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Most Canadian businesses offer flexible work hours — at least to the boss: study

By Derek Abma, Postmedia News March 14, 2011

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Survey results released Monday suggest 88 per cent of Canadian businesses are now offering their employees some kind of flexible work arrangements.

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Imagine being able to work when you want and where you want.

It shouldn't be such a far-fetched idea. Survey results released Monday suggest 88 per cent of Canadian businesses are now offering their employees some kind of flexible work arrangements.

However, the survey also suggested that 45 per cent of companies offer these perks to only their most senior employees.

The poll, done by a Luxembourg-based Regus PLC, involved about 17,000 businesses in 80 countries, and 117 in Canada. The proportion of Canadian companies offering flexible work arrangements was higher than the U.S. figure of 85 per cent and the global figure of 81 per cent.

The Canadian results have a margin of error of three percentage points, Regus said, declining to offer further statistical information.

Wes Lenci, Regus's regional vice-president for Canada, said offering employees more options in shaping their schedules and choosing their work location is a growing trend.

He said it's another perk that can help a company reel in highly qualified staff at a time when many members of the workforce are retiring.

"Hiring people and finding top talent is not as easy as it once was," Lenci said.

"One way you can sweeten the offer is by allowing a flexible workplace for these potential candidates."

In the Canadian portion of the study, 66 per cent of business leaders said flexible working arrangements save them money.

This comes largely from not leasing excess office space because flex-scheduling can allow for more desk sharing, people working from home or operating from other remote locations.

The study said many companies around the world are paying for more office space than they need, particularly after job cuts in the recent recession.

In Canada, where the recession was not as severe, companies continue to pay a premium for downtown office space in big cities, said Lenci. For this reason, he said, many are inclined to use cheaper facilities in the suburbs, which many employees find more convenient anyway.

"Your real-estate costs as a company tend to be your largest monthly reoccurring costs," Lenci said. "Of course, your employee costs are next."

Regus offers companies around the world options for facilitating flexible work arrangements, such as office space and meeting rooms booked on an as-needed basis.

As for limiting flexible work arrangements to only the most senior employees of an organization, Lenci called it a reasonable stance. He said it's not something that's offered to everyone in his organization.

"We want people to strive towards it," he said. "We just don't want to hand it out. Of course, the person that you give it to has to be the kind of person that can be a self-starter, have the discipline to still get their work done and not be supervised."

About one-third of the Canadian companies in the survey said allowing flexible working arrangements improves the productivity of employees.

"Obviously, (an employee) will be much more happier and content just driving 10 minutes or taking a bus that 10 minutes, or walking for that matter, and then they can start in on their work and not have to spend that hour going down (to work) and hour coming home," Lenci said.

Lorraine Weygman, a Toronto-based business consultant who deals with issues of workplace culture, said flexible work arrangements can benefit both employees and companies.

However, she warned, it doesn't always work out for the best. A person who is working from home, for example, has to be able to avoid distractions, and might find themselves not as motivated as they are in a busy office environment.

Also, she noted that a greater effort has to be made in communication between workers and employers in a flexible working relationship.

"The whole key here is: What are your expectations when you do a flexible schedule?" she said. "How does it work for both sides? It has to benefit both."

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