



Staggered hours schemes

What are staggered hours schemes?

Under staggered hours schemes, workers or groups of workers start and finish work at slightly different times. A staggered hours system may allow workers some discretion, within prescribed limits, in fixing the time when they start and finish work. However, once these starting and finishing times have been chosen (or fixed by the employer), they remain unchanged. Thus, these schemes should not be confused with flexitime programmes (see Information Sheet No. WT-14).

Staggered hours schemes represent one way of easing problems of traffic congestion and over-burdened public transport at certain peak hours. Instead of having all workers arrive and leave at practically the same time, different firms or even different branches of activity could adopt different starting and finishing times. Traffic would thereby flow more smoothly, public transport would be utilized more rationally, and the physical and psychological strain would be lessened for all concerned. These schemes may also make it easier for workers to access cafeterias, childcare facilities and other services.

Staggered hours in practice

There is little information on the extent of staggered hours schemes. It is known, however, that staggered hours schemes are used mainly for day work, but they are sometimes also introduced in shift work as well (i.e. “overlapping” shifts). Under most schemes, starting and finishing hours for day work can be staggered every 15 to 30 minutes between, for instance, 7:00 and 9:00 in the morning and between 16:00 and 18:00 in the evening. Lunch breaks are often staggered as well, for example, one group going to lunch at 12:00, another group going at 12:30, and another group going at 13:00. Rest breaks can be similarly staggered if

there is a need to have continuous coverage at the worksite.

A typical example of overlapping shifts would be to have one shift from 7:30 to 15:00 and a second from 10:30 to 18:00. Aside from meal breaks, this working time arrangement would provide a “core” period of 4.5 hours per day between 10:30 and 15:00 when all workers are present. This may be particularly important if there are peaks in demand. In the service sector, services would also be able to be provided to customers for the extended period between 7:30 and 18:00. Finally, overlapping periods can also facilitate training.

Advantages and disadvantages

The potential advantages of staggered hours schemes include:

- Reduced congestion associated with the simultaneous arrival and departure of workers at the workplace.
- Easier access to cafeterias, childcare facilities and other services.
- Extended operating hours at no extra labour cost (within certain limits).
- Better arrangements for workers to carry out family obligations or other activities.

These types of schemes may also have several potential disadvantages, e.g.:

- A shorter period when all workers are present.
- Record-keeping or administrative difficulties.
- Potential inconveniences for some workers due to new schedules.
- Extra costs associated with extended operating hours as a result of additional security, heating, lighting and other expenses.

Implementation

The successful introduction of staggered hours schemes requires proper consideration of the schedules of public transport, school and childcare facilities, as well as any other factors that influence the arrival and departure times of workers. It is also important that the assignment of workers to particular schedules take into account their individual needs and preferences.

In practice, efforts to take advantage of staggered hours schemes have encountered some difficulties in coordination, reconciling different interests and preferences, changing

habits and attitudes, and meeting business' operational and commercial requirements. Within fairly narrow limits, however, many firms in large cities have been able to alter the usual starting and finishing times of their employees with positive results (see the example below). Also, in many developing countries faced with the problems of urban sprawl, traffic jams and inadequate transport, the coordinated staggering of working hours may well offer a measure of relief. While the difficulties should not be underestimated, the concept of staggered hours is worth exploring.



Case example: Staggered hours schemes in Singapore

Several successful cases of staggered hours schemes are found in Singapore, where traffic congestion has often caused long commuting times. Since 1985, for example, the National University Hospital in Singapore has offered staff who do not work shifts the choice of coming to work at 8:00, 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning, primarily in order to help those who have to take their children to school before coming to work. This hospital has also benefited from this scheme by being able to serve customers an extra two hours — from 8:00 to 18:00 — instead of the regular opening hours of 9:00 to 17:00. However, the origin of staggered hours in Singapore can be traced back to a 1975 government initiative, which aimed to ease traffic congestion, especially in the city area, and relieve overcrowding at lunchtime.

Source: "Firms find it advantageous to have staggered hours", in *The Straits Times*, 23 February 1997, Singapore.