. Other companies had implemented similar programs successfully. One manufacturer found flexible, part-time schedules particularly attractive at its rural locations. MI research indicates that lack of child care, elder care and accessible transportation are more pronounced in rural areas, leading to greater employee demand for flexibility.¹⁸

A few companies had developed a workforce ethos that centered on flexibility. For example, one manufacturer has a “work where it works” as well as a “work when it works” philosophy. This approach has led this company to develop a number of flexibility options. In implementing their “work where it works” philosophy, this company lists administrative and engineering jobs with flexible work locations determined by role and customer needs. In a similar vein of prioritizing employee flexibility and customer needs, the company has also instituted a “dress for your day” policy. “It’s about encouraging an empowerment mindset for our employees. It’s had a very positive effect on our workforce,” said a working group participant from this company.

To actualize their “work when it works” philosophy, this manufacturer offers three main flexibility options for their production workers: a traditional workweek with 5 8-hour days, a compressed 4 10-hour workweek and a highly condensed 3 12-hour workweek. Typically, once an employee selected an option, they would be scheduled accordingly unless they needed to change their option in the long term. Core hours are established with the ability for employees to flex hours. Employees can also choose to work overtime. A working group participant from this company noted that while many workers prefer the 5 8-hour day option, a significant number are interested in the 4 10-hour day option.

For those interested in working more or less than the standard 40-hour workweek, this company also offers workers 50-hour workweeks (5 10-hour days) and 24-hour workweeks (6 4-hour days). Additionally, every facility has the ability to set their own work scheduling options. This approach, which offers many different flexibility options, is based on the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all schedule. The company piloted their flexibility options in a Midwest city successfully and have since instituted their flexibility policies across a number of other plants.

¹⁶ [What Is the Gig Economy and What’s the Deal for Gig Workers?](#) World Economic Forum. May 26, 2021.

¹⁷ As more manufacturers worry about the loss of aging talent, particularly among those at or close to retirement age, many have looked at phased retirement as an attractive option to retain some of their key employees for longer. For more information, see [The Aging of the Manufacturing Workforce: Challenges and Best Practices](#). The Manufacturing Institute. July 2019.

¹⁸ [Attracting and Retaining Manufacturing Talent in a Rural vs. Urban Setting](#). The Manufacturing Institute and FORVIS. August 2023.

One manufacturer has a similar philosophy for their administrative workers: “work appropriately.” Exempt employees are expected to come into the office if their team is meeting in person but are otherwise allowed to work wherever they’d like. For their production workers, this company sets expectations for the number of hours workers should complete across two weeks. Employees can swap shifts with other employees to take time off as needed with no impact on pay as long as they reach the total number of expected hours within that timeframe.

Another manufacturer takes an analogous approach to their administrative worker flexibility philosophy with “flex for your day,” where exempt employees can decide to adjust their working hours or location based on their needs while meeting their job responsibilities. Compressed workweeks have worked well for production workers at this company. Since the company runs a 24/7 operation, the manufacturer offers 2- to 12-hour shifts to its employees. This company has been focusing on upskilling and cross-training employees so that workers can fill multiple roles.

➤ Flexibility Support Structures

Key Takeaway: To implement flexibility options, manufacturers should use a combination of technology structures and workplace policies as well as targeted training of supervisors.

With companies at varying stages in testing flexibility options, working group participants expressed significant interest in learning what structures and tools manufacturers are using to implement these policies.

One manufacturer assigns its flexible shifts, which it has rolled out to 40 of its manufacturing plants, using in-person methods (whiteboards on the shop floor, printed-out schedules, etc.). The company is working toward transitioning to an online scheduling system and has been using Humanity, an online employee scheduling software, as it integrates well with Workday software.

Several companies expanded on the need to leverage technologies to facilitate flexible scheduling and shift swapping. One manufacturer uses Shiftboard, which also integrates with Workday. This software allows both full- and part-time employees to modify their schedules. Having their scheduling data connected in this way is useful in coordinating with their supply chain. Another manufacturer utilizes their Workday platform to advertise gig assignments. These opportunities are open to the global workforce and are not site-specific.

In addition to technology structures, working group participants discussed the importance of workplace policies in supporting the implementation of flexibility. “We need policies that address some of the reasons that employees are asking for flexibility in the first place,” said a working group participant from a large manufacturer. “At our company, we are benchmarking caregiver policies as we recognize this is a primary cause for employees to request flexible schedules.” Several other companies agreed that the issue of child care, particularly in relation to flexibility, was important to address in workplace policies.

Working group participants also identified the need to train and source talent to implement flexibility effectively. One manufacturer, for example, brought on a talent project manager to the team to handle the complexity of managing agile change management between human resources and operations. Another manufacturer similarly hired a training and scheduling coordinator to handle flexible schedules. Companies also discussed the importance of training supervisors to implement flexibility options effectively. A different manufacturer designed a program to further upskill supervisors, including training on implementing workplace flexibility.

➤ Assessing Flexibility

Key Takeaway: Manufacturers should identify key metrics, such as employee engagement, the number of applicants, the time it takes to fill positions, turnover and absenteeism, to assess the effectiveness of their flexibility options. Data can be collected from direct feedback from employees, job posting websites and human resource information systems.

Working group participants discussed approaches to assessing the effectiveness of flexibility options in increasing productivity as well as attracting and retaining employees.

Some manufacturers sought direct feedback from employees on flexibility options. For example, one manufacturer's employee experience team will be exploring employee feedback on its flexibility policies through an employee survey. Several companies used employee engagement as a key metric in assessing flexibility. Several manufacturers surveyed their employees on work-life balance and scheduling preferences. One manufacturer similarly conducted an employee engagement survey to improve attraction and retention as well as an exit survey, noting that work-life balance came up often. A different manufacturer noted other important metrics to track include productivity gains and risks. The primary metric that this company considers is the time it takes to fill positions, although a working group participant from this company noted that tracking the time it takes for an employee to reach proficiency would also be useful.

One manufacturer set up its flexibility implementation with assessment in mind. Running a 5-month pilot of a 4-day, 10-hour workweek among the second shift of production employees, a decision driven by supply chain pinch points, which helped prove a business case for flexibility, this company tracked retention, absenteeism and the utilization of qualifying leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. Although the pilot received positive feedback from employees, reduced turnover and absenteeism and increased hiring through higher job listing open rates and number of hires, the company decided to reevaluate its approach to flexibility to better meet its production needs.

A manufacturer similarly tried a compressed, four-day workweek and did not find it optimal. While piloting flexibility options, this company monitored Facebook job postings that featured flexibility offerings versus other benefits. The company found that paid time off was the number-one driver for job application opens. On the other hand, another manufacturer has had a compressed, four-day workweek for the past five years and has reduced operational costs.

Working group participants also noted that Workday can pull reports on employee use of flexibility options, which can be useful in assessing the effectiveness of these policies. One manufacturer utilizes its human resources information system to track metrics. Another manufacturer handles metrics assessment through its human resources department and utilizes a consultant for supply chain data and analytics.



➤ Challenges

Key Takeaway: Challenges that companies may encounter when implementing flexibility include the need for additional time and financial investment, coordination with unions, incorporation of offsite partners' needs and maintenance of the quality of hires and current workforce.

While many companies saw the value in offering flexibility options to their production workers, some challenges in testing and implementing these policies occurred. Manufacturers, particularly small and medium-sized companies, shared their challenges in being able to access the resources needed to explore flexibility options, whether that was the time investment in determining and testing particular approaches or the financial investment of technology and talent.

Several companies discussed challenges around making flexibility changes in coordination with unions and assessing what options are possible under existing collective bargaining agreements. One company noted that union members who had worked at their company for a significant amount of time did not want to see changes to shift scheduling, feeling that they had “earned” the first shift and preferring static shifts to rotating. Younger employees, on the other hand, were pressing their union stewards to incorporate flexibility into their CBA.

Other challenges that participants discussed included understanding and incorporating the needs of offsite partners into flexibility assessments as well as tracking the quality of hires and current workforce from onboarding through training and settling into the position to assess productivity under a flexible working model.

➤ Benefits

Key Takeaway: There are many significant benefits to offering flexibility options to production workers, including higher applicant rates, wider talent pools, reduced absenteeism, lower attrition and better performance.

While manufacturers shared some of the challenges they faced in offering flexibility options, most companies that had piloted or formally instituted flexibility offerings for production workers reported positive impacts on applicant rates, absenteeism, attrition rates and performance.

For example, with the flexibility and culture approaches that one manufacturer has taken over the past few years, attracting applicants has ceased to be a challenge. “Flexibility provides employees with the work-life balance they need. This company has seen great success with our flexibility options, including the 4-day, 10-hour workweek, flex for health and school events and child care. It’s been so successful that we actually have a waiting list of people who want to work for us,” said a working group participant from this company. In addition to its flexibility policies, this company transitioned from an attendance point system to simply tracking attendance to hold employees accountable if absenteeism became a significant issue and saw a positive change in company culture as a result.

Many manufacturers are often concerned with creating two classes of workers by offering flexibility with remote and hybrid options available only to administrative and engineering staff. However, the flexibility options that one

manufacturer has piloted with its production workers has had an inverse effect on its working population. “We have administrative and engineering staff who are eager to have some of the flexibility that production workers now have,” a working group participant from this company noted.

For one manufacturer, offering flexibility to its production workers opened up the labor market, allowing them to market employment opportunities differently, particularly on social media. “Flexible working schedules have been working well for military spouses. It’s been very beneficial to broaden our workforce to include populations like these,” said a working group participant from this company. The company has also seen record low attrition rates after moving to flexible work schedules, so much so that flexibility is now a mandatory policy with four to six facilities transitioning each week.

A working group participant from a manufacturer similarly emphasized the importance of flexibility in opening up employment opportunities for parents, particularly mothers who often bear the brunt of child care responsibilities. “Parents want the flexibility to do what they do best professionally but to also be there for their families and children.” In the same vein, another manufacturer, which is in the early stages of assessing flexibility as it explores what options are being implemented in manufacturing production spaces, noted that the company would like to attract more women to its workforce by utilizing flexibility.



Recommendations

Manufacturers stand at the vanguard of creating flexibility models for production workers, utilizing their creative problem-solving skills to address their employees' needs while balancing production demands. From the discussions with working group participants, a series of recommendations on how manufacturers can best approach the question of workplace flexibility for production workers emerged. This set of recommendations should be seen as a starting point for informed, internal discussions on the needs and constraints of each particular manufacturer, rather than a panacea. By evaluating these factors, considering the variety of flexibility approaches presented in this paper and weighing the following recommendations, manufacturing leaders can determine the best way to test and implement workplace flexibility at their company.

Recommendation #1: Identify the objectives that your company hopes to achieve in providing workplace flexibility by focusing on the challenges that you would like to solve, whether it's increasing the number of applicants or reducing turnover and absenteeism. Establish your baseline by evaluating your company's status on these metrics.

Workplace flexibility is a tool that can be used to address several different workforce challenges. Companies in the working group focused on one to three key indicators when determining their objectives in instituting flexibility. Most companies utilized their human resources information systems to establish their baselines.

Recommendation #2: Define your company's workplace flexibility philosophy. This philosophy should account for the full range of employee types in your organization, including the constraints and needs specific to those populations.

Companies in the working group that had defined their workplace flexibility philosophy to be broad and inclusive found it easier to design policies that provided equivalent options to different worker populations. While the specific flexibility options may be different for administrative workers and production workers, companies that focused on providing the flexibility needed for these different worker populations to meet their personal obligations, like providing child care, found success.

Recommendation #3: Determine what flexibility options your company would like to test by assessing your company's production needs and employee interest. Think through what structures you will need to best implement these options.

Most companies in the working group assessed their production needs either internally or through utilizing consultants. Companies also surveyed their employees to get a sense for what flexibility options they were interested in. Flexibility options that were tested and implemented by working group participants included the following:

- Compressed workweeks with variations in number of days and hours
- Shift swapping
- Rotating shifts
- Phased retirement
- Creating teams of floaters
- Increasing number of flexible, part-time workers
- Supplementing workforce with gig shifts/workers
- Offering more or less hours per week (e.g., 50-hour or 29-hour workweeks)

- Offering a range of shift hours (e.g., 2 or 12-hour shifts)
- Informal flexibility policies (asking time off on a case-by-case basis, letting employees off early before a holiday, working across different business units, etc.)

The primary structures that participants identified as key to the success of implementing flexibility options were technology and software for scheduling and metric tracking purposes, workplace policies as well as training and sourcing talent to support execution.

Recommendation #4: Map out a communication strategy to launch your flexibility options with supervisors and production workers. Plan for the potential impacts of implementing these flexibility options on production processes and offer appropriate support. Provide your supervisory staff and production workers with adequate training on policy implementation.

While the specifics of how companies in the working group rolled out their flexibility options differed, depending on company size and the breadth of new flexibility policies, a general approach emerged.

- After determining the flexibility options that your company will implement, create a communication strategy that accounts for the impacts that new policies will have on different populations in your organization.
 - For example, what responsibilities will supervisors have in implementing these policies? How will production workers be informed about new flexibility options? What tools will supervisors and production workers use to manage flexibility and production needs? How will information about these new tools be shared? How long will flexibility options be tested?
- Adequately train supervisory staff and production workers to navigate the new policies. Establish clear lines of communication for questions and feedback.

Recommendation #5: Consider how you will evaluate the success of the flexibility options that your company wants to test before implementation. Conceptualize a system for tracking these metrics.

With many working group participants in early stages of testing and implementing flexibility options, manufacturers were still in the process of developing systems to assess these new policies. Still, working group participants identified the need to track the following metrics, both before and after instituting workplace flexibility:

- Number of hires
- Turnover rates
- Utilization of flexibility options
- Productivity
- Employee engagement

While many companies tracked these metrics in their existing systems, several participants mentioned the need for more streamlined methods of capturing these types of data. Having this type of data would help make the business case for maintaining workplace flexibility policies.

➤ Conclusion

At first glance, providing workplace flexibility for production workers in manufacturing may seem impractical and difficult to achieve. However, many manufacturers have recognized the value of tackling this challenge and have tested a variety of options to determine what works best for their production needs and employees. While some approaches have not been effective at specific companies, other manufacturers have found great success in attracting and retaining talent while meeting production needs by implementing workplace flexibility for their production workers.

As the MI concluded its flexibility working group series, manufacturers shared what they expected to see in terms of workplace flexibility moving forward. Many participants voiced the positive impacts they had observed through the course of their flexibility efforts and their motivation to continue testing and implementing different options. As a working group participant from a large manufacturer put it, “Our company would love to do more to change the perceptions and the possibilities of flexibility options by continuing to explore and expand our efforts.” A working group participant from a small manufacturer echoed these sentiments, saying, “At our company, we’ve seen what workplace flexibility means for our production workers. The change in company culture is so valuable. We hope to continue to work with our employees to identify how their needs align with our needs.”

Other participants noted that with generational shifts in workplace expectations, the question of flexibility would continue to persist. “The issue of work-life balance existed all along, but it took the pandemic to raise the issue. We anticipate that with each incoming generation, these expectations will continue to grow stronger,” said a working group participant from a large manufacturer.

Through convening companies from a range of sectors and sizes, manufacturers recognize the benefits in offering flexibility for production workers. Working group participants are balancing production and employee needs creatively to identify the flexibility options that work best for their particular context. By defining an inclusive workplace flexibility philosophy, assessing production and employee needs, identifying the structures needed to support flexibility policies and tracking key metrics, other manufacturers can also test and implement flexibility options. Through learning from one another, manufacturers can determine the most effective approach to workplace flexibility for their production workers, building a more resilient workforce prepared for the opportunities of the 21st century.

► Appendix A – Additional Resources

In preparation for the flexibility working group sessions, the MI gathered a collection of resources on workplace flexibility to inform discussions. Comprising research reports, news articles and critical analyses of workplace flexibility approaches and related topics, these resources may be helpful for manufacturers seeking to determine strategies in offering flexibility for production workers in addition to the references in the body of this white paper.

- The MI publishes **Workforce in Focus**, a monthly newsletter that analyzes current labor market data and conducts deep dives into topics like workplace flexibility. You can sign up for the newsletter [here](#).
- [How Remote Work Connected Employees Making \\$19 an Hour and \\$80,000 a Year](#). The New York Times. May 31, 2023.
- [Research: The Flexibility Options Your On-Site Employees Want](#). Harvard Business Review. May 29, 2023.
- [Future Forum Pulse](#). Future Forum. February 2023.
- [After Testing Four-Day Week, Companies Say They Don't Want to Stop](#). The Wall Street Journal. Feb. 21, 2023.
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