

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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How “Flexible” Is Your Business?

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When the coronavirus pandemic forced schools to shut down in the spring, parents had to quickly react and juggle their jobs with the added roles of teacher, tutor and occasional IT technician. For most of us, it's been a stressful time, but one that many families presumed would be temporary.

We all assumed this pandemic would disappear by the end of the school year, but as the virus spread and erupted throughout the U.S., many school districts again shifted much or all learning online. Parents are faced with moving to remote learning, with no clear end in sight.

Now, employers and employees are wrestling with how to adapt to a new reality that may require them to extend short-term fixes and create more long-term solutions, whether that's staggering schedules for employees, splitting jobs between two workers or offering leaves of absence.

"I think employers had to very quickly allow a lot of things in the spring that they can't sustain on an ongoing basis without little more thought and a little more structure around it," said Patty Pryor, a principal and litigation manager for the law firm Jackson Lewis, who focuses on disability and leave management issues. "There has to be flexibility for all this to work out."

The stakes are high. Without support, some overwhelmed parents—particularly mothers, who typically take on more of the caregiving burden—say they'll likely drop out of the workforce ... and many already have.

Then you have to look at your morale. It may plummet, as employees without children feel pushed to pick up the slack for their colleagues who are parents. Some companies are also taking into account how some workers are juggling jobs with family responsibilities when evaluating their performance.

"There's a lot to balance and think through," Pryor said. "Employers are really struggling because of that. It's not just dollars and cents."

Remote work and job sharing, where a pair of employees trade off days for the same role, are options. But with our type of business, remote work doesn't fit for us. So we need to figure out how to take advantage of the opportunities that are out there for our business. Such arrangements may become more common because of the ongoing challenges caused by the health crisis.

"There's a lot of understanding around what people are able to do," Pryor said. "We have to prioritize ... it's quite a

daunting experience to be doing two full-time jobs at the same time.”

More than half of working parents say they're distracted to a moderate or significant degree as they carry out job tasks while helping their children with remote learning, according to Perceptyx, an employee survey platform. Meanwhile, the survey found 42% of working parents are also somewhat or greatly worried about their job security because they're having to manage with their kids being at home—even understanding employers may face a predicament since they need a steady workflow to stay financially afloat.

Many employers believe workers need flexibility during a challenging time. Among companies, 59% have offered flexible hours to support the caregiving responsibilities of their employees, and another 29% are planning or considering that option, according to Perceptyx. And 51% of businesses will enhance their flexible hours offering this year or in 2021.

Perceptyx found that 92% of employees who strongly believe their employers are providing the leeway and support needed to work from home while caring for children plan to stay at the company for at least the next 12 months.

As employers, we want to be as helpful as we can during these crises and understand the troubles that our employees are having. We cannot afford to pay employees who aren't productive and are so distracted at work they have no focus. With the current workforce in the United States, our government has come to the aid of many Americans who were either forced out of a job or have had to quit due to children at home. We've run numerous ads to try to get Americans to come and work with little to no responses. So now we need to worry about the retention of our current employees—we know the greenhouse will not run without a workforce.

The H-2A program is a short-term solution, but not a permanent one, so we have to take each employee on a case-by-case basis and figure out what's best for them and for our company's bottom line. We also pray that this pandemic will end soon and we can all get back to a somewhat normal life. **GT**

Information from Patty Pryor was taken from *USA Today*, August 17, 2020.

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