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Four-day work weeks, telecommuting present problems

By Barbara Rose Chicago Tribune

Every week brings another announcement of a government agency adopting a four-day week or a business expanding telecommuting options to help minimize employees' pain at the gas pump.

The spike in oil prices — the latest in a host of megatrends pushing organizations to offer alternative work arrangements — seems a golden opportunity for flexibility advocates.

Yet there are pitfalls. Knee-jerk solutions such as four-day weeks and work-from-home Fridays are not necessarily the answer, experts say, and ill-conceived or hastily adopted programs serve neither customers nor employees.

In Ohio, where workers in 23 state agencies enjoyed access to flexible hours and four-day weeks for about eight years, administrators tightened state policies in February because they said service had suffered.

Offering options tailored to fit an organization's needs and strategy is the way to go, experts said.

"A four-day week can be a great solution when it's not imposed," said senior consultant Karen Noble, leader of the "everywhere workplace" practice at Newton,

Mass.-based WFD Consulting. "When you

say everybody will work four-day weeks, that's 'rigid flexibility' and it's not driven by business needs. It's not even driven necessarily by people's needs. What people want is more control over the imposed paradigm."

"Flexibility is about how we get work done together in this economy," said consultant

Cali Williams Yost, president of Madison,

N.J.-based Work+Life Fit Inc. "Gas prices and being 'green' would be one aspect of it, along with serving customers in a 24/7 environment, managing global teams, recruiting and retaining talent, managing real estate more efficiently."

The biggest gas savings comes from telecommuting, but it requires investment in technology and in training managers and employees.

"The biggest obstacle continues to be management mistrust" by supervisors who equate face time with productivity, said telework researcher and author Kate Lister.

She estimates 50 million jobs could be performed remotely. If all those people worked from home about half the time, gas savings based on an average commute at \$4.50 per gallon would total \$40 billion, or 60 percent of the nation's Gulf-region oil imports.

Many global technology companies are already down that road. At Nortel Networks Inc., where

telecommuting has been an option for 15 years, director of workplace planning, innovation and construction David Dunn said employees “have been voting with their feet in terms of making choices about where and when and how to work.”

“It’s only in the last three to four years where these technologies have become ubiquitous and the shift in behavior is increasing,” he said. “Whether you’re a human resources person or a technology person or an environmental person, I think we’re at the beginning of a very dramatic shift.”

Noble, the consultant, agrees. “Flexibility usually only happens when people’s backs are to the wall or when business needs really change,” she said. “Gas has got everybody focused like a laser beam on employee pain and how to minimize it.”