

# HOLISTIC FLEXIBILITY:

HUMANIZING THE WORKPLACE FOR PRODUCTIVITY,  
PROFITABILITY, AND POSSIBILITY

Manar Sweillam Morales

# Flexibility is not new;

it has evolved throughout history, driven by economic crises, geopolitical disruptions, labor market changes, shifting societal norms and values, global competition, and a pandemic.

In the United States, companies first offered flexibility options during the Great Depression. Job sharing was introduced in the 1930s to avoid layoffs, stabilize wages, and keep people working. As the economy recovered, companies phased out these options.

The gas crisis and growing environmental awareness of the 1970s prompted a new interest in flexible work options. NASA engineer Jack Nilles coined the term “telecommuting” in 1972, and his book *The Telecommunications-Transportation Tradeoff* is considered the founding document of telecommuting. From the beginning, Nilles believed the widespread adoption of telecommuting would not be based on technology alone, but “organizational– and management–cultural changes were far more important.” In 1979, Frank W. Schiff, vice president and chief economist of the Committee for Economic Development, wrote an article in the *Washington Post* entitled “Working at Home Can Save Gasoline.” In the article, he suggests that if professionals telecommute just a day or two a week, the savings in gas, time spent in traffic, and mental stress could be significant.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, the significant rise in women in the labor market created a fundamental shift that made flexibility even more relevant. The percentage of women participating in the workforce increased from 34 percent in 1950 to 60 percent in 2000. More women in the workforce meant more parents and caretakers juggling work and home responsibilities and more dual-career households feeling squeezed for time.

By 2006, when I began researching this concept, many professional services organizations offered what they called *flexible work arrangements*, which included a variety of options such as telecommuting, compressed work weeks, and reduced hours and job sharing. Although these flexibility policies were technically more widely available, they were highly stigmatized.

After COVID-19 forced a sudden move to virtual work for most companies, the number one question company leaders asked me was, “Is this really going to stick?” Meaning—“How much longer do we have to put up with this online [insert expletive here]?” They wanted to roll the clocks back and walk back into the office, no questions asked, just like they’d always done before.

Yes, there are still plenty of companies that feel that way.

One thing is clear to me after decades of studying this question—flexibility is here to stay. How 9/11 forever changed how we travel, COVID-19 forever changed how we work. The question is how we will create a future workplace that supports the organization and all its people.

If flexibility has historically been used with varying effectiveness and often surrounded by stigma, why is this time different?

## HOLISTIC FLEXIBILITY

The answer is *holistic flexibility*. At the Diversity & Flexibility Alliance, we define holistic flexibility as a complete and integrated approach to working that meets organizational and employee needs in a way that produces a healthy culture, employee loyalty and productivity, and a profitable bottom line.

Holistic flexibility includes not only *where* you work but also *when* and *how long* you work. It's a form of deparented, degendered, and destigmatized flexibility. In other words, it's an approach that creates a judgment- and bias-free culture that no longer assumes every mother wants to work from home, every baby boomer wants to work in person, or everyone is always most productive at the office. It's work that is humanized.

Another term we hear often is *hybrid work*. Hybrid work is not a synonym of holistic flexibility but a subset that specifically relates to *where* you work. The Alliance defines hybrid work as bringing together the best of who we are in person and the best of who we are online to equal the best of who we'll be in the future.

For us, the term *holistic* conveys that one size does not fit all. With holistic flexibility, an organization empowers people to work in a way that meets their unique needs and unleashes their full potential. Holistic flexibility is giving management and employees the tools and training they need to manage teams or their careers and workdays.

Holistic flexibility is flexibility for all of us.

## WHY HOLISTIC FLEXIBILITY IS HERE TO STAY

Earlier I mentioned that just as 9/11 forever changed the way we travel, COVID-19 forever changed the way we work.

If flexibility has historically been used with varying effectiveness and often surrounded by stigma, why is this time different?

Because never before have so many people worked from home simultaneously. As a result, we were all forced to experience flexibility at scale and find a way to make it work.

Now that we know it's possible to make it work, there's no going back. Here are five specific reasons why flexibility—and specifically holistic flexibility—is here to stay:

- **Status quo is no longer a barrier.** Historically, very few people used flexibility options, even when they were available. Most people worked full-time in an office, the primary working model since the Industrial Revolution. When speaking to leaders about flexibility before the pandemic, I often heard a lot of resistance, usually in the form of “But this is how we’ve always done it.” The status quo was solid, clear, and longstanding.

Today, that is no longer the case. COVID-19 forced us all—organizations and individuals—to reimagine how to run meetings, how to mentor, how to hire, and how to collaborate, all while working from home. We could no longer rely on “the way we had always done it” because it was no longer an option.

As a result, in 2022, 58 percent of job holders in the United States have the option to work at home at least one day per week—and 87 percent of them take it. Estimates of growth rates vary, but according to McKinsey, flexible work has grown from one-third to ten times since the pandemic. A new status quo has been created, and it's likely to stick because flexibility works.

COVID-19 showed us that flexible work options *increased* productivity and access to talent, and they improved nearly every benchmark that matters. Thanks to the pandemic, we all found we could be profitable and flexible in ways we had never thought possible.

- **Its stigma is reduced.** According to another survey before the pandemic, 93 percent of law firms had some form of flexibility policy in place, but usage rates were 8.8 percent. Low usage in law firms was typically due to the characteristically large gap between policy and practice and the stigma associated with using those policies. The irony is that while stigma resulted in low usage rates, low usage resulted in more significant stigma, as people made assumptions about flexibility that weren't necessarily accurate, resulting in a vicious cycle.

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This stigma existed across industries: many believed if you weren't working at an office, you wouldn't be as productive, you'd be distracted, or you wouldn't be as available to coworkers or clients. As Schiff pointed out in "Working at Home Can Save Gasoline," these objections were common in the 1970s and weren't even true then. In 1973 and 2023, professionals can focus, be productive, and be available when working at different locations than their coworkers or clients or at times other than the typical 9-5 workday. People assumed otherwise simply because they hadn't experienced it.

When COVID-19 forced nearly everyone to work at home, those assumptions changed. The leaders who had said they could *never possibly* work from home suddenly were. Our shared experience at scale naturally reduced the stigma.

- **It has become a necessary skill.** Before the pandemic, nearly all business was conducted in person, so tools for online work were largely optional. Online work was not considered as effective, as it was seen as difficult to build trust and rapport. For this reason, many top-level leaders could get away with preferring not to do video calls.

However, when in-person options disappeared, we were forced to conduct business and build trust and rapport with online tools. The companies that could make this shift succeeded. Those that couldn't were more likely to struggle or fail.

Today, online work skills are not just business as usual; they're crucial to every business's continuity plan. Now that we know we can effectively conduct business online, employees *and* clients will expect this option from now on. Online work is no longer a choice; it's a necessary skill.

The rate of change is growing exponentially, so we need to keep adapting to change. Clients will only be requesting more virtual meetings, and soon, we'll all have no choice but to navigate online, in-person, and hybrid meetings regularly if we want to stay competitive.

## Online work is no longer a choice; it's a necessary skill.

- **Many employees do not want to be forced to return to the office.** Historically, there has been a clear boundary between work and personal life. Allowing relationship or parenting issues to seep into your work life was unprofessional. No matter what was falling apart at home, we needed to show up at work as if nothing was happening.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people experienced an alignment between their personal lives and work in ways that never happened before. The personal issues that were previously hidden were communal and impossible to hide. When we saw our accountant's four-year-old burst into the room during a virtual meeting, we understood what she was going through at a deeper level. And we couldn't unsee it. At the same time, our accountant found creative ways to parent a preschooler and effectively contribute to the company at the same time. And she doesn't want that sense of alignment to end.



A Gartner study shows you're likely to lose up to 39 percent of your workforce if you force everybody to return to the office full-time. People want the autonomy to decide how to work so they can continue experiencing that alignment between their work and personal lives.

- **Working at home has become increasingly convenient.** During the pandemic, people were forced to invest in technology to work effectively from home, which increased its convenience. That convenience also isn't going away, so if your people are going to work in an office, there must be a clear return on experience (ROE) for them. (We discuss creating this ROE for your people in the Flex Success Framework in *The Flexibility Paradigm*.)

As Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) lecturer and Presencing Institute co-founder Otto Scharmer said, "As systems collapse, people rise." That's precisely what happened in our organizations: our systems at home and work collapsed, and our employees rose to the occasion to work and allow our businesses to continue. Now that we know we can work effectively in various ways beyond being together at the office at the same time, it's nearly impossible to go back. And most don't want to.

In all the years I've been looking at flexibility, though it has had ebbs and flows, on the whole, it has never gone backward. **It's not a question of if you move toward it as an organization. It's a question of when and how.** 📌



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