



# CWCF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP LAB

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**COLORADO  
WOMEN'S CHAMBER  
FOUNDATION**  
ADVANCING WOMEN IN WORK



**COLORADO WOMEN'S  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

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REPORT COMMISSIONED BY



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# PREFACE

Though society has made great strides in the world of work in recent years, women still face historic hurdles.

As recent as 1980, women were still required to have a male cosigner on a business loan. Fast forward four decades later and half of the working population is still challenged to advance to the highest levels of leadership. Today, women make up only 19% of C-suite executives and remain underrepresented at every level.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the workforce lost two million women during “The Great Shecession.” It became painfully apparent that workplace policies were not equitably sufficient to sustain working women who tend to also be caregivers to others. Companies strained to stay afloat amid a health crisis and experts say these deficits will be felt for many years.

For employers to make up for decades of unequal treatment in the workplace and the entrepreneurial field, it’s necessary to evaluate the specific and often nuanced challenges that women and, in particular, women of color face in the workplace.

Diversity initiatives represented with a variety of weighty acronyms (DEI, DEIB, JEDI, IDEA) have been an intense focus of many organizations in recent years. However you spell it, evaluating diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice is not only the right thing to do to address generational inequities but it can also drive critical business outcomes. These outcomes include increased market share, increased revenue, and other competitive advantages in the market, which support talent recruitment and retention.

The Colorado business landscape has an opportunity to thrive with a renewed dedication to making business work for all. Now is the time to evaluate past inequities, enact new equitable policies, and promote diversity in a thoughtful, meaningful way to benefit individuals, businesses, and society.

**The Colorado Women’s Chamber Foundation Women’s Leadership Lab 2022-2023 cohort of female leaders present these findings, which are the results of a year-long inquiry into six common issues facing women in work, and recommendations for action.**



# WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY INCREASES EQUITABLE ENGAGEMENT FOR WOMEN

The origins of the traditional Monday through Friday, 9-to-5 work schedule date back to the Industrial Revolution. At the time, the workplace was highly unregulated and factory owners expected workers to log unlimited hours six days a week (Davis). In response to these long, rigid and often unfair work hours, labor unions formed to improve working conditions to the eight hour-day, five-day work week we're familiar with today.

Even though this concept of the 40-hour workweek is a vestige of the early 20th-century workplace, workers are still accustomed to the antiquated system today. However, the modern world and employee expectations have evolved, creating new workplace cultural norms and a more flexible work environment. Advances in technology, a focus on work/life balance and changing attitudes towards work contribute to this shift, as workers demand more autonomy in managing their work schedules. Workplace flexibility refers to the ability of employees to decide when, where and how they work. It considers many types of work arrangements, such as remote or hybrid work, flexible hours and job sharing. Flexible work allows employees to thrive and accommodate their personal needs, both at work and home, while not compromising productivity for the employer. As the modern world advances, the value of workplace flexibility will not be a fleeting concept.



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The COVID-19 pandemic forced the issue of workplace flexibility for many employers. In the years that followed, most employers retained some form of workplace flexibility, due in part to the benefits spotlighted during the pandemic.

According to Bain & Company, the pandemic disproportionately impacted women and their economic participation. Women were twice as likely as men to take on unpaid domestic work and more than three times as likely as men to take on caretaking responsibilities (Bain). This stark contrast in the workload division at home may be partly responsible for the dramatic decreases in the workforce for women during the pandemic. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that from February 2020 to January 2022, 1.1 million women left the workforce, accounting for 63% of all jobs lost (Gonzales).

According to a 2023 Pew research study, as impacts from the pandemic have receded, women still pick up a heavier load at home. Women tend to take on more childcare, home, and caretaker duties (NPR). This is true even as working women increase their responsibility at work and earn promotions in their careers. Just 30% of entry-level male employees reported being responsible for most of the family housework or childcare compared to 58% of entry-level women employees. The figures shift dramatically for senior management, with 13% of senior-level male employees reporting that they are responsible for most of the family housework or childcare, compared to 52% of senior-level women employees (McKinsey).

Following the upheaval of the traditional workplace arrangement, studies have shown that workplace flexibility has become a leading issue in job satisfaction, especially among women and even more so for younger generations of working women. In a recent study of women leaders, 49% said that flexibility is one of the top three things they consider when deciding whether to join or stay with a company, compared to 34% of men (McKinsey). That same study found:

- Only 10% of women want to work primarily on-site, and many women point to remote and hybrid work options as one of their top reasons for joining or staying with an organization. (McKinsey)
- 76% of women under 30 care more than they did two years ago about flexibility and company commitment to well-being (McKinsey).

Across the workforce, employees who have flexible work arrangements—whether remote or on-site—are less burned out, happier in their jobs, and less likely to consider leaving their companies (McKinsey).

Understanding the challenges women face when working without flexibility can help inform how companies approach their workplace policies. This study asks whether increased workplace flexibility drives equitable engagement for women.

## METHODOLOGY & RESULTS

Data was collected from publications, both academic and those found in popular culture. Interviews were also conducted to gather data on what kinds of flexible work arrangements are being provided at businesses in and around the Denver metro area.

The data was then evaluated to discern if workplace flexibility provided women with more significant work equity while maintaining strong workplace engagement. Data was collected from 20 professionals (5 males and 15 females) across industries (e.g., healthcare, legal, consulting, hospitality, apparel, marketing and sales). The generational breakdown of interviewees ranged from: millennials (12), Generation X (6), Generation Z (1), and baby boomers (1).

### KEY FINDINGS

**Flexibility:** Employees want to get work done from anywhere without the constraints of being in an office. The traditional 9-to-5 work schedule does not meet the flexibility needs of people in the world we live in today. People of all ages, marital or parental statuses need flexible work arrangements for various reasons. There was no difference between men and women.

**Productivity:** Employees who have workplace flexibility are more productive because they can care for family needs and their well-being. *“Flexibility allows you to have a balance, which allows you to take care of your personal needs and increases the desire to stay with my employer.” - Healthcare Coach*

**Equity:** Women often have to bear the burden of household and childcare responsibilities while managing their well-being, so workplace flexibility is necessary for career growth. Not all men we interviewed agreed or understood that women are disproportionately impacted by their work arrangements. *“Older generations or men typically don’t understand why people need more flexibility and think employees still need to be super present for work obligations. There is so much that goes into running a household, and women need more flexibility.” - Regional Sales Medical Specialist*



**Satisfaction:** Employees overall are highly satisfied in their work and life when they have workplace flexibility. *“Companies will have better success hiring and maintaining their workforce if they make flexible arrangements. They need to keep their employees’ mental health in mind when they’re writing policies and understand that mental health plays a huge role in satisfaction.” - Advertising Design Coordinator*

**Challenges:** Exploring the challenges leaders face was outside the scope of this research, but would be valuable for future learning. Data collected from interviews did not reflect a large cross-section of director or hiring-level leadership. However, leaders could face challenges around people management and precisely how to onboard or mentor new employees in a remote or hybrid workforce. *“Employees with less experience are unsuccessful when working fully remote in my industry. We only really allow employees with at least 5-10 years of experience to work remotely full-time. We have had three entry-level positions in a fully remote position fail.” - Director of Design*



### Enhanced productivity

Productivity is enhanced and does not suffer from flexible work arrangements. New data overwhelmingly support the link between remote and flexible work and increased productivity.

- 73% of managers believe workplace flexibility has increased productivity and 60% agreeing remote work also increases productivity (University of Birmingham).
- 23% of those who work remotely are willing to work longer hours from home than they would onsite, which allows them to accomplish more (ConnectSolutions).
- Workers with total flexibility reported 29% greater productivity than their peers without workplace flexibility (Forbes).

In another study by the U.S. News & World Report and Airstarter, those with workplace flexibility work more hours per week than those who work primarily in an office and as many as 16.8 days more per year. A recent Gartner study found that employees believed they were more productive when working flexible hours. While productivity can be hard to measure, we know from previous studies that more engaged employees work harder. [According to a Gallup study](#), flexible work drives employee engagement. And from decades of Gallup studies, findings consistently point to engaged employees being more enthusiastic, energetic, and committing fewer errors.

### Flexibility can help retain top talent

Most employees desire flexible work arrangements, allowing companies to attract and retain talent. The preference for flexible work is prevalent across demographics, professions, and geographies (McKinsey). As employees continue to desire flexible work arrangements, companies need to understand that the opportunity to work flexibly can decide whether a candidate accepts their job offer or stays in a position. In fact, according to a recent survey conducted by the International Workplace Group, nearly three-quarters of women (72%) stated they would look for a new job if their employer took away their flexible work arrangement. This finding highlights the critical role of flexible work arrangements in appealing to and retaining talent, particularly women, who often prioritize work-life balance and flexibility. Additionally, research from WTW demonstrates that employees who say their benefits meet their needs are far more likely to stay at their organizations for another two years than employees who say their benefits do not. When companies compete for talent, the ability and willingness to offer flexible work arrangements could be the winning edge. While widespread flexible work arrangements were born during the COVID-19 pandemic, they have remained a desirable job feature for millions. Flexibility is critical to attracting and retaining top talent. Impressively, according to McKinsey research, when people have the chance to work flexibly, 87 percent of them take it. Further, workplace flexibility is a highly motivating factor in the top three when employees seek a new job.



**Equally practiced flexible work arrangements are a necessity**

According to the International Workplace Group survey, nearly 90% of American women believe that hybrid work levels the playing field and promotes gender equality. When flexible work arrangements include working from home, women can balance their work and family responsibilities more effectively without choosing between them. However, implementing a flexible work arrangement must be purposeful and well thought out by company leadership to avoid unintended consequences.

Without careful consideration, flexible work arrangements may disadvantage those who access them (Bain & Company). Some of the most significant disadvantages experienced by employees with flexible work arrangements are restrictions to career progression, longer work hours, and the need to be always “on.”

Employees with flexible work arrangements, including remote work, can be out of sight and out of mind. Missing a few spontaneous hallway conversations may be insignificant, but the cost of being absent for most adds up. Thus, if not thoughtfully planned, flexibility can create a double-edged sword. Work flexibility can keep women engaged and retained in the workforce, but if not practiced equally by their male colleagues, this can intensify inequities in the workplace (Bain & Company).



**1** Business owners should consider workplace flexibility to retain and attract top talent, evolve with the new demands of the workforce, and offer a work arrangement that enables employees to create work-life balance and overall well-being. There are many types of flexible work arrangements beyond the typical remote or hybrid role. For example, the City of Golden is piloting a four-day work week with employees in their Police Department to improve well-being and retention. Another example is shift work, where a local Colorado hospital offers lifestyle shifts for nurses who can work 10 days and then take two to three weeks off.

**2** To bring equitable engagement practices to life in the workplace, employers should form considerate policies. When developing these policies, leaders should remain open to many ways of working. Employers can offer flexibility regarding when their employees work, how, and what work they do. Leaders must identify opportunities in their workplace and consider what version of flexibility will make the most significant equity impact on their workforce. To gauge effectiveness, leaders should seek regular feedback from employees.

**3** Employers must monitor and apply their policies regularly and consistently to ensure flexible work arrangements don't lead to inequity for women. Employees should have a level playing field with the same support and opportunities available. Policies should be re-evaluated regularly to ensure flexible work arrangements are not yielding unfair penalties. Additionally, we recommend employers consider unconscious bias around flexible work arrangements to ensure employees can leverage their organization's flex policies without fear of long-term career impact. When employee feedback or reviews are given, employers should establish checkpoints to remove any bias around when/where/how employees work within the boundaries of the organization's policies. This will create consistency in employees' experiences and encourage flexibility to boost employee morale and mental health.

**4** Lastly, we recommend companies foster a strong community within an organization to help build trust and connectivity within and between teams. When in-person work is required, investments to foster community and employee engagement will help make that time more purposeful. This community will help individuals feel supported when considering what flexible work arrangements make the most sense for their situation. This support will make setting boundaries easier and ensure employees are treated fairly.

The benefits of flexibility go beyond equitable engagement for women. Not only is workplace flexibility a leading issue in job satisfaction across all demographics but it is also identified by participants in this study and academic research as a critical factor in individual productivity. Employers should consider workplace flexibility as part of a comprehensive strategy for talent retention and acquisition as it's another low-cost benefit to employees. When implemented with thoughtful, clear, and consistent policies, employers will offer equitable engagement opportunities for women, and remain competitive in attracting and retaining top talent.

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