

READING COMPREHENSION

C1 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary | 45-60 minutes

Topic: Workplace | Skills: Reading, Vocabulary, Speaking

Read the text carefully. Then answer the questions on Page 2.

Who Gets to Be Flexible?

The consultancy described its new staffing policy as flexible working. Employees could move between projects, acquire different skills and negotiate their hours. In the recruitment brochure, flexibility was represented by a photograph of a laptop beside a sunny window. In the weekly scheduling meeting, it looked more like an empty box that someone had to fill by Friday.

For senior consultants, the policy often delivered what it promised. Their experience allowed them to decline unsuitable assignments without appearing uncooperative. They could also predict how long a task would take and arrange personal commitments **accordingly**. Junior staff had fewer resources on which to draw. Accepting a last-minute request was formally optional, but refusing one meant risking a reputation they had scarcely begun to establish.

Managers were not necessarily acting in bad faith. Clients changed requirements, colleagues became ill and projects ended unexpectedly. A rigid schedule would have created its own problems. Yet the language of individual choice **obscured** a collective question: whose time absorbed the uncertainty when plans changed?

A staff survey exposed the gap between control over hours and unpredictability of hours. Both had been recorded under the same positive heading. One employee who regularly worked late nevertheless valued the policy because she could choose those evenings. Another worked fewer hours but could never be sure which evening would remain free. The total alone did not explain their contrasting experiences.

The company responded by publishing assignments earlier and compensating people for changes made at short notice. It also tracked who repeatedly accepted unpopular work. The new rules restricted some informal arrangements that employees had liked, and managers complained that staffing took longer. No one had discovered a cost-free way of accommodating every preference.

Nevertheless, the changes made flexibility less dependent on personal **bargaining power**. The policy became more credible when it acknowledged the constraints it had previously left unnamed. Flexibility is not necessarily an empty promise, but its value cannot be assessed simply by asking whether a rule permits choice. It also depends on whether a person can exercise that choice without paying a **disproportionate** price.

Key vocabulary

accordingly - in a way appropriate to the situation described

obscured - made something harder to see or understand

bargaining power - the ability to influence the terms of an agreement

disproportionate - too large in relation to something else

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

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Answer in complete sentences. Support interpretations with evidence from the text.

1. What is the effect of contrasting the brochure photograph with the scheduling meeting?

2. Why was optional work not equally optional for everyone?

3. Why does the writer mention genuine scheduling disruptions?

4. What distinction did the survey reveal?

5. What trade-off accompanied the revised policy?

6. What criterion does the conclusion propose for meaningful choice?

Discuss with a partner

- When can an optional request become difficult to refuse?
- Should predictability be treated as a benefit separate from shorter working hours?

ANSWER KEY

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Suggested full-sentence answers. Accept other supported interpretations where appropriate.

1. What is the effect of contrasting the brochure photograph with the scheduling meeting?

The contrast exposes the gap between an attractive image of autonomy and the practical pressure to cover urgent staffing needs.

2. Why was optional work not equally optional for everyone?

Junior employees risked damaging an unestablished reputation by refusing, whereas senior staff had greater security and bargaining power.

3. Why does the writer mention genuine scheduling disruptions?

The writer acknowledges operational difficulties to avoid reducing the problem to dishonest or unreasonable managers.

4. What distinction did the survey reveal?

It distinguished control over working hours from uncertainty about them, which had misleadingly been grouped together.

5. What trade-off accompanied the revised policy?

More predictable and compensated scheduling required extra administration and restricted some valued informal arrangements.

6. What criterion does the conclusion propose for meaningful choice?

Meaningful choice requires that people can exercise it without facing a disproportionate penalty, not merely that rules formally allow it.

Teaching notes

Read once for the main idea, then reread for evidence. Compare answers before discussing the two open questions. Interpretive answers may vary; ask learners to justify their reading.

Language and reading focus: Rhetorical contrast; qualification and unequal agency.

Text: Original commentary using a fictional scenario. Discussion questions have no fixed answers.