

Highlights from Seattle, Washington

The Policy Forums:

Workplace Flexibility 2010 – a policy initiative based at Georgetown Law – is working to spur meaningful dialogue toward the creation of workplace flexibility policies that meet both employee and employer needs. As part of that process, Workplace Flexibility 2010 is hosting a series of six policy forums across the country to hear directly from local community and business leaders about the changing needs of their workforce – and to bring their perspectives and insights back to the national policy debate on workplace flexibility.

Seattle, Washington:

The third of these forums was held in May 2008 in Seattle, Washington – in partnership with the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs, Disability Studies Program, and School of Social Work.

Seattle provided a rich environment for exploring the opportunities and challenges in developing public policies that promote business performance and employee and family needs. Many Seattle employers are implementing extremely innovative workplace flexibility strategies in order to attract new talent and retain experienced older workers. At the same time, the state of Washington recently passed legislation to provide paid time off for employees caring for a newborn or newly adopted child.

Drawing on insights from those experiences, participants engaged in a roundtable discussion on how business practice and public policy might work together to expand access to workplace flexibility. The group represented an extremely diverse range of workplace perspectives from both the private and public sectors. Participants included academic researchers, labor representatives, and policy advocates – as well as managers of businesses ranging from a major technology corporation, to a medium-sized consulting firm, to a small, woman-owned and operated mortgage company.

Perspectives on Business Practice and Public Policy – Flexible Work Arrangements

This roundtable conversation was framed around two major policy components of workplace flexibility – Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Time Off (in short, episodic and extended increments).

On the issue of increasing access to FWAs, participants were asked to react to the following questions:

1. **Should all workplaces have a standard process that employees can use to request an FWA?**
2. **If so, should employers be required by law to establish such a process – or should employers be encouraged to establish a process voluntarily with significant incentives and rewards?**

Participants recognized a number of benefits associated with establishing a standard, required process available to all employees. They stated that:

- An established process in all workplaces could ensure some level of equity by guaranteeing all employees, regardless of their position, income, or job function, the right to request an FWA;
- A standardized process for any particular workplace could clarify expectations for both employers and employees around options for FWAs, and facilitate more effective communication between supervisors and employees;
- A required process – in the form of a new labor standard – could bring about needed “culture change” by making FWAs the norm in a range of workplaces, industries, and geographic areas.

Participants also acknowledged challenges and limitations associated with requiring employers to establish a process for requesting FWAs. They stated that:

- Businesses that are already creating their own innovative solutions for increasing access to FWAs could be stifled by a standardized, one-size-fits-all process;
- Making FWAs widely available could potentially hurt small and medium-sized businesses that are using FWAs and other types of workplace flexibility as recruitment tools to enhance their compensation packages and to compete with larger firms that can offer higher salaries;
- Employers are inclined to reject any rigid government mandates, and facilitating voluntary action through education and incentives would be more effective in the long-term.

New Ideas for Managing Flexibility – A Team-Based Approach

During the forum, one participant shared that her workplace created “process improvement groups” to allow employees and supervisors to openly discuss workplace challenges and potential solutions. These groups helped facilitate meaningful conversation around viable flexibility options – and members were able to draft reasonable policies to meet both employee and management needs.

Perspectives on Business Practice and Public Policy – Time Off

On the issue of providing employees with Time Off, participants were asked to share their reactions to the following questions:

1. **How is your business or organization impacted by employees’ need for Time Off – and how does it attempt to meet those needs?**
2. **Could public policy play a role in providing access to Time Off that meets employee needs and also supports business outcomes?**

Participants shared a range of experiences and perspectives on the impact of employees taking short, episodic, or extended time off from work. They included:

- One small business owner retrained her employees to cover for other workers taking maternity leave – which allowed her to develop a more seamless team of employees able to perform any job function in their workplace;
- Another business owner divided the responsibilities of an employee who took health-related time off among a number of other trained, full-time employees – and sacrificed some productivity for maintaining high-quality work;
- A representative from a medium-sized consulting firm said her employees had access to as much unpaid time off as they wished to take – and the firm used a resource manager on staff to divide work appropriately when an employee took extended leave. [The employer’s compensation system accounted for these periods of time off through its annual bonus system.]

Participants also shared their thoughts on policy approaches for expanding access to Time Off, including:

- A business representative suggested looking closely at how labor unions have successfully built long-standing relationships with employers and negotiated flexibility benefits for employees;
- Another participant suggested that the federal government provide grants to businesses interested in implementing flexibility – in order to demonstrate benefits in terms of productivity, recruitment and retention, and even profitability;
- Another participant suggested working to change labor standards in stages – and highlighted Washington State’s approach of passing an initial family care law, and then using that law as a foundation for other legislative efforts to expand access to time off.