THE UNASHAMED GUIDE TO

Virtual Management

Virtual Workforce
Virtual Teams
Virtual Meetings
Virtual Office Romances

Ben Bisbee and Kathy Wisniewski
Introduction

Game of Zones: Understanding the Virtual World

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Introduction

It had come to this again: We had to turn to Google. A friend who was a manager for a virtual workplace contacted us to ask if we knew how to deal with an online office romance that had recently bloomed. They needed to know the best way to handle the situation and couldn’t find anything relatable or tailored to the virtual workplace. They came to us because they assumed we’d know a few things. We do—but this was new to us.

So we did some online searching, but came away empty-handed. There were no answers. Sure, we found a ton of stuff about general stationary office romance issues and a few articles related to the merits and wonder of loving virtual employment. But nothing that really helped this specific situation that needed its own level of detail and nuance for the virtual world.

It was at this point we realized something distressing: We, and countless other virtual managers, were completely on our own. We also saw an opportunity.

That moment sparked the very idea for this book. What if we didn’t have to blindly search the Internet for solutions to our
virtual workplace problems, hoping for a link that would lead to some shred of an answer? What if we didn’t have to awkwardly tap our friends on the shoulder to ask for their advice or insights every time we tried to make sense of managing employees in a virtual world? What if there was a guide that gave us all the answers, or at least offered a range of suggestions?

**We’re Far Past the Early Stages**

The problem as we see it is that most current conversations, articles, books, or blogs related to virtual employment are still very much driven by the building-block arguments for establishing or attempting virtual employment. That is, they’re still deeply rooted in “why” and “when” when most of us who have been in this space—some for well over a decade—are anxiously focused on the “how” of our needs.

We believe new and established professionals working in virtual environments no longer need convincing of the possibility or plausibility of virtual employment. Those formative days have passed. In fact, 4.3 million employees now work from home at least half the time. Virtual or work-at-home employment, among the non-self-employed population, has grown by 140 percent since 2005, nearly 10 times faster than the rest of the workforce or the self-employed (Global Workplace Analytics 2018). These professionals are seeking real virtual solutions to their daily virtual issues.

And like humans themselves, the solutions necessary for a wide variety of issues are never one-size-fits-all. However, when solutions are presented, we need stronger ideas, tools, and guidance to leverage them as actual policies and practices. We’re essentially past “suggestions” as just suggestions. We need suggestions that come with instructions and intended outcomes.
So beyond taking the conversation on its natural progression in the virtual industry, this book also includes the advice of real professionals and experts who work virtually across a wealth of sectors. Within these pages they share and unpack virtual workplace realities beyond your wildest expectations, covering tales and topics that may have once been considered untouchable or implausible in a virtual setting. Are we going to address virtual workplace romance? Absolutely. But we’re also going to be talking about such topics as identifying online cliques, secret Santa, virtual disciplinary action, taking meetings on the toilet, and so much more.

Get ready; when we say this is the “unashamed guide” we are not kidding around. But there is a method to our madness! Within this book we have built a model to help you think beyond “answers” to questions, so you can discover the necessary building blocks for solutions to problems.

**Who You Are Matters**

So who are you anyway, reader? In our minds, you are a smart and savvy manager working virtually yourself or managing at least one virtual employee. You have all the technology you need and you crave tactics for management that are similar—extraordinarily similar—to managers in stationary workplaces, but the situation is just different enough that you need a few extra pointers, skills, or insights.

This book is packed with information that will aid just about anyone in any setting—even volunteers—who find themselves facing virtual management problems in a modern world. But for the purpose of this book, we are going to talk to you as a classic middle manager. Why? Because we believe middle managers make the world go round—they are the everyday heroes of
any organization, making the magic happen, with their fingers on the pulse of the day-to-day dealings in the working world.

We also believe that middle management is one of the best advocates of day-to-day needs at any organization. They have to deal with issues in real time and are often the first ones searching frantically for some shred of policy or purpose-driven tool to aid them in a tricky situation. So cheers to you, our middle management friends! This book has your needs in mind and will often speak to the very heart of your wants, desires, and plights.

**The 4Ps of Virtual Solutions**

As we mentioned, we have real solutions for real problems. And like the very technology we use every day, the building blocks of virtual solutions for our everyday problems are layered and complicated. Our job as authors is to make it feel as thoughtful, easy, and effortless as possible. We’re doing this by presenting what we call the 4Ps of Virtual Solutions. These 4Ps represent the four critical areas you need to access and address to turn suggestions into workplace practice and policy:

- **Purpose.** What is the reason you’re doing or addressing something? Simply put, begin with “why.” Why is this an issue? What does this need to be solved? Why does this matter in your virtual workplace?

- **Personality.** How is the topic at hand best addressed at the human level, by your employees, as organizational culture? How does this topic relate to your organization? And how does your approach to these processes and policies reflect the personality of your organization?

- **Policy.** What are the rules or principles associated with the topics at hand? How are they expressed and how does an employee learn about or access them?
• **Process.** What are the series of actions or steps taken to achieve a particular end related to this topic? How does tech play a role? How will you address solutions to problems as a company? How do the policies you set forth become everyday solutions or problem solvers?

At the end of the day, the 4Ps are also just really good feedback loop topic areas that will help you look at any problem you have virtually with a new set of eyes aimed at solving them.

Now a fair warning is needed. This book isn’t about creating a one-size-fits-all virtual reality. Rather, it provides a wealth of perspectives from diverse angles—sometimes the answer you’re seeking has *five* different variables. For example, there may be five different versions of technology, and while some may be better than others, there might also be essentially no major difference and it’s more about your approach. Or those variables could be associated with money, creativity, or sensitivity. And sometimes it doesn’t matter, because you just need a quick fix. In any case, you’ll find this book offers options to ensure that no matter the solution or your problem, you’ll be able to evaluate its purpose, determine how it fits within your organizational personality, and then implement a process to help make it stick.

**Unashamed Is the Name of the Game**

Are you ready? We’re excited for you to come along with us on this journey to navigate the intricacies of the world of virtual employment, which are similar to, but also often extremely different from, those associated with traditional stationary workplace settings.

Our goal is for you to use this book as a guide—something to return to time after time to find tips and guidance for whatever area of virtual management you are seeking to improve,
unpack, or solve. As such, we’ve broken things down into hyper-specific topic-based chapters—30 of them, in fact. But to make this guidebook useful, we’ve grouped these topics into four overarching sections:

- **Game of Zones.** This section sets the stage and covers topics truly unique to the virtual workplace, such as time zones, working hours, flexible schedules, and privacy.
- **The New VHR.** This section covers the core aspects of managing, but with a virtual spin. Topics include hiring and interviews, onboarding, meetings, performance reviews, and firings.
- **Culture Is King.** This section focuses on how you build and maintain a virtual team. Just because you’re virtual doesn’t mean you can neglect the importance that team building and culture can play in a workplace. You need to keep an eye on employee morale, cliques, and gossip, while also bringing the team together with virtual parties and benefits.
- **Home vs. Home Office.** This section offers advice on handling the daily oddities of working from home. Whether it’s laundry, errands, meetings from the bathroom, office romance, or interruptive pets and children, you should be aware of how to address these topics.

From the mundane to the awkward, we are going to cover it all, because we know you have to manage it all no matter where you are managing from. May you enjoy this journey of solving your problems as much as we enjoyed writing solutions for your problems.

Have a suggestion or story related to any topic covered in this book? Share it online at www.unashamedvirtualmanagement.com and it might be featured on the book’s website and in future editions!
GAME OF ZONES

Understanding the Virtual World
1.

All About Time Zones

It’s the subject of songs, books, poems, movies, and religious texts. A most precious commodity. We never have enough of it, yet sometimes we have too much of it on our hands. Occasionally we borrow it, sometimes it flies, and at other times it just stands still. Sometimes we waste it, and at other moments it’s on our side. We try desperately to manage it but often feel that it really manages us. What is it? Time.

Such mighty juxtaposition for such a tiny little word. We all have the same 24 hours to work with. We are all very busy. And now, thanks to technology, we have the easiest access we have ever had to people on the other side of the globe.

Let’s Level Set, Shall We?
You may have never thought about it this way, but working with another person in another part of the world creates a virtual workplace. Even if the rest of your co-workers are surrounding you in cubicleland, that single co-worker in different time zone or country makes you a member of the virtual workplace club!
Welcome. And while working with those in other time zones has its advantages, it also has its challenges.

The biggest is most definitely time differences. You have to search and calculate the exact time difference between where you are and the country on the other end. You work forward—and backward and forward again—and then when you finally schedule your meeting, you realize you didn’t take Europe’s daylight saving time into account (which, in case you didn’t know, is different than the United States’s) and someone ends up missing the meeting.

So here you are, playing a very tricky, very sophisticated game of zones. But what are the most important things to keep in mind when strategizing your next move? Let’s get started.

**Manage Your Own Expectations**

When working with people from around the globe, the most important piece of advice we can offer is to manage your own expectations. In this highly technological age, we have become accustomed to receiving immediate or semi-immediate responses when reaching out for information. We send an email, we get a response shortly thereafter. We expect it, like a dog gets used to getting a treat every time he performs a trick or command. But what happens when that dog doesn’t get his treat immediately? He gets impatient, annoyed, agitated until he gets what he wants or, more significantly, what he has come to expect. In the United States, it’s often difficult for us to wait for a response when we’re on the East Coast and we’ve sent an email to someone on the West Coast, which is a mere three hours behind. U.S. time differences can be even greater—there are four hours between the East Coast and Alaska and five or six hours between the East Coast and
Hawaii (which does not participate in daylight saving time). When you take a typical nine to five workday into consideration, six hours is a lot!

But consider what it’s like if you’re on the East Coast and you send an email to someone in, say, South Korea, which is 13 hours ahead. Let’s say you sent that email around noon your time. What time did it hit the inbox of the person in Korea? (You didn’t think we were going to make you do math in this book, did ya?) You guessed it! They received it at 1 a.m., when they’re more likely to be sleeping than online checking email. And by the time they do see your email, you’ll be the one who’s asleep! And furthermore, how often do we wait to respond to emails because we have to gather information, talk to someone higher up, jet off to a meeting, or take care of something else that simply takes higher priority at the moment?

The game of zones becomes a waiting game, and a response may take significantly longer to receive. However, the opportunity to collaborate with and leverage the vast global talent pool far outweighs the small challenges it presents. So, manage your own expectations. Think ahead and be patient!

**Blessed Are the Flexible, For They Will Not Break**

Take a scenario like the one presented above. Now, remove “email” and insert “conference call.”

Now stop groaning.

Flexibility is the name of the game when it comes to working with global teams and global time zones. When you have to consider time zones that are a full 12 hours (or more) apart, you must time conference calls very carefully to accommodate everyone. This requires flexibility and a whole new level of commitment from you and your team.
One virtual position that I held required me to plan the annual meeting for a professional membership group. In 2017 their meeting was held in Singapore, a full 12-hour difference from where I was located.

When sending emails to my contacts there, I had to think ahead about the information I was seeking. I learned to not expect an answer until the next working day because when I was sending the email, they were either not working or fast asleep. We also had to set up phone calls several times throughout the process to discuss details. We decided to switch times every call—one would be 9 a.m. my time and 9 p.m. theirs, and the next time, we would flip. This required flexibility on both our parts, but it worked out perfectly in the end.

—Kathy

One tip is to consider flipping conference calls each time when your team members are this spread out. This means that sacrificing some of your own “off hours” to make the 12-hour time difference conference call work. For example, if your monthly call happens at 9 a.m. your time (which equals 9 p.m. their time), consider swapping the time for the next call. This helps create a more fair environment, because everyone equally sacrifices their personal time. You don’t want anyone feeling like they’re not cared about or considered, or resentment may start to build.

This might be a new concept for you. Sometimes when people work a strict nine-to-five job, they believe that their off time is their time off. Fair enough. It may be challenging to adopt a new way of working or thinking. We get it. But working globally means thinking globally. And we would say again that the benefits of remote work and the ability to interact and work closely
with people all over the globe is exciting and beneficial and will yield very positive influences on your company or organization. So, be flexible. Flexible people bend—they don’t break. Embrace the vast and diverse possibilities! You’ll be glad you did!

**Culture**

When working with people around the globe, you will experience many cultural differences. Did you know that in Singapore, for example, if a bus company says they’re picking you up at midnight, you had *better* be there at midnight? In an experience that Kathy had, when she asked the bus company why they didn’t wait for her party, their answer was “We did wait. The driver left at 12:01!”

You need to do a little research. Much like the Myers-Briggs personality test can give you great insight into how other people tick, a little research on the culture of the country you’re working with can go a long way in helping avoid unnecessary faux pas and embarrassment. You can find all sorts of information about this online. Or better yet? Ask the person you’re working with! Who is going to turn you down the opportunity to answer questions about their culture? Plus, this kind of research—talking with the person you’re working with—will provide much more relevant cultural information. And as a bonus? You’ll build a nice rapport with that person, who will appreciate that you took an interest in them and their culture.

Language and expressions are other important cultural considerations. Once, Ben was working with a global committee at the United Nations when he got on a conference call with 15 people who represented just about every major continent. While English was the working language, it didn’t mean everyone knew everyone else’s colloquialisms or turns of phrase. So, when Ben
made the mistake of saying “Now this topic might take us down a very strange rabbit hole,” he meant to imply that it would bring up a variety of additional topics that he didn’t want to explore. Instead it brought about an unnecessary 20-minute conversation about what a “rabbit hole” had to do with the topic, and why we didn’t want to travel down one. We would say in this instance, it’s important to think not just about the game of zones, but the game of causal language too. Our advice here is to keep it simple. When working with people from other cultures and countries, the simpler the language, the better.

National culture is a consideration that you should not take lightly. A person’s culture is a part of their very being, so taking the time to learn about someone and the values and norms that they have woven into their identity will level-up your working relationships and minimize the risk of offending a valuable team member.

Cultural differences are no less visible in a virtual workspace than in an in-person environment. I remember a U.S.-based project manager insisting that she didn’t have to deal with cultural differences on her global team because everyone lived and worked in their countries of origin. Almost that moment her phone rang, and she excused herself—it was her colleague in India. When she returned from the call, she spent a long time lamenting how her colleagues in India and China didn’t understand work-life balance, expecting her to be available to them 24/7.

—Caliopy Glaros, Founder and Principal Consultant, Philanthropy Without Borders
A Few More Thoughts
That’s our take on how to best handle the game of zones. You may also have organizational policies outlining how to deal with these situations, but we hope these help to fill any holes. You may think you’ve got it handled, but we’d just be up sick all night if we didn’t at least mention them one more time:

✓ Manage your expectations.
✓ Use technology wisely. Take advantage of smart tools to help when working with people in various time zones.
✓ Be flexible and understanding, but also try to be consistent.
   That way everyone on the team can anticipate things like emails, deliverables, and expectations.
✓ Do your research on culture. Build a great rapport with your international co-workers by asking about their culture and what is important to them as part of the virtual workplace growth. You should also make sure everyone is working with the same tools and expectations.
✓ Be proactive. Think through conference call schedules and be mindful of time differences. Plan ahead so you can send emails (especially those of a somewhat urgent nature) well in advance to allow for the time difference and include ample time to await a response.
✓ Be inclusive. If you really want to show your international colleagues that you appreciate their culture, learn and use simple phrases in their language such as “hello,” “goodbye,” “please,” and “thank you.”

Signing Off
It is an exciting time. We have the privilege of interacting with and getting to know people from all around the globe, something that just two or three decades ago was practically
impossible without actual, physical travel. This paved the way for the virtual workplace to exist. Proving we could work virtually and successfully with individuals around the world meant we could and should consider doing the same with those just one or more time zones away. Don’t ever forget that. We are wise to take this privilege and leverage it for our mutual greatest success as opposed to assuming that something as minor as time differences could derail the whole process. Look to the opportunities that our global community presents and prepare for them wisely! When we can make a 12-hour time difference work, we are capable of just about anything in the virtual workplace, and that’s something worth celebrating no matter where you are, no matter when you are.
2.

What Is Nine-to-Five in a Global, Virtual Workplace?

Being able to work in a global workplace has its advantages. You can leverage the knowledge and experience of those located all around the world, rather than be limited to those in your immediate geographic area. But while the benefits are great, this also comes with challenges and considerations—namely, what does nine-to-five look like in a global workplace?

Let’s Level Set, Shall We?
You’ve probably heard the saying “It’s five o’clock somewhere!” (often used in reference to the appropriate time to start drinking). Or maybe you’ve watched New Year’s Eve celebrations on TV when they jump to midnight coverage of different cities around the world—but you still have several hours to go until
your official “new year” begins. These are obvious examples of how we don’t all follow the same clock.

Maybe your business has remote employees who are all in the same geographic area, or at least the same time zone. If that’s the case, this chapter is not for you. However, if you are working with remote employees who are on a clock that differs even one hour from yours, you may have wondered what a nine-to-five schedule looks like for your team and company. It’s an important question.

If, for example, your working hours are literally 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., what sort of expectations need to be set with someone on the other side of the world? Is the work time overlap of just one to three hours sufficient for getting work done efficiently or effectively for a team with one person working in Eastern Time, one person working in Europe (five to seven hours ahead), and a third person working in Singapore (a 12-hour difference)?

The Short Answer
The short answer is it’s up to you or your superiors. That’s helpful right? We swear we’re not trying to shortcut things.

But in all seriousness, management decides what each employee’s schedule looks like, based on the needs of the company. As a manager, being proactive to find or develop answers to these questions, then exercising your leadership skills by being transparent and forthcoming with that information, will go a long way in making your team a well-oiled, happy machine.

The Long Answer
Now for the longer answer. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all formula for what a typical nine-to-five workday even looks
like—notwithstanding the reminder that it’s a fairly American idea to begin with and as such should be thought of as a cultural thing and not a universal thing. It’s going to be different for every organization based on their needs.

If your company sets work hours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the time zone in which the headquarters is located, that’s fine. Or work hours might be set from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in whatever time zone the employee is located. Or perhaps it allows for a completely flexible work schedule, which is set by each individual employee (see the next chapter for more on this type of work day).

I lived in Virginia and managed teams in Japan and Australia. That meant 2 a.m. conference calls and a schedule that had to be bent to fit the client. My colleagues in Fairfax couldn’t understand why I was sleepy at our 9 a.m. staff meetings. I finally adjusted my hours and worked 5 p.m. to 2 a.m., which was just enough overlap with the Fairfax team. Our clients often didn’t realize that I was in the United States, which was always the highest compliment that I could get.

—Court Ogilvie, Consultant, Principal, Tenada Consulting Group

The more important point here is to make your expectations clear up front and document them. If the hours are 9 a.m.–5 p.m. in your headquarter city’s time zone, than a virtual employee who lives in a time zone that’s eight hours ahead will need to understand that this is a requirement of the job and be agreeable to it. If there is a little wiggle room within those parameters and it’s within your power to make accommodations, work with the staff member to figure out what that looks like. At the end of the day, you need to make sure that your staff is crystal clear on what is expected of them as far as their work hours are
concerned, and then sign off that they understand. This management skill will serve you in both virtual- and stationary-based management settings and cannot be overstated.

**Nine-to-Five Management in a Global Workplace**

OK, at this point you’re probably saying “Thanks for all of this, but the real issue is how do I best manage people in my nine-to-five while dealing with any number of nine-to-five realities around the world?”

For starters you need to do it thoughtfully. This includes gaining the full support of your company when it comes to setting expectations for your time, your employees’ needs, and the needs of the company.

You’ll also want to be more flexible when it comes to dealing with immediate or crucial issues from direct reports. You know how many companies offer flex time for work travel, attending conferences, or attending or setting up events? This is no different. If you need to spend one or more days a week working “off hours” for one employee who is 12 hours off your schedule on a short- or long-term project or assignment, you might ask to shift your hours elsewhere. It’s not only fair, it’s reasonable to ensure you’re doing your job well with your entire team on everyone’s time, not just your own.

**A Few More Thoughts**

✔ **Track your team’s schedule.** Take out a piece of paper or create a grid! You’ll all benefit if you can see what everyone’s typical work schedule looks like individually, as well as how it overlaps collectively. Use your chart to visualize how everyone can and can’t work “together” when necessary.
I have worked in the virtual team environment on a global scale for the last 10 years. This not only involved regularly leading meetings across varying time zones, holidays, and language barriers, but also understanding how to effectively gather information and communicate expectations cross-culturally and within local regulations. You cannot expect to (virtually) march into an office half a world away and assume you understand what process improvements need to be put into place solely based on the fact that you all fall under the same corporate umbrella.

In the beginning—and as we added new countries to our scope of work—I was repeatedly caught off-guard by the vast differences in readily available technical resources, means of electronic communication, and the level of governmental engagement in daily processes, as well as the sheer extent of things I take for granted. The virtual workplace has given us extensive access to one another and opportunities to collaborate on new solutions to issues we all face in trying to create consistent customer experiences and seamless business practices. This environment literally puts the world at our fingertips while exponentially expanding our depth of perspective.

—Jennie Adamik, Global Brokerage Training Specialist
With an International Supply Chain Provider

✓ Convert the chart to all relevant time zones; for example, if your employee is in Singapore, create a Singapore chart. This will help you look like a rock star to your international colleagues and prove that you are truly interested in being as inclusive as possible.

✓ Share this chart. If someone’s trying to schedule a conference call, this graph would be ideal because it allows them to
see where the workday overlaps so they can make the best scheduling choices possible.

✔ **Track your own hours.** Sometimes trying to lead a global team with any intimacy is difficult. When it’s proving to be so, and your hours start exponentially expanding, you need to talk with your supervisor about the realities of leading a global team remotely.

✔ **Remain open minded.** There may come a point where the established schedule no longer works for your international employee. Make sure your lines of communication are open and they can come to you to discuss potential schedule adjustments. This will not only show them that they are a valuable asset to your organization, but also reinforce your openness as a virtual manager.

**Signing Off**

In a virtual world, nine-to-five can be a workplace norm that becomes very abnormal very quickly. Ultimately, the hours an employee works are determined by their supervisor (or those even higher in some instances) and they’re going to be different based on organizational needs. If your hours are strict, they’re strict. If they are flexible, they’re flexible. If set hours are non-existent, they’re nonexistent. Whatever your company policy is, it just needs to be clearly communicated to your staff—no matter what time zone they work in.
3.
How to Address and Accommodate a Flexible Schedule

Who doesn’t love the idea of a 15-second commute to our home office, or being able to work in our most comfortable clothes? One of the things that we and many other virtual employees love best about working virtually is the possibility of a flexible schedule, or the ability to work inside or outside the typical nine-to-five as desired.

As with other topics in this book, you must decide what works best for your organization. Perhaps that includes flexible schedules. But going a little deeper, what might that look like for your workplace and especially your team?

Let’s Level Set, Shall We?
One of the themes you’ll see us touch on again and again is how the virtual workplace is a reflection of the modern
workplace. This is no more true than when talking about flexible schedules. Not only are most online businesses technically open 24/7, but even brick-and-mortar businesses are feeling the pressure to include flexibility in how they interact with and offer services to customers and clients. The standard nine-to-five universe is shrinking, and that means our expectations to push anyone into those timeframes—employees or anyone else—must change too.

These days, offering flexible schedules is more about meeting organizational needs, rather than just accommodating someone’s interest in working when they want. When the work needs to get done, it often just needs to get done. And we’re afraid that doesn’t always fall into the traditional nine-to-five timeframe. Does this mean you should always be on? Or that you should expect your employees to be at the ready at all times? Not at all. But it does mean that you need to consider flexibility as part of the job, not just a perk.

Working with people all over the globe definitely requires a good bit of flexibility. It’s nice when things can be handled over email, but sometimes a phone call or video conference is necessary to get the job done. When I have had to meet with someone in a different time zone at a time that was outside my normal nine-to-five, I have been fortunate enough to be able to flex or slide my schedule to meet that demand. So, if I had a 9 p.m. phone call my time, I could either slide my schedule to work two-to-ten rather than nine-to-five, or I could work my normal schedule, take the evening call, and then start work an hour later the next day.

—Kathy
Time to Flex Your Hours

There is no hard and fast definition for what flexibility should look like in the workplace—barring that it’s necessary to conduct a larger flow of work that’s more global in nature—so it is up to you and those above you to figure out how it works and, as always, back those decisions up with your policies and procedures. Flexible scheduling can manifest in three different ways with room to mix and match—limited flexibility, moderate flexibility, and full flexibility.

Let’s look at a couple of examples of how different levels of flexibility might work and discuss a few tips for working within each framework. Perhaps this will spark some ideas for how you can incorporate flexibility as effectively as possible into your environment.

Limited Flexibility

One way to set up a limited flexibility workplace is to set core business or working hours and then allow staff to slide on either side. For example, if your company sets six standard hours of expected set time, your core hours might be 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. During this time, all employees are required to be working; however, they can slide their schedules however they like on either side. So, employees who like to get up early can work 8 a.m.—4 p.m. Others who like to sleep in a little may choose to work 10 a.m.—6 p.m. Employees who fit somewhere in the middle could work 9 a.m.—5 p.m. The flexibility is limited in that for those six core hours, everyone must be working, but the start and end times are theirs to schedule as they wish.

Isn’t this just a modern version of having shifts? Not if you’re the kind of company that needs 24-hour operations that require employees to work in set shifts around the clock. However, if you...
need people 24/7, you can set four to six hours of time in shift models, but allow your employees to decide how to manage the other two to four hours of their day. Now we’re talking about flexibility again set to the tune of standards.

You can also add another layer of flexibility within this setup. For example, can people change their hours daily, depending on what is going on in their lives? Can they work 8 a.m.–4 p.m. one day and 10 a.m.–6 p.m. the next? Do they need permission?

This is a good way to test the waters of flexibility. You can start here and see if it works for your company. Or maybe try a trial run on Mondays or Fridays to get the ball rolling. You can be flexible about how flexible your schedules are. We know, it’s very meta.

**Moderate Flexibility**

Moderate flexibility could be giving employees the ability to choose their work hours without any core hours in place, as long as they’re still working Monday through Friday. Additionally, they must understand that meetings will be scheduled at the discretion of management, and all staff are required to attend, regardless of their regularly chosen schedule.

With moderate flexibility one employee might work 8 a.m.–4 p.m., while another chooses to work 12 p.m.–8 p.m. Or someone could split their day—work 8 a.m.–2 p.m., take a break to get their kids off the bus and make dinner, and then work again from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. every night. However, to our point earlier, if you call a standing meeting every Tuesday at 11 a.m., even the employee who works 12 p.m.–8 p.m. has to be “at work” by 11 a.m. Tuesdays, no questions asked.

This flexibility provides staff with much greater autonomy over their work lives, but still ties everyone to a standard
unification of structure. It also lets folks take a stronger approach to managing their work and life balance—something that is often touted as one of the main benefits of working virtually.

**Full Flexibility**

Full flexibility is the grand prize of the flexibility game! If you are a full flexibility business, you allow your staff to work whenever they chose, as long as they put in their full 40 hours and complete the work assigned to them. One recommendation we would make, however, is that this level of flexibility be reserved for mature, established teams made of staff you know can handle this much flexibility and who have demonstrated capability with a work ethic to match. This benefit is best utilized with those you know are going to get the job done.

If you’re considering implementing full flexibility in your organization, you may want to phase it in. For example, start with full flexibility every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but only moderate flexibility on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the first few months. This will help everyone get their bearings.

> Although there is great satisfaction, independence, and freedom in working virtually, I think it’s important to note that we are all better together than alone. As independent contractors, we share knowledge collectively and use the experiences of our clients around the globe to learn more and help them avoid risk. Being tied to a “mother ship” like Maritz allows me to tap into resources that might otherwise make me feel like I had one hand tied behind my back.

—Mimi Whitney, National Account Manager, Experient—a Maritz Global Events Company
A Few More Thoughts

✓ Keep time zones in mind. If people on your team live in varying time zones, you have to keep this in mind when developing your plan for workplace flexibility. In fact, it might force a kind of universal flexibility in how you manage your own schedule to help support all of your direct reports.

✓ Create benchmarks and deadlines. To test your flexibility plan, develop benchmarks and deadlines to help measure the effectiveness of flexible work time. How? Flexibility makes people happy. Happy people are more productive and get their work done. If they are meeting their deadlines and doing good work, your flexibility plan is effective!

✓ Don’t equate fairness with sameness. This tip might be a little controversial, but stick with us for a second. There may come a time that you realize it doesn’t make sense for a certain position to be flexible. Notice we said position, not person. Let’s say you’re the president or CEO and you choose to work strictly 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. You’ve probably got an executive assistant that you spend a lot of time working closely with. Or perhaps your company has positions that work in in customer service, requiring a set timeframe for answering calls each and every day. It might not make good business sense to offer flexible schedules for these positions. In these cases, it’s important to make those expectations clear up front so your staff can decide for themselves if this is the right fit for them. Be open and disclose the fact that while other staff have flexible schedules, this particular position is not conducive to that.
✓ Tout flexibility as a perk. Flexible work schedules can be particularly helpful in nonprofit organizations where bosses are often looking for ways to offer perks, but may not have the money for other costly benefits. If you’re used to running a tight ship, but are considering implementing flexibility, start with the limited flexibility option and see how it goes. If all goes well, advance to moderate flexibility and perhaps even full flexibility later on.

Signing Off
Flexible schedules are a fantastic perk, but they’re also often necessary to get work done today. Either way, allowing staff to choose their own schedules is a great, no-cost benefit. However, you need to make sure it’s part of your policies, procedures, and culture—flexibility without reliability and definition is the gateway to instability.

And remember, these are just a few of the ways you can experiment with flexibility. What other ways can you dream up? The flexibility world is your oyster, there for the exploring for both personnel perks and pragmatic business practices. But we assure you—flexibility is not just the future—it’s now. And giving your staff the flexibility to balance their work and personal lives is a benefit that reaches far beyond what you will ever be able to see. It makes for happy, satisfied employees and can even contribute to your employees’ overall wellness. And who doesn’t want that?
About the Authors

Ben Bisbee is a dreamer, a doer, a madman with focus; the good kind of dangerous. A multi-sector professional with more than 20 years of experience building successful, award-winning community and development programs for organizations of all shapes and sizes, he is a nationally recognized author, speaker and problem-solver. As the chief vision officer at Rhinocorn, a design house for nonprofit innovation and advancement projects, Ben works to drive the focus and direction of the company’s vision and purpose.

Considering himself a social technologist, Ben is quickly becoming known for his work in virtual technology and methodologies, helping to build strengthened relationships between humans and the technology they use to work, play, and engage. Ben lives in northeast Ohio with his husband, Joe, and their 10 cats.
Kathy Wisniewski, CVA, is a nonprofit professional who has been in the sector for nearly 20 years. Currently serving as the executive board administrator for the Histiocyte Society based in Pitman, New Jersey, she specializes in volunteer and board administration. She has a particular love for the international community as she scouts, plans, and executes the society’s annual meeting in various locations around the world.

Kathy is also a Certified Health Coach and owner of True and Lasting Wellness. After so many years in the nonprofit sector and seeing firsthand how professionals are in danger of burnout and in need of more balance in their lives, she chose to focus her business on primarily virtual health coaching for nonprofit professionals, helping them discover and reach their health and wellness goals.

Both of these endeavors have honed Kathy’s virtual management skills and given her a deep appreciation for the advantages of technology in being able to reach a larger audience in our virtual world. Kathy was born and raised in New Jersey and although she now calls northeast Ohio home, she will always consider herself a Jersey girl.