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Popularity Gaining For Four-Day Work Weeks

By Lori Aratani The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A growing number of businesses and state and local governments from the Washington suburbs to Salt Lake City are pondering a strategy for saving on utility costs and being kind to the environment: telling their workers to stay home.

Congress is also weighing the merits of flexible work schedules. This month, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., proposed that more federal workers shift to a four-day, 10-hour-a-day workweek to help eliminate unnecessary commuting and reduce road congestion. He asked the Office of Personnel Management to analyze whether such a shift would be possible and report back by the end of this month.

Such scheduling arrangements, in which employees work longer hours but fewer days, share jobs or stagger start or quitting times, have been a part of the U.S. workplace for years. But in recent months, interest in flextime has been growing quickly.

This month, Utah became the first state in the country to take the leap, shifting most of its 17,000 state employees to a mandatory 10-hour-a-day, four-day workweek and closing most state offices on Fridays. Hawaii is piloting a similar experiment with about 100 state workers, and officials in Fairfax County, Va., are studying whether such an arrangement would work for them.

Human resource experts, however, caution companies about moving too hastily. Once put in place, flexible hours are difficult to undo.

David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a Connecticut-based human resources consulting firm, said although he encourages companies to consider such arrangements, he is concerned that too many businesses are not thinking of the long-term impact.

“Once you put some of these things in place, it’s a disaster to try and undo them. You can’t go back to employees and say, ‘Remember all that stuff in terms of flexible work arrangements? Well, forget it; we’re reverting back to the old way.’ Talk about a revolution.”

A shorter workweek helped lure Sara Campbell from her job with the Howard County, Md., school system to a job working in the human resources department of the Howard government. Campbell, 26, said four 10-hour days leave her more time to run errands and spend time with her two children, ages 4 and 1.

“It’s a real morale-booster,” she said. “There’s just so much less stress, because I know I have that extra day.”