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## ***THE FLEXIBLE TIME SCHEDULE: IS IT RIGHT FOR YOUR PRACTICE?***

As many practice managers we know found out over the past few months, summer is probably the most difficult time when it comes to staffing the office. Multiple requests for vacation are bundled with other requests from employees for more flexible schedules. Whether they need to take kids to camp in the mornings, pick them up from swim team practice or share the car since their kids are now driving to summer jobs, these realities hit the office administrator during the “dog days of summer.” Make plans now to avoid this stress next year—rather than juggling daily requests for time off, you may want to consider flex time as an option for your practice.

Flex time is not a “one size fits all” concept. In reality, some employee functions in your office may be eligible for a flexible schedule, while other employees must work a traditional schedule. For example, if you have an employee who works accounts receivable, most of this work can be done during flexible hours using the internet and the phone. In contrast, employees who support clinical activities must be present during the clinical scheduled hours.

### **Define Minimum Staffing Levels**

The first step in considering flex time is to define the minimum staffing levels in each of your departments. For example, if you need someone available to talk with patients about billing and past due accounts, there must be at least one person in the billing office during the hours the office is open. However, this does not have to be a single employee. Employees can be cross-trained, and some responsibilities can be shared.

Flex time most commonly involves two separate components, core work hours and flexible work hours. The core hours are those hours that most employees must work. These are typically the hours of business during which the core work is performed. For example, in the office, the core hours might be 9:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Most of the patients are being seen during these hours; the majority of employees need to be present for these activities.

Flexible work hours might be between 7:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m. These are optional times during which employees may choose to arrive and depart from work. Employees who have a flex schedule can select options for arrival and departure time within

these flex hours. The flex time is used to establish a schedule that defines when the employee will arrive and depart from work. Additionally, there are opportunities for some employees to work a swing shift. This shift begins or ends during the core hours, but extends beyond the usual flex time. For example, an employee working a flexible swing shift might work from noon until 8 p.m.

### Learn by Example

Here are some examples:

- Dr. Smith's office has two employees who are responsible for chart preparation. Since charts can be pulled and prepared for patient appointments during flexible hours, one person works from 7:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. and the other individual comes in at 9 a.m. and works until 6 p.m. This schedule allows one of these individuals to be available during the busiest office times to assist with chart pulling for walk-ins and phone calls. However, the person who works the later schedule has more time to prepare charts and deal with additions to the schedules that have occurred during the day.
- Dr. Jones' office has three employees who work accounts receivables. Most of their work can be done on the internet and on the phone. One of these individuals works from 7:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. and another employee works from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. The early employee can begin to work insurance reports and review patient issues from the previous day. The individual who works until 6 p.m. can run the daily reports and finish the close-of-business activities. The third person works from 12:00 noon until 8:00 p.m. Having the third individual work those hours places someone in the office to cover the lunch periods of the other two employees and places someone in the office for evening hours. During the evening he or she can reach more patients at home to collect past-due accounts, since many of the patients are at work during the traditional work day. Other employees can leave messages for patients during the day, giving them the option to return the call in the evening hours, when it is more convenient. Of course, a separate phone number is used for these calls, since the office phones are being covered by the answering service. For all of these employees, their work on the internet can be accomplished at any time. These three individuals can work the schedule that best suits their needs, and the schedule can be rotated as needed to provide each employee some flexibility.
- The Spine Center has three orthopedic physicians. Each one takes one morning off per week to make up for the time he is on call. On each of these days, one of the clinical support personnel comes in at 9:30 a.m. and works until 6:30 p.m. to provide more support for that physician's afternoon schedule. The clinical staff can rotate this schedule to accommodate their personal schedules.

- The Women’s Care practice has four doctors and is open from 8:00 a.m. until 5 p.m. Patient appointments are booked from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Two of the front desk patient services representatives come in at 8:00 a.m. to prepare for front desk operations and organize the patient records. They leave at 5:00 p.m. The third person comes in at 9:00 a.m. and works until 6:00 p.m. This third individual closes the front desk operations, does some quality assurance on the day’s activities and is available to handle last-minute emergent issues. The front desk personnel can rotate these hours as needed to accommodate their personal schedules.
- Salem Family Medical Associates is open from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. The triage nurse works from 9:00 am until 6:00 p.m. Early calls are placed in her voicemail box, and she handles these when she arrives. She works later in the day, allowing her to more time to deal with the volume of calls that have come in while the office was open.

### **Employers Benefit from Flex Time, Too**

The benefits of flex time to employers are worthy of consideration. The internet is full of articles discussing flexible schedules. Charles McDonnell, in his article “Can Flex Time Work for You?” discusses how employers who implemented flex time have experienced reductions in tardiness and absenteeism, reduced turnover, higher job satisfaction and increased productivity. Additionally, flex time often allows physicians to retain top performers and recruit talented job candidates who need non-traditional hours.

In the models proposed above, the productivity of these employees can be maximized, and overtime is prevented proactively. The realities of the work day are addressed with a staffing matrix that puts employees in the right spots at the right times. Surely, there is more than enough work to be done at all hours of the day, but the variety that flex time offers to employees can have a dramatic impact on creating a positive work attitude and increasing productivity that benefit both the employer and the employees.

### **Key Elements for Success**

Many employers shy away from flex time because it is more challenging to manage—they think they will not know who is coming or going. In fact, it is more difficult. However, there are several key elements for success that you can use to implement a workable flex time schedule.

- Determine the core tasks that must be performed and consider when these tasks can be performed.
- Talk with employees about the work scope, get information about when they can be most productive, and determine if they need a flex schedule.

- Develop a plan for a flex schedule with the hours carefully planned to accommodate the required work.
- Assign employees to the flex schedule that best meets the employer's needs and then the employee's needs.
- Talk with employees about the plan and publish it so everyone knows the schedule. Some practices allow the employees to work together at established intervals to coordinate the schedules and sign up for the hours they want to work. In other settings, the manager works with employees who could benefit from flex time. The schedules can be planned weekly, monthly or quarterly to help the manager keep track of the hours each employee will work.

It's worth noting that tracking time is easier if you have a computerized time system, as some employees may want to take advantage of the new-found flexibility. Evaluate the flex schedule by examining the time and attendance data, tracking productivity and holding discussions with physicians and staff about how it is working. Adjustments can be made using these data.

Without question, flex time has its benefits and challenges. For some employers, it has been a valuable tool toward increasing productivity and employee job satisfaction. So before you become overwhelmed with requests for time off, managing overtime or losing a valuable employee, consider whether or not flex time might be the right answer for you.

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