

July 2020

## Organizational Intentions Versus Leadership Impact: The Flexible Work Experience

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### Recommended Citation

Vroman, Susan R. (2020) "Organizational Intentions Versus Leadership Impact: The Flexible Work Experience," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.132.1313>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol13/iss2/13>

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# **Organizational Intentions Versus Leadership Impact:**

## ***The Flexible Work Experience***

### *Abstract*

*Understanding that there will arrive a time when workers return to their respective places of employment, it is imperative to be ready to review and if necessary, restructure and implement certain work policies that detract from social equities. For instance, flexible work arrangements (FWA) might be one way to improve the work environment, especially as they have increased in popularity in the past two decades. While FWA may represent a means to enable workers to manage their work and life commitments, it is important to*

*note that they may also complicate prioritization of the organizational value proposition. Further, having an FWA program and effectively supporting it are not synonymous – and this bears impact on employees. This research highlights opportunities and implications for FWA management based on findings from a recent New England healthcare organization case study which illustrates how working mothers experience enacted flexible work arrangement policies. This article identifies methods for organizations and managers to improve the experience of workers who wish to or need to use FWA.*

### **Introduction**

Beyond the positive optics for staying current with workplace trends, there are many business drivers for creating and managing effective Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) programs. Broader in scope than short-notice or unplanned remote working systems which emerged as the new norm in times of the COVID-19 response, understanding FWA as a structured approach to work absolutely has relevance in our evolving workplace. Effective management of FWA facilitates on-the-job benefits such as reduced absenteeism, increased productivity, and heightened job satisfaction (e.g., Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014; Shockley & Allen 2012). It has been well documented that to accomplish these desirable effects, providing FWA policies and procedures is not enough. Further, a lack of planning or clarity of leadership responsibilities also has potential to bear impact. For workers to feel engaged when working remotely, they need to perceive that their leaders support FWA policies and

those that use them in a way that is consistent with the values of the organization they came to work for (Eaton, 2003; Eek & Axmon, 2013; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015).

## **The Value of Flexible Work**

While workforce demographics are changing, there is evidence that flexible work arrangements continue to be valued by employees (e.g., Bailyn, 2006; Eek & Axmon, 2013). Employees find that FWA programs help them to both cope with work challenges and overcome the stressors generated by work-family conflict (Konrad & Yang, 2012). Upping the ante, there is an additional stakeholder in this discussion. The Department of Labor has stated that over 74 million women, nearly 47% of the United States civilian total working population (DeWolf, 2017, para 2), are in the American workforce. By its estimates, 70% of mothers with children under eighteen are working, 75% of whom are working full time (para 3). Meanwhile, employers in the United States are under no legal obligation to provide flexible work arrangements and general failure to support women in the workplace is predicted to impose serious costs to the U.S. economy over the next few decades (Adema, Clarke, & Frey, 2016).

Recognizing the role working mothers play in the labor market, it seems clear that those employers seeking to attract and retain members of this talent pool need to create a positive working experience which entails both organizational structure and leadership support of FWA. Working mothers are particularly vulnerable to the determination of how they measure up to organizational expectations (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). When individuals perceive cultural support for maternal employment and work-life management, this may translate to a greater sense of institutional FWA support (Baird et al., 2012). On the other hand, if they do not feel supported or feel using FWA will come with negative effects on potential career growth, they may avoid FWA (Daverth, Hyde, & Caseell, 2016; Greenberg & Landry, 2011). Understanding what FWA benefits are afforded to employees is only the beginning – how leaders manage those using them and what this feels like tells the full story of how leaders enact the values of the organization.

So, the issue becomes: how do working mothers experience enacted flexible work arrangement policies? This was the question that shaped a case study at Acceber Health Group (pseudonym), a New England health care provider. At AHG, the Customer Care department launched a formal teleworking arrangement for a designated group of employees. This study discovered the impacts of organizational and leadership enactment of formal FWA programs.

## **The X-Factor: Enacted Support**

Although more and more employers are implementing formal FWA structures and policies, management is not always consistent in their promotion or support (Konrad & Yang, 2012). Despite the fact that organizations tout these programs to become employers of choice (Kelliher & Anderson, 2008; Peters, den Dulk, & de Ruijter, 2010), employees still fear being stigmatized and worry that they will not be given comparable promotion or pay opportunities if they are used (denDulk & de Ruijter, 2008; Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Matos & Gallinsky, 2011).

For job seekers who prioritize flex work, basic web searches for the “best companies to work for with FWA” generate lists of companies that advertise having have these policies in place. Simply having FWA programs may signal that the employer is *doing their part* in the FWA

movement, however intentions do not always match with experienced impact. What it feels like to be an employee using FWA is not as readily available to perspective employees, and even then, determining what makes a “best” scenario is relative.

Some of the obstacles employers and employees report include managers’ implicit biases towards employees who use these policies, which in turn affects if and how employees use them (Smith, Gilmer, & Stockdale, 2019). While these biases are difficult to eradicate, it has also been found that, despite the benefits that are well documented and understood, managers fear introducing even formally structured FWA programs due to what they consider ambiguous results (Cegarra-Leiva, Sanchez-Vidal, & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012). Thus, their observed and experienced behaviors when managing flexible work policies can generate confusion among those they supervise as well as one another.

We humans pick up on the stimuli that bears meaning to us. When it comes to evaluating if a company really wants us to use the FWA programs they set up, we look for more than a mention in the company handbook. Using cues like facial expressions when leaders discuss flex work opportunities, employees socially construct the reality they are experiencing. Those who hope to see an organization that is supportive of FWA may bracket (Weick, 1979) their experiences to either see or not see behaviors that reinforce their interests. In other words, individuals create an enacted environment (Weick, 1979) around the reinforcement of their perceptions. Further, reading social cues they pick up from coworkers, employees go through a process of interpersonal sensemaking (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003) which impacts all matters of business and their engagement therein. They sense if using FWA is really supported by the organization via their observations and experiences interacting with and among company leaders. So, for remote workers, what and how the organization does to enact formal policies may be scrutinized with a good chance of misinterpretation. When someone is working remotely and can only take literal cues from written emails or verbal cues like tone of voice over phone conversations, much is left to individual sense-making and rationale.

Put another way, simply adopting FWA to compete for valuable hires is not enough. Those companies that want their employees to believe they can and should use flex options may feel that asking managers to promote them is sufficient. However, to truly create a working experience that integrates the work-family experience and encourages FWA use, managerial support is critical (Daverth et al., 2016; Hammer et al., 2009; Kossek et al., 2011; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010). Furthermore, employees must believe the support is genuine and real. To create a reality where it will thrive and have impactful positive effects, FWA therefore must not only be formally endorsed when people are known to be watching, but enacted even when people are not.

### **A Case of Enactment: Acceber Health Group**

To gain insight into how organizational leadership support impacts the working mother experience, a multiple embedded case study focused on two Customer Care Hubs of Acceber Health Group (AHG). AHG was founded over forty years ago and is currently the region’s largest provider of medical and diagnostic imaging services, offering imaging modalities including MRI, PET/CT, CT, and Radiation Oncology. AHG’s Customer Care employees are empowered to facilitate all patient transactions including scheduling, insurance verifications, and billing.

Customer Care employees have direct dialogue with patients via virtual interface, starting with establishing first impressions and addressing concerns of incoming patients.

### ***Background on the Case***

In 2011, AHG reorganized some functional work-flows as part of a Six Sigma initiative enabling customers to interface with one representative for all care and billing coordination. Hub offices were created, through which Customer Care employees were empowered to provide comprehensive customer service to patients from scheduling to insurance verification and billing. On a trial and informal basis, eight employees were offered the opportunity to become Home (Customer Care) Agents. There was not a formal policy or agreement as it was a trial endeavor.

AHG formally rolled out its Teleworking policy in 2015 in response to several trends. Concurrent with implementing the successful home agency policy, AHG realized that its physical space would be insufficient to house a growing staff. Also, as a New England employer, the company observed there was little loss of time and productivity for teleworkers when there was inclement weather. Home Agents were able to take calls and reschedule appointments for patients (and/or health providers) who could not safely get to imaging facilities or appointments. Thus, the wins telecommuting provided paved the way for greater interest and adaptation across the company.

Today, there are over eighty Customer Care employees that work in two locations, Hub A and Hub B, and who report in to six unique supervisors. Although a formal, company-wide teleworking policy has been implemented for the entire company, granting Home Agent status remains at the discretion of supervisors. This study focused on the teams of two managers; for simplicity of reporting these will be referred to as Manager A and Manager B, to also represent that they report to the two different physical office locations.

With the Teleworking policy in place, AHG formally espouses FWA structure. Beyond that, however, much is up to leadership enactment; the policy states that “each department will make its own selections” on who will be given the opportunity to participate. For example, full or part time formal telecommuting work agreements do not have standard eligibility requirements. The only written guideline requires that employees be selected based on the availability of the job, their performance history, and the support of the supervisor.

There is no training on nor formally established standards for managing Home Agents. While reporting functions can provide some analytics on performance, this is not used consistently across the locations. Along these lines, it is also not explicitly written that AHG employees need to report into an office to be eligible for promotion, however some managers believe that employees need to report into the office if they desire promotion. These differences bear potential impact to the mothers working in the Customer Care groups, and beyond.

### ***Data Collection***

Data for this research employed a multiple-embedded case study approach that studied supervisor/employee pairings in two AHG Customer Care Hubs. For the sake of anonymity and assured interview confidentiality, individual profiles were grouped: in both hubs studied, all interviewed agents were working mothers with at least one dependent child at home under eighteen years old. The minority of the mothers were Customer Care Specialists, which is a higher company rank than the other Customer Care Representatives. All of those interviewed work full time, and their AHG tenure ranges from four months to sixteen years.

This research also had access to company documents including the employee handbook, organizational charts, benefits guide, new employee orientation materials, standards and practices, and turnover data. Electronic correspondence from the Chief Human Resources Officer and the Human Resources Specialist was also analyzed. Thorough review of these documents in accordance with the applied coding protocol designed for this study yielded evidence that illustrates how AHG formally structures and supports FWA and family supportive supervisory behaviors.

### ***Findings***

Enacting formal structure may present in an array of possible behaviors and consequent interpretations. Leaders can demonstrate the value they place on and create a sense of work-life support via their willingness to openly communicate flexible work policies or encouraging employees to use them (Putnam et al., 2014). Moreover, when leaders demonstrate emotional support showing employees they are genuinely cared for and that they, themselves, integrate family responsibilities in their day to day self-conduct, they are enacting Family Supportive Supervisory Behaviors (FSSB) (Hammer et al., 2009).

At Acceber Health Group, the managers interviewed at both Hub A and Hub B personally believe they are supportive of FWA, and both state that they intentionally work to demonstrate this to their direct reports. Findings demonstrate that their direct reports agree: at the two sites studied, there is no hesitation to ask for flexible work because FWA is formally structured, and the enacted behaviors of both supervisors are perceived to be supportive of family management needs. Overall, the interviewed working mothers feel supported to telecommute and use other FWA options to be available when their families need them.

Company cultures that are perceived as family supportive are proven to drive employee retention (Hill, Matthews, & Walsh, 2016; Morganson, Major, & Litano, 2016). FSSB has also been shown to play a role in increased job satisfaction that, in turn, lowers turnover intentions (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Hammer et al., 2009; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010). The satisfaction and turnover intentions of working mothers at AHG is consistent with the literature: they are satisfied and plan to stay.

Where findings from the two sites differed stem from specific methods of enacted behaviors between the two supervisors. The Customer Care employees working at Hub A, both home agents and in the office, have performance metrics published each week whereas Hub B does not. Despite the fact that Manager A is known to seek confirmation of daily activity and productivity, employees in her span of control exhibited less anxiety about their performance than those at Hub B, where home agents report they often aim to exceed stated expectations to demonstrate that the investment and trust that AHG has placed upon them is warranted.

Those at Hub A also expressed comfort in allocating their time and efforts. Because they can see that their overall performance is meeting expectations against performance metrics, Hub A's Customer Care employees are more comfortable taking the time refine their approach to their work. For example, they do not hesitate to consult peers (both in the office and fellow home agents) when they are working on complex cases. The sentiment is that their work is documented and their results are on the board, so if they are delivering results, they can manage their time in between customer calls.

At Hub B, with no formal reporting or set frequency for evaluation beyond annual reviews, there is not an understanding if individual performance measures up to expectations. One

interview participant even expressed sentiments of feeling isolated without the ability to understand how her performance measured up against others in her team, her role, or her department. This emotion was compounded by the perceived inability to reach out to peers for help because she did not want to be seen as non-productive by spending time on internal phone calls. Although she reported an appreciation for [Manager B's] laissez-faire approach to getting work done, the lack of routine or predictable measurement analytics had emotional effects including waning loyalty towards the organization. The lack of structured performance expectations and/or policy at site B does not enable workers to feel confident in their performance and may become a more prominent distraction with performance implications.

### **Walking the Talk: Values-Based Leadership Implications**

Employers can curate the perception that they value their employees' abilities to manage work and family roles (Kossek et al., 2010). Leaders can create a sense of work-life support via their enactment of FWA policies such as their willingness to openly communicate flexible work policies and encouraging employees to use them (Putnam et al., 2014). What they choose to do and how they behave has the potential to affect perceptions among their team, and others in the organization. While enactment is a personal operating mode, and the focus of this study is flexibility, it is ironic that organizations can best demonstrate the value of FWA via structuring its support.

#### **Recommendation #1:**

##### ***Establish formal FWA policies to create managerial opportunities for enactment.***

Having a formal structure to flexible work policies provides a common, shared framework and value proposition baseline for all employees. Employees at AHG have online access to the employee handbook for any inquiries of company policies and their parameters should they have questions or concerns about eligibility, elements of policies, or implications for their use. Likewise, managers have the same access to these policies and can refer to them at any time in the course of their regular supervisory activities.

Both as a practical impossibility and in an effort to empower those working at an organization, Human Resources policies do not indicate every possible opportunity when FWA may be appropriate. Nor does it explore every possible track for flex-work management. Leaving room for discretion which both employees and managers have to operationalize (and enact) how policies work, formal program structure serves as a common baseline to ensure leadership compliance. How employees experience these policies is the result of how they fit into the culture of each organizational sub-unit or work team.

Regardless of the formally structured policies an organization espouses, adhering to policy is only one aspect of FWA management. At AHG, the formal telecommuting policy orients both managers and employees to the basic parameters involved therein, however leaders are given the discretionary option to enact how these policies fit into the larger organizational operations. One AHG Manager, for example, has imposed her own 40% cap on the total amount of direct reports she allows to work remotely. (There is no limit like this required or even suggested by AHG policy or by anyone in Human Resources). Many employees described the ability to "make up work" later in the day or during the same week if they had to take unplanned time off. Thus, leaders are individually enacting FWA and creating the environment in which they lead.

As a first step to fostering a positive FWA experience, Human Resources practitioners should be encouraged to clearly articulate aspects of formal FWA policies that are fixed as well as those which managers have discretion to implement. Clarity of some elements (e.g., percentage of a job-family population that may participate in tele-working at any given time or the application process is to work remotely) may facilitate smoother operations at the organizational, managerial, and individual contributor level. In terms of discretionary aspects, soft boundaries that can be altered to accommodate certain workflows or cultures should also be defined to offer maximum transparency of where the organizational expectations are firm. The more clearly structured policies are to all employees, the greater chances they will be enacted as intended and in alignment with organizational values.

## **Recommendation #2:**

### ***Clarify expectations, then manage to them.***

AHG's teleworking policy offers a structure for some elements of its administration. However, many details are left to managers' discretion, including how these policies fit into the larger organizational operations. Employees want make meaning out of their surroundings (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), and they are continuously exposed to signals indicating others' appraisals of their worth in terms of personal contributions and the roles they fulfil (Wrzesniewski et al, 2003). However, when signals are not clear they cannot do this easily. Consistent with the literature, working mothers at AHG, who do not have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do, are displaying some signs of anxiousness and confusion when it comes to performance management.

Customer Care employees at AHG were frustrated because some aspects of the FWA policies and practices are still unclear. While it is unlikely that every scenario for eligibility can be covered in one policy, certain opportunities that stand out. For example, there is no clear understanding about who is selected to work from home (if it is based on tenure, shift, performance, or a combination therein). There also is not a clear process on how to apply for a remote worker role, or even the overall process for placement in formal teleworking positions. There is therefore an opportunity to refine and/or standardize eligibility for some jobs or job families to improve organizational clarity and FWA support.

Among the Customer Care teams, the frequency of reporting is another example of how performance management differs by site. At Hub A, all customer care agents, both home agents and those in the office, have their performance metrics published each week. At Hub B, there are no regularly published or discussed performance metrics. At Hub A employees experienced less anxiety about their performance than those at Hub B. Interestingly, Hub B home agents also reported that they often aim to exceed expectations to demonstrate that the investment in and trust that AHG has placed upon them is warranted. Knowing what is expected and what will be done with their performance data settles work anxieties and normalizes the work experience for home agents as well as their office counterparts. No one in this study feels exploited or as if they need to supplement work capabilities beyond reason to assist those who are working remotely. This, in turn, enables a clear focus on the work at hand.

Clarity of performance expectations and transparency in the communication of results enables employees and managers to share a common baseline. Empowering managers to use their discretion is not to be discouraged, however establishing virtual guard rails for FWA program management promotes better chances of "success." Establishing FWA eligibility

criteria, a recruiting or transition process, and subsequent performance thresholds and management checkpoints, for example, may assuage confusion and ensure energy remains directed at the work at hand.

Perhaps the most impactful element of this process will be how managers enact expectations. To assist in this, structured parameters will be consistent and clear points for leaders to base their behaviors against. Knowing what is expected in the quantity and or quality of performance calibrates leaders' expectations and, from there, organizationally endorsed rewards and consequences may also be established and allocated. Managing in alignment to these guidelines will assist in the interpersonal sensemaking cues that the company is truly committed to FWA.

### **Recommendation #3:**

#### ***Narrow the interpretation process: Train managers.***

As discussed earlier, employees who value FWA watch for cues of organizational and leadership support. They may observe enacted actions or reactions around policy elements, those using FWA, or those who manage them. The extent to which leaders have the flexibility to improvise versus align to company expectations is first codified in policy, then reinforced through training.

As stated above, managers at AHG may selectively apply elements of the Teleworking written policy while taking liberties where discretion is enabled. For example, current managers selectively discuss home agency possibilities during job interviews and/or mention remote working opportunities when they become available. Thus, AHG managers are thereby enacting the environment they lead and the values they hold.

The leaders of AHG Hubs A and B openly and actively show their FWA support on a regular basis. Through their willingness to grant home agency, to enable flex-time to make up unplanned time off requests, and their own use of FWA to manage family responsibilities, managers at Hubs A and B may be seen as “competence multipliers” (Weick, 1979) in their enactment of these policies. In other words, because they themselves willingly manage and personally take advantage of the FWA programs, these managers have built and maintained cultures that accept and promote flexible work where more people are likely to do the same around them. These happenings have been fortunate thus far since this support was never formally trained.

Formally developed and implemented training about managing FWA narrows the opportunities for leaders to create their own interpretations or impose their own value sets which may have adverse impacts on the workforce (Allen, 2001). AHG does not currently offer a training in this area, however a program is in development. While not negating the ability for departments to customize some aspects of policy implementation, training may include methods and behaviors for managing FWA and/or a remote workforce in aggregate. This opportunity also simplifies the unknowns and variables involved in the management of FWA, lessening the risk of negative interpretations or enactments.

Focusing on the daily management of FWA, employees benefit from fair standards and managed accountabilities. Deemed effective at Hub A, all employees on a team (office and remote workers) can be evaluated against the same metrics and have the same expectations for how performance reporting is communicated to them. Although performance management

was not found to be an issue, adherence to rigorous standards as well as a predictable routine measurement against metrics was found to be beneficial.

Helping managers understand the importance of these elements of management as well as holding employees accountable for reaching results or coaching them to correct behaviors can be trained. How FWA programs are administered (including if and when FWA may be considered) should also be standardized to promote more routine enactment. To establish a culture where all team members feel included and know where they stand, supporting this type of fair management training can contribute to successful FWA experience for working mothers.

#### **Recommendation #4:**

##### ***Ask and then react.***

An annual employee engagement survey is a formal means by which Human Resources may ask all employees about their ability to manage work and life. Adding new data to the HR departments' understanding of employee values and needs provides opportunities to further refine the tools management can employ to manage FWA and work-life management. The extent to which an organization is proactive in learning employee needs and possible additional accommodations is also an element that impacts worker engagement (Nohe, Michel, & Sonntag, 2014).

At AHG, while many employees recalled being asked for work-life management ideas in their annual survey, none had any notion of what is done with the data generated. There was slight confusion about what the company does with this data, and some sentiments of worry that because the company is asking about this, they are thinking about changing the Teleworking program. Employees shared the belief that if there are new FWA ideas, AHG is not sharing them or working to make any new accommodations. They also worry that changes may be made to what is already liked, otherwise why else would they be asked about these topics? There is a clear opportunity to adjust either the questions asked, the reporting of the survey results to explain themes of what has been heard and what the company intends to do in response, or both.

Through communication, employers have the opportunity to curate the perception that they care about their employees and their abilities to manage their work (Kossek et al., 2010). When employees are asked or formally surveyed for their input towards enhancing or refining FWA offerings, it is recommended that the organization communicates its responses in a timely manner. This may take the form of assembled themes, action items that will be pursued, or explanations on why action will not be taken. Whatever the chosen option, having data and not appearing to use it causes some confusion among the employees who are sensitive to any changes in FWA and how company questions may therefore impact their (potential) use.

#### **Summary**

Espoused value sets inform organizational programs and policies. If work-life management is prioritized by an organization, leaders can create a sense of support via their enactment of FWA policies. Whether they are willing to openly communicate flexible work policies or encourage employees to use them, what leaders choose to do and how they behave has the potential to affect perceptions among their team and others in the organization. Those

employees who want or need flexibility at work may therefore evaluate all leader actions as either supportive or not-supportive of FWA.

For an organization to demonstrate what it values, its leaders need to walk the talk. Company cultures that are perceived as family supportive are the result of leadership behaviors observed both publicly and directly between managers and employees. Family supportive cultures have been proven to drive employee retention (Hill, Matthews, & Walsh, 2016; Morganson, Major, & Litano, 2016), and much of this perception stems from leadership behaviors (McCarthy et al., 2013, Morganson, Major, & Litano, 2016). This was true at AHG, all employees interviewed articulated that the support of their supervisors for FWA has significant impact on them: they are satisfied and plan to stay.

When it comes to enacting FWA, the twist was in the guide-rails. While in some cases, a hands-off approach for management may seem desirable, for AHG it caused more apprehension and anxiousness for workers using FWA. Leaders who aligned their actions to structured routines positively impacted their direct reports work engagement as well as their ability to respond to family needs.

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### **Author's Note: Post Script in the COVID Era**

This case study and accompanying analysis was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Early March, 2020, became a defining moment for many working parents as their home's became office space as well as home-schools, often with little or no preparation. For those whose employers had enabled FWA prior, the transition may have been easier but not likely without hiccups. Programs and policies formally espoused by organizations were often leveraged. However, in many companies, FWA was commonly designated for specific situations and circumstances, not for universal deployment. For employees whose companies had not rolled out any remote-work policies prior to the pandemic, the gap was wider to overcome.

Subsequent research in the role leader and organizational enactment plays on the working mother experience is being carried out presently. Some studies are focusing on gender norms, including which parent (mother or father) has assumed primary caregiving responsibilities. Others are looking at ideal worker models and the emotional labor required in pandemic times. There are clearly challenges beyond completing the work required by one's job and family, but few models working mothers can liken these times to for reference.

The issues explored in this case study remain salient for employers of working mothers using FWA. Understanding what is valued by this employee group and responding to these ideas remains a strategy for employers to validate their working mothers, as does laying out clear expectations and managing to them. Meanwhile, supervisors who are suddenly being asked to manage remote employees may not feel comfortable managing performance or handling employee relations issues; however, it is never too late to carry out training on expectations and methodologies. Adopting or adhering to this article's recommendations remain beneficial whether the organization enables FWA on a temporary basis, or more permanently.

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## About the Author

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