



## Ten Tips to Create a Flexible, Virtual Work Environment

The workplace flexibility movement has two things going for it: one, it's not going away, and two, just like the word itself, it can adapt and change to fit any organizational culture.

Business and Professional Women's Foundation is a non-profit research and education organization that supports workforce development programs and workplace policies that recognize the diverse needs of working women, communities and businesses. That is not only how we fulfill our mission, but also how we conduct our operations internally. Through our own research, BPW Foundation recognized the empowering, productive and profitable qualities residing in a flexible, virtual office environment.

In May 2010, BPW Foundation went virtual. But not only did we leave our brick and mortar office behind, we also started operating under ROWE (Results Only Work Environment), originally created by Best Buy. This approach rebuffs rewarding presence over performance. Under ROWE, productivity is no longer measured by hours worked, but by deliverables and outputs.

If an employee can get her work done from 9am-1pm, why should she sit at her desk for the rest of the day? And in fact, why should she even have to be at her desk? If the focus is on results, then why can't she work when, where and how she works best? Can't she check her iPhone from a football game, the beach or a coffee shop? Work is no longer where you go, but what you do.

To make ROWE our own, BPW Foundation had to be flexible, adaptable, and open-minded. We are driven by our definition of a successful workplace (one that practices and embraces diversity, equity and work-life balance) and our *Successful Workplace Guidelines*.

Now four months into our flexible, virtual work approach (and about a year of prior planning), we've come up with initial guidelines on how to create a work model that links profitability and flexibility.

**1. Do Your Homework.** There are organizations that have already taken this path. Read books and articles. Tap into board members' expertise. Check with HR (How would a virtual employee handbook differ? Are there additional liability issues?), accounting (How much will the organizations save?) and trusted peers (How will the public and other stakeholders react?).

**2. Hire an Expert.** Workplace consultants can help you navigate this new world, from gaining buy-in from employees and board members to figuring out innovative communication strategies.

3. **Create Space for Change.** Going virtual while also initiating a ROWE policy, requires a paradigm shift. Employees need the space to process and discuss the changes to come in an open and judgment-free environment.

4. **Gear Up.** Invest in the necessary technology and tools to inspire the most productivity: enhanced networks, software upgrades, laptops, printers, smart phones, wireless cards, hands-free devices or webcams.

5. **Discover Your Flexstyle.** Let employees manage their time and environment. While one person may like her work and life to flow seamlessly through out the day (check email, wash laundry, research grants, grocery shop...) others may prefer a clear division with traditional hours and a proper desk.

6. **Define Your Results.** Moving from a presence-oriented to a performance-oriented work environment means that you need to be clear about your organizational goals and how each employee's work is tied to overall objectives. Focus on Outputs Not Inputs. The worker who stays late is not always the one that worked the hardest. Forget hours logged as a way to measure. Reward quality and prompt deliverables.

7. **Socialize.** Just as we all have differing work styles, we have different personalities. In person interaction can be critical to the success of this virtual move. Encourage in-person meetings between staff whether in the park or at a café to discuss a project; continue external client or coalition meetings; host a monthly organizational ice cream social; have a regular, scheduled in-person staff meeting.

8. **Experiment.** Transitioning into a virtual and flexible operating approach is both fun and scary and rewarding and frustrating. Both employers and employees should be free to express their experiences and test out different styles. It's okay to fail, as long as the failure is seen as a way to improve this exciting and transformative time.

9. **Have Fun.** Everyone (employers especially!) should take advantage of the flexibility. Work from a mountain cottage. See a Tuesday matinee. Sleep until noon. Volunteer on a farm. Schedule both fun time and work time to ensure deadlines and work commitments are met.

10. **Track your Progress.** By documenting employer and employee experiences, it will become easier to recognize what is working (email responsiveness guidelines) and what might need to be changed (length and structure of staff meetings). Develop indicators that allow you to measure changes related to costs, organizational effectiveness, employee satisfaction and environmental impact. For example, what is the environmental impact of not driving to work everyday; what are the cost savings from eating at home; and what are the improvements in your family and social life?