



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05PCB
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JULY 07, 2020

ARTICLE **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Adventures in Alternative Work Arrangements

by Michele Benton

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Adventures in Alternative Work Arrangements

by Michele Benton
JULY 07, 2020



PETER CADE/GETTY IMAGES

Before having kids, we tend to envision ourselves as the devoted company worker, always present, fully committed, and willing to give extra effort to get the job done. But with kids come new demands, especially for the majority of us who are in [dual-career households](#). Our commitment and career ambitions hold true, it's just harder to fit life around traditional work structures. It would seem that alternative work programs — flexible hours, remote work, part-time salaried work, job shares, and lateral moves — create a win-win for employers, employees, and families.

Unfortunately, alternative work is a bit of a ruse. [Most employers offer it](#), usually as part of their inclusion programs to attract quality talent (you!). But, often it's an empty gesture as few employees ever use these options. [Research](#) in the U.S. and Europe confirms consequences we already know: using [these programs](#) means certain career death.

We desperately need these options. Not on paper, but in practice in our lives. With no yellow brick road to follow, we must find our own way forward. Here are four steps to making an alternative work program work for you:

Get real. Just because a company is recognized as a top employer for parents [doesn't mean alternative work is mainstream](#). Often, it functions like a glorified mommy track, and access is based on manager preference (and what works in one department may not work in yours). In developing your alternative work proposal, look around, chat with colleagues, and tap into HR to assess potential acceptance and barriers:

- Do senior leaders “get it”? How many are parents of young children or part of a dual-career couple? What unstated messages are sent about family and work?
- What types of alternative work are accepted? Is it only “work from home Fridays” or are other types commonplace? Which department or roles permit it? Are certain managers more accepting?
- What happens to people who use alternative work? How do they get big projects or promotions? Do they have a senior-level sponsor, a plan to ramp back up, or something else for support?

Make it worthwhile. Build on areas of acceptance and overcome barriers by helping your leaders realize there are different ways to show career commitment:

- **Craft a value proposition.** Assess what impact you have on revenue, profit, efficiency, or costs, and connect it to your proposal. For example, your part-time role saves one million dollars in outside vendor fees, working 3-days-remote delivers \$300,000 in sales, or a lateral move closes a gap without costs/downtime of a temp. Be creative — for ideas, tap a finance friend.
- **Talk outcomes not hours.** Many cultures tend to focus on busy-ness, time, or effort when discussing work. Instead, highlight your efficient method, innovative use of resources, or creative thinking skills. (Think of yourself as a consultant who charges by project deliverable, not billable hours.) During performance reviews, champion your accomplishments and make the case for a meaningful salary increase and bonus. Steer conversations toward your bottom-line value.
- **Protect what you hope to gain.** If your goal is fewer hours, don't automatically work longer than agreed or overcompensate in exhaustive frenzy while at work. If you want less intensity in your lateral position, make sure an additional project brings promotable skills or senior stakeholder visibility before you take it on. Be selective when giving discretionary effort.

- **Make it normal.** Avoid signaling that alternative work is wrong. You wouldn't apologize to colleagues if you weren't available one evening or on a Sunday morning, so don't apologize for not working "conventional" hours. Simply state what's possible, *I'm not available Monday, but I'm open 9–2 Tuesday*. Or, *I can have it ready Friday, would that work?* Choose words that reinforce professionalism, such as *work remotely* (vs. *work from home*), or *I'm in transit* (vs. *I'm in my car*).
- **Push for career support.** Seek senior-level mentors and talk up how your alternative work arrangement is creating results. Before talent discussions, check in with your manager to prepare them to advocate for you. Let decision-makers know you're interested in high-potential leadership training and resources.

Buck gender assumptions. Even though family structures have evolved into countless variations, stereotypes of life divided between a working husband and a stay-at-home wife linger. With alternative work programs, men get the benefit of the doubt [while women get punished](#) as motherhood seems incompatible with work commitment. At home, alternative work for women usually translates into more domestic burden, like childcare or housework, but for most men, [it facilitates other work arenas like training or a side gig](#). Consider how gender assumptions intersect with the life you're trying to create:

- When changing job structure, be clear about what things you're taking on outside work. Make sure you and your partner feel expectations and tradeoffs are fair, and frame shared duties the same way (is it parenting or babysitting?).
- A lot of advice today encourages women to recast their definition of success away from power and money, to things like well-being or family satisfaction, and to be at peace with [dropping the ball](#) or [opting out](#). Define success for yourself.

Vote with your feet. Finally, if you can't get support for an alternative program that works for you, take your talent elsewhere. Re-allocate discretionary time to job searching. In your exit interview, tell HR exactly why you're leaving, as company execs read these reports.

When it comes to creating career opportunities that support your life and goals outside of work, your words and actions can help transform alternative work from good policy to good practice.

Michele Benton is President of [lime LLC](#), a marketing strategy, capabilities, and performance consultancy. Fed up that society's message to working parents is "Embrace the Suck", she runs the blog and resource center [BeSaturated.com](#) to help contemporary professionals create a good life in today's global, social, and digital times. Follow Michele on Twitter [@michelebphd](#)
