



Ginny Sargent's follow up responses to webinar questions and additional references

Q. What does your research tell us about flexible work and health?

A. The research shows us that work-time flexibility can be both good and bad for worker health. People who have a set/regular work schedule, and people with the flexibility to set their own regular working hours are both more likely to establish and maintain health practices. Whereas people whose flexibility results in irregular work hours are less likely to eat well, keep active and get sufficient sleep. Work predictability, rhythms and routines help us to consider how flexible work affects health practices. People tend to thrive when daily activities, including work, occur in a predictable sequence and a regular rhythm.

The social and economic determinants of health, including time, help us to understand connections between work and health.

References

Sargent GM, McQuoid J, Dixon J, Banwell C, Strazdins L. (in press) Flexible work, temporal disruption and implications for health practices: An Australian qualitative study. *Work, Employment and Society* (in press, accepted June 2020)

Sargent G, Banwell C, Strazdins L, Dixon J. (2018) Time and participation in workplace health promotion: Australian qualitative study. *Health Promotion International* 33(3):436-47

Banwell C, Sargent GM, Dixon J, Strazdins L. (2018) A cultural economy approach to workplace health promotion in Australian small and medium sized workplaces: a critical qualitative study. *Critical Public Health* 1-10

Q. How does working from home impact on work-time and workers?

A. For many, working from home has completely removed the regular, predictable structure that work-time previously provided. For parents of school aged children, during COVID school shutdowns, they also lost the school-day structure.

With the loss of structure around working days, many people are finding it hard to put boundaries around their work: spreading work-hours across more hours of each day, and across more days of the week. This also results in less leisure time, increasing physical and mental stress.

Furthermore, the healthy social connections from work, and other structured activities that might mitigate the stresses have also been affected.

Q. Can you suggest workplace health promotion that is suitable for flexible workers?

- A. Workplaces can focus on activities that are suitable for workers who are not necessarily working at the same place or at the same time. For individuals, focus on the basics – work security, invest in appropriate training/professional development, managing workloads, supporting leave, and activities that demonstrate their appreciation of staff.

Find activities that provide an opportunity for social connection amongst the team in work hours – eg social walks, online one-on one coffee chats, team planning meetings.

Organisational changes that can promote a better work environment include:

- Workplaces to set up clear lines of communication and expectations about when and how. For example, organisations can direct that emails are not sent outside of standard work hours (people who are working non-standard hours can use the email facility to delay sending)
- Workplaces communicate clear expectations about work-time and how they are managing workloads.
- Supervisors can be directed to negotiate regular/bespoke work-hours for each employee.

Q. What do you suggest for people who are used to having flex-time when that is no longer available?

- A. Flex-time is a mechanism that enables employers to provide some autonomy for workers around the extent of their work-day outside of core hours. Some people are used to some day-to-day flexibility and recording their work-hours on a daily basis to track their flex-time.

Being asked to record standard work hours when working from home provides workers with the autonomy to fit work around other commitments. This is an opportunity for workers to set regular work schedules that total a standard working week.

I recommend using this as an opportunity to set yourself a regular work schedule, that provides you a structure for regular work hours (whether these are standard or not), over no more than 5 days a week (assuming that it is only one job). It's important that there is some regularity, whether that is daily, Monday-Friday, roster rotation or other. A regular work schedule will enable the establishment of a new work routine, which we know supports health practices and health. You might like to include other activities in your daily schedule.

Other resources

“Feeling good at home (during COVID-19)” can be found on the PHXchange, Communicating Science page <https://rsph.anu.edu.au/phxchange/communicating-science>

For all podcast listeners interested in how to make work better, Ginny recommends ‘Eat Sleep Work Repeat’.