

Flexing their Muscles

BY EILENE ZIMMERMAN

An *SMM* exclusive survey reveals that more salespeople are demanding flexible work options, such as part-time hours and telecommuting. Managers who implement such programs are seeing jumps in employee loyalty, productivity, and even sales

ONE MORNING IN 1998 Bruce Fleischmann, a sales manager with Pfizer, was out making calls with a salesperson who had just returned from maternity leave. Fleischmann noticed that the woman, whom he knew well, just wasn't herself. She seemed anxious and preoccupied. So Fleischmann asked if something was on her mind.

"She just burst into tears," he recalls. "She said she felt torn about whether or not to be home with her child or at work; that even though she liked her job, it was tough to do that and be a new mother." A few weeks later the salesperson quit, unable to find a way to combine work and parenting.

"It's a typical situation," Fleischmann says. "Her productivity was high and from a financial point of view, it costs Pfizer tens of thousands of dollars to replace someone at that level of sales," Fleischmann says. "It's downright painful to lose them."

In an effort to stem the turnover of productive salespeople like these, Pfizer recently began offering a limited number of its highest performers the opportunity to work shorter, more flexible hours. Flextime reps would work 60 percent of a full-time schedule, with several scheduling options to choose from. Their income would also be scaled back to 60 percent,

PHOTOGRAPH: © JAVREEDPHOTO.COM

CAROLE LEVIN HAS SOLD MICE AND RATS FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH FOR 11 YEARS, BUT SHE'S NEVER BEEN CAGED BY A COMPANY OFFICE.

but bonuses, awards, and health benefits would stay the same.

The flextime program, known as Vista Rx, began in 1999, with reps selling the same four Pfizer pharmaceuticals as their full-time counterparts. Fleischmann says from day one, Vista's sales slogan has been "One hundred percent commitment, sixty percent of the time." The program is far more popular than Fleischmann and others at Pfizer had anticipated. The pilot began with 70 salespeople. Last fall it nearly doubled, to 130. The program is very selective, and many who were interviewed didn't qualify to participate.

Workplace experts aren't surprised that programs like the one at Pfizer are successful. Flextime for salespeople seems a natural, because sales reps tend to be autonomous, and are judged on their results rather than time spent in the office. "As long as they are producing results and boosting revenue, why do you as a manager care when or where they're working?" says Jennifer White, author of *Drive Your People Wild Without Driving Them Crazy*:

Leadership Lessons for a Chaotic World (Wiley & Sons).

But not all sales managers share this sentiment. A just-released *SMM Work/Life Benefits Survey* reveals that less than half of the managers who responded offer sales and marketing employees the option to work flexible hours. Thirty-three percent offer telecommuting; and only 24 percent offer a part-time option.

Managers who don't offer such options may be missing out on a valuable opportunity to motivate staffers, boost employee loyalty, raise productivity—and even increase sales.

FLEXIBLE SALES STARS

CAROLE LEVIN, a sales manager with Taconic, in Wellesley, Massachusetts, which sells mice and rats for use in medical research, has never worked at the company office.

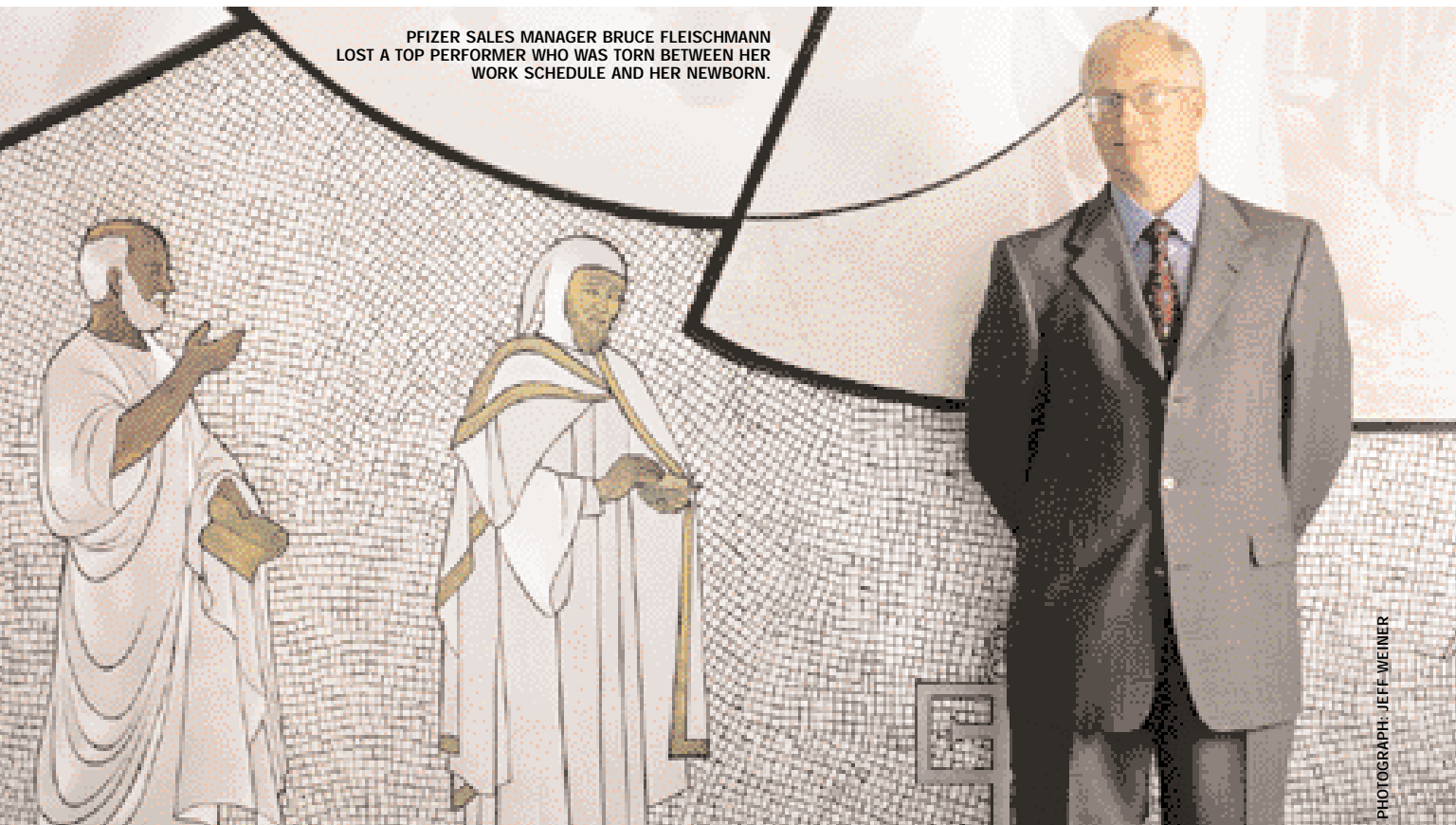
She's also never worked full time. Levin started out at Taconic 11 years ago, when the company didn't have enough revenue in New England to support a full-time salesperson. "The idea was that when we reached a certain revenue goal I would work full time," she says. "We reached that goal about nine years ago."

When Levin started at Taconic she had an infant at home; she now has three children. "It worked really well for me," she says. "Any time I would entertain the thought of doing something different, I realized I would be hard-pressed to find the flexibility I have now."

Levin manages a team of two remote salespeople, both full-time. Through cell phones, handheld PDA devices, and laptops, the three remain in contact. She also visits the company's main office near Albany, New York, once a month, and attends committee meetings either in person or via conference call.

This nontraditional working arrangement hasn't affected Levin's sales. "I have always exceeded

PFIZER SALES MANAGER BRUCE FLEISCHMANN LOST A TOP PERFORMER WHO WAS TORN BETWEEN HER WORK SCHEDULE AND HER NEWBORN.



PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF WEINER

expectations and our sales numbers are outstanding,” she says. “My volume is based on what a full-time person’s is and I always meet quota.”

The members of Pfizer’s flextime sales force also beat their quotas, Fleischmann says. “We see a very high performance level from these folks, because they are motivated, persistent, and effective salespeople. It’s been a business win for Pfizer and a quality-of-life win for the reps.”

CAN YOU MANAGE IT?

WHETHER IT’S A four-day work week, job sharing, staggered work hours, or the ability to telecommute, some sales managers clearly recognize the need for flexibility. Customers also recognize it—and often appreciate it, too.

“Ten years ago, if I were to tell a

client I couldn’t meet with them because I had to be at my daughter’s field hockey game, they would have questioned my dedication,” says Steve Waterhouse, president of The Waterhouse Group, a sales consulting firm based in Scarborough, Maine. “Today when I say that they say, ‘That’s wonderful. That’s right where you should be.’”

But there are plenty of problems with flexible work schedules, on both the management and employee side of the equation. Most sales managers have trouble letting go and believing their people will do the job required without constant supervision or nagging.

“Many managers are control freaks and don’t trust their people enough to let them make the switch to telecommuting or flextime,” says White, who is also founder and CEO of JWC Group Inc., an executive coaching firm in Kansas City, Missouri. “The reality is, it’s frustrating to pick up the phone, call your sales reps and find they aren’t in the

office, and it’s six or twelve hours before they call you back.”

White has had such an experience herself. One of her employees lives in Minneapolis and recruits coaches for JWC. For several weeks last year he stopped communicating with White, who began worrying that he wasn’t making his numbers. “I kept trying to reach him to find out how many people he had in the pipeline, and who he closed [sales with] each week, because he hadn’t called or e-mailed. It turned out he was too busy doing his job, but in order for me to feel confident, I needed him to be in touch with me.”

Pat Katepoo, founder of WorkOptions.com, based in Oahu, Hawaii, created FlexSuccess, an electronic workbook that helps individuals negotiate flexible work arrangements with their employers. She counsels clients over the phone and online, and says those in sales find it especially challenging to convince their managers to allow flextime. “Unlike an accountant or sys-

tems analyst, salespeople have a very measurable output," she says. "So what manager in his right mind would want to say, 'Sure, cut back?'" However, sales does lend itself to telecommuting or job sharing, Katepoo says.

But some managers still have difficulty embracing those kinds of non-traditional work arrangements, despite the fact that 32 percent of managers surveyed for the *SMM* Work/Life Benefits Survey said their staffers who telecommute get more work done than non-telecommuting counterparts. (Fifty-six percent said there was no difference in the amount of work done between the two groups.)

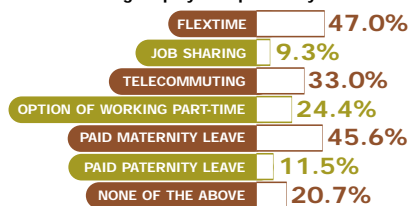
NOT FOR EVERYONE

FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS may not be appropriate for every employee.

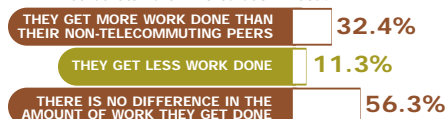
No More Nine-to-Five FOR REPS

Flexible work schedules, telecommuting, and job sharing are gaining acceptance on sales forces, an *SMM* survey finds. Most managers say flextime employees are just as productive.

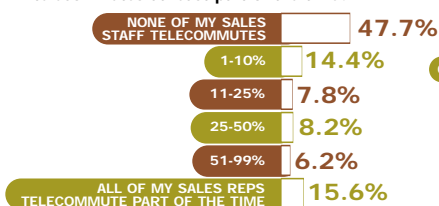
Which of the following work/life benefits does your company offer to sales and/or marketing employees specifically?



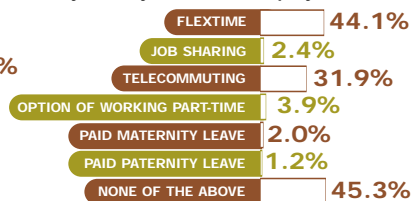
In general, what is your feeling about sales staffers who telecommute?



What percent of your sales staff telecommutes at least part of the time?



Which of the following work/life benefits have you taken advantage of in the past two years at your current company?



Source: *SMM/Equation Research*

DO'S AND DON'TS OF SETTING UP A FLEXTIME POLICY

TO ESTABLISH A fair, flexible work program for salespeople, managers must view it as a work arrangement, rather than a privilege of employment, says Camille Olson, a partner in the labor employment group of Seyfarth Shaw law firm in Chicago, who spends much of her time helping employers understand and institute alternative work arrangements for employees. Here's her advice:

- ✓ Before offering anyone flexible hours, write a policy and guidelines that cover flexible work hours, telecommuting, and job sharing, and have each employee read and sign it. The guidelines should answer questions like, "What is the time-keeping policy?" and "How often will a remote employee be required to communicate with the home office?" Be sure to lay out the company's policy for worker's compensation and third-party injuries for telecommuters.
- ✓ Describe the procedure that will be used to evaluate if an employee is eligible for each arrangement. Don't focus on subjective criteria, such as saying only employees who are very organized and self-directed will be considered. Focus instead on the job requirements.
- ✓ Include in the guidelines exactly what equipment the employee will need to telecommute, what the company will supply, and how the employee can use that equipment.
- ✓ The biggest issue with part-time workers is the ability and interest of the employers in providing benefits. Decide what you want to offer and who is eligible. You can offer limited benefits, for example, vacation and sick time, especially if your part-time workers have spouses who can provide medical or health benefits.
- ✓ Telecommuting job assignments should have a specific term so the arrangement can be reevaluated. Tell the employee it's an assignment to a job that you're trying out for six months, but at any time the company has the right to assign you a different schedule. It is not an entitlement.
- ✓ Make sure you're ready for the program. First, consider if your employees need training to work in a flexible environment. Managers should also ask themselves if they have the policies, procedures, and technology to support alternative work arrangements.

—E.Z.

Karen Eagan, president of the executive search firm The Retail Search Group, in Penn Valley, California, used flextime as an incentive for her search consultants and has so far been disappointed with the results.

Eagan's consultants spend their entire day on the phone, identifying people who are already employed and trying to sell them on a new job. For every job that is filled, the consultants make a commission. She created a Pacesetter status for those consultants who produced a certain level of revenue in the course of a year.

"We gave these people a flexible Friday, and the freedom to come in later in the morning or leave earlier in the afternoon," she says. "We're working toward a flexible work schedule so that as our staff matures they will create their own good work habits and self discipline." It may take some time. Of the three employees who were permitted to change their schedules, all ended up performing more poorly.

Eagan says the hardest part about implementing a flexible work program is determining which employees have the ability to succeed in such an environment. "They have to be self-directed and self-disciplined, committed to producing results," she says.

Another sticking point is the legal issues surrounding flexible arrangements. Most managers never establish a formal policy, instead allowing flextime on a case-by-case arrangement with certain favored employees. That spells trouble, says John Scalia, an employment attorney with Greenberg Traurig, a law firm based in McLean, Virginia.

"It may not be that they are playing favorites...maybe they're just bending over backwards to accommodate a salesperson," Scalia says. "But it's a problem when someone with different circumstances comes to them wanting the same thing, and they don't get it." That opens up the possibility of discrimination claims against the employer. Scalia says this is most common when a disabled employee is accommodated with a flexible schedule. If there isn't a flextime policy in place, the employer can't take the position that flextime is only for disabled employees.

Scalia says managers and their employers should develop a policy that can address the issue of who gets flex-

time and why, and also gives the manager a degree of discretion. "Make it clear flextime is not an automatic right of all employees," he says.

Managers should look at flexible work arrangements as job assignments, rather than a perk or benefit, says Camille Olson, a partner in the labor employment group of Seyfarth Shaw law firm in Chicago. That's a tough mindset for executives to adopt, but necessary if they are to objectively determine who is offered flextime. The criteria should not include qualities like being self-organized or self-directed, because those are highly subjective. "Focus instead on the job requirements, or an employee who isn't offered a flexible schedule could sue," she says.

Done right, a flextime policy can be positive for both salespeople and management. Levin says the faith Taconic's management has in her makes her a more loyal employee. "Because I'm so grateful for the flexibility, I put in a lot of extra effort," she says.

Waterhouse says the employees who do best on flextime are usually the most dedicated, largely because they've found a way to balance their personal lives with their professional lives.

"They focus a huge amount of energy on their jobs and during their nonwork time they do what the full-time person does during work time," he says.

Even Retail Search Group's Eagan, whose current experience with flextime isn't a success, concedes it makes a lot of sense, especially as a way to motivate. "Let's face it, salespeople on the road all day are only working sixty percent of the time anyway. The other forty percent they are browsing bookstores, running errands, drinking lattes," she says. "So why not incentivize it?"

Some managers who offer only limited flexibility are reporting success. Max Basenese, sales director at OnProject Inc., a project management company in Morristown, New Jersey, says he offers his salespeople a small amount of flexibility: staggered hours and Fridays off in the summertime. "I find they are fresher, more creative, and smarter when they have more control over their schedules," he says. "It's not rocket science. No one wants a steady diet of the same routine, day in and day out." □

WRITER EILENE ZIMMERMAN CAN BE REACHED AT
EDIT@SALESANDMARKETING.COM