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# Want more flexibility? Have a plan -- and ask

**BY CINDY GOODMAN**

Like many commuters, Jason Friedman spends 10 hours a week on South Florida roads, feeling unproductive and wishing he could be playing with his kids. Friedman had ruled out asking his employer to let him work from home a few days a week, figuring there was a good reason it had never been done.

But lately, Friedman has come to realize he never will close the gap between the kind of life he wants and the one he actually is living unless he asks for what he wants.

Remember the saying, if you don't ask, you won't get? Such wisdom applies increasingly to the quest for better work/life balance. Two separate surveys show more than half of Americans say finding a better work/life fit is their top goal in 2008. But only 15 percent of private workers believe they have the option to work at home occasionally.

"A lot of people think because their life is out of balance, the only way to change that is to quit or do nothing," says Peggy Klaus, author of *The Hard Truth About Soft Skills*. "But there are ways to ask for things that make them a win-win for all."

Stop stewing, Klaus says, and start getting clear about what you want and what trade-offs you are willing to make. If you work from home one day a week, are you willing to give up face time? Can you afford earning less money if you work fewer hours?

Even in a souring economy, smart employers say they are considering formal flexible work policies or using nonstandard work arrangements to boost productivity. The majority of businesses that offer these perks rank them as their most effective tools for keeping employees -- even better than above-average salaries, training and stock options.

Here are three other things you should do before asking for what you want:

- **Assess your employer's policies.** Figure out what programs are available, but don't rule out something just because it hasn't been done before.

**If there is no policy, "it might be hard to fight the forces of inertia," says Timothy Clark, author of *Epic Change*. "You just might need to strategize more."**

Flexibility can take many forms: flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, part-time work, compressed workweeks, daily or informal flexibility, earlier start or end times. Many companies and government agencies offer formal flexibility policies and others are considering them this year. Most still rely on individually negotiated deals.

- **Build your case.** Even at tradition-steeped law and accounting firms, managers are approving these arrangements when workers show their bosses what's in it for them. When making the pitch, consider their style.

"If the boss is a micromanager and you know she doesn't like people to work virtually, address her concerns. Tell her you will check in regularly," suggests Klaus.

She also believes a proposal for flexibility is a great time to recession-proof your job. "This is when you justify why you are necessary."

**Clark, whose book addresses leadership, says a proposal should detail a worker's value, explain how the work will get done and address every potential argument or concern.**

When Friedman, the commuter, recently decided to approach his organization's leaders about allowing staffers to work from home some days, he prepared a well researched report. In it, he outlined how the business would prosper and included examples of competitors who offer remote working. "To me it's a no-brainer," he says. He's waiting for an answer.

Managers cite a couple of factors when approving an employee's request.

"What I'm looking for in this is a win-win situation," says Doug Gawrych, managing partner of Grant Thornton's South Florida offices.

Grant Thornton, an accounting firm, has a nationally recognized flexibility program. Gawrych believes staffers who work directly with clients should get the client's approval, too. "What works is if the person approaches it from the standpoint that nothing is rigid."

Jay Kim, of the Fort Lauderdale law firm WardKim, recently allowed an associate to work a few weeks from another country and others to have flexibility to do volunteer work during office hours. Ward says associates only need to convince him that whatever arrangement they want won't affect their ability to get their work done. "Everyone knows if employees are happy, they do better work."

- **Get out of your own way.** Many workers feel stuck, without taking a hard look at what is keeping them from getting what they want.

Ilene Rosenberg, a recruiting manager, had been putting in long hours at Grant Thornton and mentioned to her manager that she felt distanced from her young daughter. The manager suggested she take an hour in the morning once a week for a parent-child class. Since then, Rosenberg has had another child and begun working from home one morning a week.

"It changed my whole life," she says. "I realized I was at a place where they respected me and understood family is important."

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