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Does Avoiding a 9-to-5 Grind Make You a Target for Layoffs?



• **By SUE SHELLNBARGER**

As layoffs spread, part-timers, flex-timers and telecommuters fear they'll be the first to go. Unfortunately, they're sometimes right.

The outcome depends on where you work. At some employers, people on reduced-hours or work-at-home setups are the first to fall under the budget ax; other employers revert to an "all hands on deck" mode and revoke flexible arrangements. At other companies, however, oddball work setups are considered an advantage in the drive for efficiency. Either way, hanging onto a flexible work setup during a recession requires planning -- and luck.

Staying Flexible

- Work on jobs that are seen as critical to your employer's future
- Maintain cutting-edge skills
- Set measurable objectives with your boss
- Make sure you're meeting or exceeding goals
- Communicate often with your boss about your setup

Work & Family Mailbox

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In tough times, many employers revert to thinking critical jobs can only be done full-time, flat-out and under the boss's nose. Hilary Achauer, a San Diego marketing specialist for a nonprofit concern, sought to return to work part-time from maternity leave last year, but was offered a full-time management job instead. When she passed it up, she was diverted to a marginal job, then axed in February, while the employee who took the full-time slot was spared. "When the going gets tough," she says, some employers say, "'That person is only part-time, let's get rid of them.'"

On the other hand, employers who are equipped to measure output against costs may see an efficient part-timer or telecommuter as an asset. A part-timer hired last fall by a retailing client of Flexperience, a Burlingame, Calif., consulting firm, thought she'd be the first to be laid off, says Sally Thornton, president of Flexperience. But she was so productive at reduced pay, Ms. Thornton says, that her employer chose to keep her over more senior full-timers. Work-at-home employees also confer savings, on real estate and office costs.

Indeed, in the current recession, more employers are using flexible setups to save money. Based on an April survey by Towers Perrin of 700 employers, 21% to 32% are either implementing or considering part-time shifts or four-day workweeks, as a cost-cutting tool. Of course, employees usually don't have a choice under these circumstances and may not welcome the change.

In general, the number of employees working flexibly at their own request usually stalls or declines in a recession, not only because employers cut back but because employees fear straying from the norm. The number of corporate telecommuters edged lower in the 2001 recession, then recovered, only to decline to 8.7 million in 2009 from 9.2 million in 2006, says Ray Boggs of IDC, a Framingham, Mass., research concern.

Some managers harbor stereotypes that people who work part-time or take leaves lack commitment. Amid rising discrimination complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the agency is holding a hearing Wednesday on bias against people with caregiving duties.

To improve your survival chances, ask yourself, "What's most important to my company right now, and how do I make sure I'm contributing to that, and that my achievement is visible to my boss?" says Sarah Grayson, a partner in On-Ramps, a New York search firm.

"If you're doing something peripheral, figure out how to get involved with something that is not," says Liz Polk Lynch, a San Francisco group manager for a software firm. At her company, "I've never had anyone come to me and say, 'So-and-so doesn't work Fridays,

so can we let them go?" says Ms. Lynch. "I hear, 'So-and-so's job performance seems to be slipping, or they don't seem to be working on critical projects, so can we let them go?'"

Make sure your goals are clear and your output first-rate. Establish "an ongoing conversation" with your boss, says Cali Williams Yost, a Madison, N.J., consultant. "Sit down, talk about how it's working."

Be willing to bend a bit -- even though it forces work-life sacrifices. Part-timer Anne Abreu, a San Mateo, Calif., insurance specialist, knows her schedule puts her "under the spotlight," she says. So she is often at the office on her day off to work or attend meetings. In a nontraditional setup, she says, "you need to be realistic, be flexible and deliver results."

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