

## Executive roundtable

# Workplace flexibility increasingly important

By **LYLE MORAN**  
*The Daily Transcript*

Offering employees options for when and where they can work has become increasingly essential to attracting and retaining young adults and working mothers, local business leaders say.

At a recent roundtable hosted by *The Daily Transcript* and sponsored by the San Diego Society for Human Resource Management, participants said workplace flexibility is especially enticing to the millennial generation born from the 1980s to the early-2000s.

Jennifer Barnes, president of **Pro Back Office**, which offers businesses assistance in areas ranging from accounting to auditing, said she lets her employees work at different times during the day, including late in the evening.

Barnes, who has 30 staffers and 15 independent contractors, also permits her employees to work from home or a client's office.

She says about one-third of her employees are millennials, and none has quit the company in three years.

"As long as the clients are happy and as long as everyone is doing their job, we don't care where they are working," Barnes said. "We are able to keep millennials very happy by offering them that flexibility."

Felena Hanson is the founder of **Hera Hub**, which offers shared workspaces for women.

Among her seven employees and the hundreds of members who use her locations, Hanson said she has seen workplace flexibility take precedence over pay for many millennials seeking jobs.

"Employers, more and more, are starting to really embrace this conversation because if we are really going to continue to grow as companies, we need strong talent and management and beyond," said Hanson, who is franchising her business nationwide.

Many young people are also starting their own businesses, Hanson said, because they want the ability to set their own schedules and work from different locations.

Other panelists said not just millennials seek flexible schedules in employment.

Jerry Sanders, president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, said his organization has been a great place for mothers to work because of the alternative schedules it permits.

The chamber offers employees the opportunity to work 80 hours in nine days, which allows them to take every other Friday off and work different schedules to meet the hours requirement. The schedule, for example, enables mothers to attend parent-teacher conferences and other school events.

"It is part of the fabric of the organization now that we get a lot of work out everybody, but they are able to do that more on their own schedule and working from home, and coming in and bringing kids," Sanders said.

Jim Unger, vice president at **Hornblower**, said the cruises and events company is an attractive place to work for people of all ages seeking flexible schedules because its operations take place 24/7.

Untraditional schedules are attractive to employees with children, in school or working more than one job, he said.

"It really crosses all generations now," Unger said. Hornblower also has some "remote reservation agents" who work offsite.

Other panelists said that state law makes it difficult for private, nonunionized workplaces to offer flexible work arrangements.

California law requires employers to pay daily overtime anytime a nonexempt employee works more than eight hours in a day, rather than solely paying weekly overtime to those who work more than 40 hours.

Employees who seek more flexible schedules that



Michael Countis

**Michael Kalt, left, is a partner at law firm Wilson Turner Kosmo and Jerry Sanders is president and CEO of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.**

don't automatically require overtime pay can obtain it only with a two-thirds approval of nonexempt associates in a "work unit" via a secret ballot vote.

"We can't figure out how to provide enough flexibility, the flexibility we all say we want, and stay within the confines of the law," said Tim Durie, senior vice president of human resources at **Newland Real Estate Group**, which has about 50 employees in San Diego and 250 nationwide.

Assemblyman Brian Jones, a Republican from Santee, said he has tried to make it easier for private employers to offer flexible schedules.

A bill he filed in the last legislative session would have allowed nonexempt employees in the private sector to request a schedule with four 10-hour workdays without requiring employers to pay daily overtime. The legislation died in committee.

Jones said he plans to file a similar bill in the current legislative session.

"The good news is we are going to keep working on it because we are making incremental progress," Jones said.

Attorney Michael Kalt, governmental affairs director for the California State Council for SHRM, said the organization was proud to support Jones' bill because it would allow flexibility for only those employees who seek it.

Kalt said one reason legislative efforts such as Jones' have struggled to gain traction is because of a disconnect in Sacramento.

"From what I hear around the table and what I hear from my employer clients, it's the employees coming to the employer asking for flexibility," said Kalt, a partner at **Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP** in San Diego.

"But in Sacramento, it is something a lot of people assume the employers want and are trying to impose upon the employees to take away their rights, which makes it hard to get the laws changed to increase flexibility," he said.

Besides flexibility in schedules and work locations, some employers offer different approaches to paid time off.

Creative agency **thinkParallax** made the news earlier this year by offering its employees \$1,500 and an extra day off to travel somewhere they had never been before.

The program's goal was to inspire the employees and have them return refreshed and excited about work projects, said Jonathan Hanwit, the company's CEO.

The company received a lot of positive press about the move, which resulted in people from

around the world seeking to work at the company.

There also was a flood of applications when thinkParallax posted positions.

"The idea that it could be a recruitment piece was kind of news to me," Hanwit said.

Meanwhile, Hanson's Hera Hub does not track paid time off or limit it. She said no one has abused the policy.

"If you get your work done and we are thriving as a company, I really don't care if you take a week off here or there," Hanson said.

Despite the many positive benefits that stem from employers offering different types of workplace flexibility, panelists acknowledged there is potential for drawbacks.

Hanwit said he fears that the collaboration of people working together in the same office space may be lost.

"In our environment, I see a potential issue with too much flexibility," Hanwit said.

Durie of Newland Real Estate said his company has adopted the core hours of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. when all employees are expected to be in the office.

That approach provides flexibility for employees who need to take their children to school, for example, or prefer starting earlier.

But Durie said the schedule also maintains "the synergy and community of everyone together."

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### Roundtable participants

**Jennifer Barnes**, President,  
*Pro Back Office*

**Tim Durie**, Senior Vice President of HR,  
*Newland Real Estate Group*

**Felena Hanson**, Founder,  
*Hera Hub*

**Jonathan Hanwit**, Co-Founder and CEO,  
*thinkParallax*

**Brian Jones**, Assemblyman,  
*71st Assembly District*

**Michael Kalt**, Partner,  
*Wilson Turner Kosmo*

**Jerry Sanders**, President and CEO,  
*San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce*

**Jim Unger**, Vice President and GM,  
*Hornblower*