

# Workplace and scheduling accommodations

Shaping a productive environment in academic institutions



## A way forward

The aging of the U.S. population is gaining national attention, especially within higher education where the trend is particularly pronounced.<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2010 the proportion of all professors age 65 and older nearly doubled, and their median age now surpasses all other occupational groups.<sup>2</sup> Many faculty and staff are reluctant to retire from positions that provide significant financial and psychological rewards.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, as they age, their productivity appears to decline.<sup>4</sup> The types of programs discussed here can help institutions maintain productivity among aging employees who want to keep on working.

In the first paper of the Aging Workforce Series we reviewed important research undertaken by the University of Iowa (UI) Center on Aging. Its survey of more than 200 American universities and colleges explored how institutions are addressing the financial and productivity challenges created by a rapidly aging campus workforce. The UI researchers found that most institutions lack a cohesive, strategic approach for dealing with these challenges. The researchers presented four tactical pillars to build a strategic plan: health and fitness programs, workplace and scheduling accommodations, retirement counseling and employee assistance programs, and retirement pathways. This paper examines the workplace and scheduling accommodations pillar. Additional papers explore the other pillars, with a similar focus on helping leaders take a strategic approach to managing their aging workforces and the financial challenges they present.

## Improving accommodations to improve the bottom line

Workplace accommodations — such as chairs designed to support the lower back, oversized monitors to aid failing eyes, and flexible scheduling and telecommuting options — offer myriad benefits: improved work output, decreased health insurance payouts and reduced disability leaves.<sup>5</sup> But even though this kind of flexibility can be valuable to the institution as well as its employees, the UI survey found that few institutions offer such accommodations geared toward aging employees.<sup>6</sup> The UI study grouped campus-based accommodation programs relevant to aging employees into two categories: ergonomics and scheduling.

### Ergonomic accommodations

**Getting around:** Traveling around campus can become difficult for employees as they grow older. These employees benefit from on-campus transportation such as buses, trolleys or escorts to remote parking or far-away buildings. Varied route scheduling and kneeling buses also improve workplace mobility.

**Workspace makeover:** As employees grow older certain physical limitations that lower productivity — such as arthritis, far-sightedness and glare sensitivity — can be offset by workstation adjustments.<sup>7</sup> Institutions should encourage aging employees to request ergonomic assessments to determine potential modifications to help maintain health and avoid on-the-job injuries; for example, furniture tailored to the proper height, keyboards that lessen wrist strain, and lighting that reduces glare. At West Virginia University, the HR department has developed an extensive question and answer section on its website to address concerns employees or supervisors have about workstation configurations and potential solutions. Any employee, supervisor or department head can go online to obtain an ergonomic assessment or request one with a phone call.

**Software solutions:** Institutions should also consider some other high-tech ways to accommodate aging employees in the office, such as voice recognition technologies that reduce the need to type or read a monitor, as well as other software tailored to specific



## Workplace and scheduling accommodations

disabilities. These might include magnifier utilities that enlarge the onscreen cursor, a mouse utility that allows cursor control with head movements, and programs that produce speech from text for common computer programs like word processors and web browsers.

### Scheduling accommodations

**Shorter workweeks:** Allowing aging employees to compress work schedules into three- or four-day workweeks can avoid burnout and help employees achieve a better work-life balance.<sup>8,9</sup> For instance, many aging employees have elderly parents who increasingly need their care and attention. A compressed workweek can help employees manage these competing responsibilities.

**Job sharing:** Aging employees might prefer to cut back on responsibilities through a job-sharing arrangement rather than enter full-time retirement. For example, two aging faculty members wishing to phase into retirement might share one full-time position, one choosing to teach the fall semester and the other teaching in the spring.

**Seasonal changes:** Seasonal scheduling is useful for reducing work hours for both faculty and administrators. For example, an aging administrator might prefer to work more than 40 hours a week during busy times in the school year in exchange for more time off in the summers in order to travel or visit grandchildren.

**Home front:** Telecommuting is increasingly common in corporate America and may also work for faculty and staff duties. There are many advantages: making it easier to care for elderly parents, using a more comfortable home office, and reducing the time and stress of commuting (particularly valuable for those with diminished mobility). All these may contribute to reduced absenteeism, lowered chance of injury and increased productivity.

### Case in Point: University of Kentucky

Debbie Burton, a University of Kentucky staff member, found that flexible scheduling at the university allowed her to care for her aging parents while they were both injured. “As baby boomers, we have kids to take care of and aging parents who need our help. There are choices out there to accommodate everybody.” Fortunately, Burton, who works for the College of Arts and Sciences, was able to take advantage of a work-life program there. “My job was able to be flexible, and I put in a proposal to take part in the flexible work schedule. There is variation, but I requested to do four 10-hour days during the summer. They have forms and guidelines to follow; you put in the paperwork, and the support is there.”

For Burton and her family, these accommodations made all of the difference. She was able to help her parents through a challenging time while keeping her position. Burton sees the program at the University of Kentucky as a reflection of the changing times as well as needs. Technology, advances in communication, and diverse family structures are all important considerations when creating workplace accommodations. Burton says: “It makes no sense to say that we can’t accommodate you, we’ll let you go and get someone else in here. It’s a win-win situation; it keeps morale up, lets employees know they are valued, and keeps knowledge on campus.”

## Workplace and scheduling accommodations

**Leave reduction coordination:** Another option is for the HR staff (including those who manage disability claims) and on-campus health professionals to work together to develop and promote a “paid-time-off bank.” This arrangement combines vacation time, sick time and personal time into a single bank of days that employees can use at their discretion to support work-life balance and flexibility.

### Get off to a fast start

An institution needs a well-crafted implementation strategy for a workplace and scheduling accommodation program to achieve broad adoption. Researchers at UI found that the most successful implementation strategies share three common traits: a campus-wide commitment to the value and benefits of accommodations relative to short-term costs; direct communications; and the ability to track results.

### Campus-wide commitment can drive results

Workplace accommodations do present short-term costs which can be difficult for some institutions to support. However, based on prospective costs of hiring and training new employees, losing productive and knowledgeable workers, and efficiently helping prepare workers for retirement, it’s likely that accommodations will offer institutions cost savings over time. Differentiating between the initial short-term costs and the long-term cost-savings is an important step for institutions to take as they contemplate creating workplace accommodations.<sup>10</sup>

In reality, purposeful spending and projecting cost-savings will only start this conversation. It is equally important to develop metrics that provide meaningful, accurate feedback about the success of on-campus resources and that measure both employee satisfaction and fiscal conservation. Metrics should include start-to-finish statistics about pre-accommodation employee attitudes, the saturation of information that is being presented to employees, the utilization of accommodations, and changes in employee behavior. The fact is, even the best institutions rarely measure or evaluate their programs and policies.

Understanding what employees really want can be the first step to developing valuable workplace accommodations and benefits. For instance, many institutions struggle to define appropriate levels of benefits coverage for part-time employees, not knowing how relevant it is to employee decision making. The UI study found that many aging employees’ top concern is staying connected to the workplace as they scale back their responsibilities. They want to maintain access to medical coverage, but they are generally willing to accept higher out-of-pocket medical expenses.

### Case in Point: University of Pennsylvania

Since 1995, the University of Pennsylvania’s Quality of Work-Life Programs have helped faculty and staff achieve “productive, constructive and enjoyable work lives” by offering flexible hours, opportunities to work from home, compressed work schedules, part-time work, and job sharing. The campus promotes this culture, in part, by offering a menu of online resources including descriptions of available scheduling accommodations, forms to request accommodations, information for employees and supervisors to implement accommodations, and contact information. By making this information readily available to supervisors and employees alike, the university makes it exceptionally easy to request a scheduling or ergonomic change.

## Workplace and scheduling accommodations

Another institutional concern is that employees who don't qualify for accommodations may well complain that the policy is unfair and discriminatory. To avoid liability, institutions must publish clear guidelines for how decisions are made. If workplace accommodation decisions include a discretionary component, as they often do, then the supervisor and HR must clearly document how they reached their conclusions and include the rationale in the employee's file.<sup>10,11</sup>

### Starting a direct conversation

Encouraging people to ask for and use workplace accommodations requires administrators to communicate in many forms to all the audiences involved. The main challenge is to communicate to employees that the university is fully committed and supports the use of accommodations as a way to increase productivity and job satisfaction. That means communications must be targeted to both the employees who will use accommodations and the staff who are responsible for approving, promoting and coordinating them. Supervisors, HR specialists, deans and department heads must all understand that the benefits of offering workplace accommodations exceed the costs — and must believe that the institution encourages them to engage employees in conversations about accommodations.

For instance, the University of Arizona makes a great effort to promote the use of accommodations in the workplace. They have a comprehensive online guide to workplace accommodations reviewing numerous flexible arrangements, which include flexible year scheduling, job sharing between two employees, temporary alternative duty assignments for up to 16 weeks to accommodate personal family needs, and transitional arrangements allowing employees to phase in or out of work for special circumstances.

Another way to promote workplace accommodations is to provide clear information and easy guidance about how to make such requests. For example, an HR website could list the key elements to include when drafting a workplace accommodation request. By providing a template for requests, the institution offers employees a way to begin a formal conversation. It also shows that campus leadership wants departments and employees to coordinate on workplace accommodations.<sup>12</sup>

### Tracking results

As part of a workplace and scheduling accommodations program, the institution needs to track results. Employee satisfaction is important, but department chairs and supervisors should measure other tangible outcomes important to the institution, such as productivity, employee turnover, total paid sick days and absenteeism. If supervisors can demonstrate the positive impact of workplace accommodations, they can be expanded. Keeping close

#### Case in Point: The University of Chicago

At The University of Chicago, HR provides detailed guidelines for requesting workplace and scheduling accommodations so employees can craft proposals. These guidelines help employees from start to finish — from deciding if flex scheduling is the right arrangement, to what happens after a scheduling accommodation is approved. The guidelines also provide information about what department heads and supervisors expect from scheduling accommodations. By removing the guesswork, employees and supervisors are more inclined to create workplace and scheduling accommodations.

## Workplace and scheduling accommodations

tabs on outcomes is one reason having a staff member dedicated to supporting the initiative is so important. Even someone who devotes just half a day to the initiative can be instrumental in educating administrators and department heads about the value of workplace accommodations, coordinating departments to arrange accommodations, keeping everyone abreast of legal responsibilities, and tracking results.

### A Checklist for Getting Started

Creating or improving a workplace and scheduling accommodations program geared toward an aging workforce can seem daunting, but done right it is quite manageable. Here's a checklist for getting started.

- Propose to institutional leadership — including administration, faculty and staff councils, campus health officials, and human resources specialists — that the school needs a workplace and scheduling accommodations program for aging workers.
- Form a working group to assess gaps in the current workplace and scheduling accommodations program, and gather ideas and information about what improvements can be made.
- Survey your institution and estimate workplace and scheduling accommodation needs and preferences for aging employees.
- Appoint a program manager and staff to design a program and a comprehensive communication plan for key audiences.
- Develop an implementation strategy that features several examples of workplace accommodations and allows adequate time to foster awareness and engagement across campus.
- Create measurement and evaluation processes that demonstrate how accommodations produce benefits in excess of costs for the institution.
- Continue to refine the workplace and scheduling accommodations program and anticipate future needs, such as remote access computing and telecommuting for in-person meetings.

### The time to build a more productive environment

As this paper demonstrates, flexible scheduling options and workplace accommodations are practical and affordable actions institutions can take to address the challenges of an aging workforce. As part of an overall strategy for managing wellness, these actions can go a long way toward keeping employees healthy, happy and productive. And the rewards can be significant. By implementing such programs — focusing on gaining the buy-in of supervisors and department heads, and the participation of employees — schools can improve the quality of life and job satisfaction of skilled, experienced workers. Just as important, they can improve their bottom lines by lowering absenteeism and healthcare costs while maintaining and even boosting productivity across the campus. We've seen some institutions begin to lead the way in establishing best practices for workplace and scheduling accommodations. It's time for more institutions to follow their lead.

## Workplace and scheduling accommodations

- <sup>1</sup> Kaskie, B., Leicht, K. and Hitlin, S., "Promoting Workplace Longevity and Desirable Retirement Pathways Within Academic Institutions," TIAA-CREF Institute, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau (2000, 2005, 2010), Current Population Survey. <http://www.census.gov/cps/data>.
- <sup>3</sup> June, A. (2011). Senior Professors: Not When to Retire, but How. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 57(42), B46-B47. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- <sup>4</sup> Levin, Sharon G. and Paula E. Stephan, "Age and research productivity of academic scientists," *Research in Higher Education*, 1989: 30(5): 531-549.
- <sup>5</sup> Baicker, Katherine, David Cutler, and Zirui Song. (2010) "Workplace Wellness Programs Can Generate Savings," *Health Affairs*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 304-311.
- <sup>6</sup> Sugar, Judith A., Keri Pruitt, Jaime L. K. Anstee, Susan G. Harris. *Educational Gerontology*, 31: 405-418, 2005; and Feinsod, Roselyn and Davenport, Thomas. (2006). 'The Aging Workforce: Challenge or Opportunity?' *World At Work Journal*, Third Quarter
- <sup>7</sup> Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/ergonomics/index.html>. (2007)
- <sup>8</sup> Work Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility. Executive Office of the President, Council of Economic Advisors. Edited by Christina Romer. March 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Baltes, Boris B.; Briggs, Thomas E.; Huff, Joseph W.; Wright, Julie A.; Neuman, George A. Flexible and compressed workweek schedules: A meta-analysis of their effects on work-related criteria. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 84(4), Aug 1999, 496-513.
- <sup>10</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, § 2, 104 Stat. 328 (1991).
- <sup>11</sup> Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. Pub.L. 103-3; 29 U.S.C. sec. 2601; 29 CFR 825 (1993).
- <sup>12</sup> Timmons, J.C., Hall, A.C., Fesko, S.L., and Migilore, A.. Retaining the Older Workforce: Social Policy Considerations for the Universally Designed Workplace. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*: Vol 23: 2. (2011)

