

## Working Differently

**O**ffice hours? There's no such thing. A desk? Only if you want one. A set schedule? Not here.

This is the philosophy of the Missouri Research and Education Network (MOREnet), an operating unit of the University of Missouri System that provides Internet and IT services to higher education, K-12 schools, libraries and other affiliates. For the past two years, the organization has been operating a pilot of the results-only work environment (ROWE) model, wherein employees focus on results rather than the number of hours worked. At MOREnet, there are no required office hours or meetings, and employees can work whenever and wherever is most convenient for them (with certain ground rules) and are encouraged to find the work/life balance that best meets their needs.

### Why ROWE?

In 2010, MOREnet endured a loss of state appropriations (representing roughly 45 percent of its operating revenues), a 158 percent increase in membership fees, layoffs and a hiring stop, a physical relocation, and a mandate to become self-funded. Among the many repercussions of this disruptive change was a decrease in employee morale and engagement. MOREnet had always been a stable organization and employees, whose average tenure was nearly 12 years, had never experienced a shake-up of this magnitude. MOREnet's executive director, John Gillispie (who came on board in January 2010 after the organization's first and only executive director retired the year prior), knew he needed to be truly innovative in order to overcome the funding challenges the organization faced as well as hold on to his best and brightest employees. Enter the ROWE model.

ROWE has been used in the past by companies like Best Buy, Gap, Banana Republic and several smaller businesses to motivate, engage and retain their best people. With ROWE, employees are free to work when, how and where they'd like. Companies and organizations stop paying employees to simply show up to work and instead pay them for producing results. ROWE is not a traditional flexible schedule or telework arrangement. It is a way for employees to navigate the everyday demands of life while also meeting the expectations of the organization. It's not easy to implement, as it requires culture change on a grand scale. And it's not for every workplace. But for MOREnet, it helped create a high-performance, high-commitment organization that has been able to flourish despite the challenges it has faced.

### How It Works

At MOREnet, exempt employees have no core office hours and are able to choose when and where they work. In other words, says Gillispie, "they get to work in whatever way allows them to produce the best results." For some, that means working from 6 a.m. until 1 p.m. each day. For others, it means taking Fridays off. For others still, evening work best suits their situation. Many employees work different schedules each week. And some, like Gillispie himself, prefer the eight-to-five, Monday-Friday office setting (MOREnet provides traditional office space for all employees, as well as meeting rooms).

There are only a couple of ground rules: 1) every employee must be reachable and respond as if he or she were in the office or must let coworkers know when he or she will be reachable and/or returning calls or e-mails, and 2) the call center must take calls from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday (and yes, even call center employees work from where they want). The ROWE model at MOREnet applies to all employees, but exempt employees and non-exempt employees are required to be treated slightly differently due to federal wage and hour laws. Non-exempt team members are required to track and report their hours and paid leave time and are expected to work a 40-hour week; however, they still enjoy the benefit of working where they want.

Gillispie admits that for those who have never worked in a ROWE organization, the thought of giving employees complete control over their work time and effort can be unsettling. But, he says, "if you have the right people working for you and the right performance metrics in place and establish clear goals and expectations, it may well be the best thing you could ever do for your organization."

And although some may think that this type of work environment provides safe harbor for poor performers, Gillispie refutes that notion outright. "I believe that a ROWE employer attracts the best of the best talent. Only high-performing, self-motivated, dedicated individuals will succeed in a ROWE workplace. What I've found is that poor performers will usually self-select out before the need arises to let them go. They usually realize early on that they are unable to compete in such a high-performing, results-oriented organization."

### Benefits of ROWE

Since the ROWE model was implemented in 2013, MOREnet has seen a significant decrease in turnover, a decrease in reported sick time, a decrease in reported vacation time, fewer unplanned absences, and an increase in employee engagement and job satisfaction (as measured by climate surveys). Morale is high, productivity is up, organizational goals are being met or exceeded, and costs are down.

Employees have also realized many benefits. By being able to work on their own terms, many employees report saving hundreds of dollars per month — by using less gas, by not having to purchase professional clothes, by not having to utilize childcare services, by being able to exercise regularly and eat at home, etc. “Our employees absolutely love this new way of working,” says Gillispie. “And it shows in the work they’re producing, their loyalty and the way they’re interacting with our customers. Our people really do love to come (or *not* come!) to work.”

### Challenges of ROWE

Although Gillispie is a champion of the ROWE model, he does admit that this type of work environment is not without its challenges. For starters, he says, “managers have traditionally been taught to manage time instead of results, so there must be a focused, sustained effort to train managers on how to nurture and manage a results-based culture.” And because this type of work arrangement is foreign to so many, “it requires a sharp learning curve — for employees, leaders and the organization itself.” There’s also the upfront investment in new technology required to pave the way for a work-from-anywhere approach. And onboarding can be a challenge simply from a logistical perspective. Additionally, many types of performance management systems won’t work within a ROWE workplace. “You may need to grow your own in order to measure what you really need to measure,” says Gillispie.

If you’re looking into a ROWE model for your organization, Gillispie suggests partnering with human resources, risk management and legal counsel to address any liability or compliance issues that may arise.

### How Can HR Help Support Flex Work?

The University of Missouri System’s human resources organization has been integral to the success of MOREnet’s unique work arrangement. From helping envision what the ROWE model might look like at MOREnet to serving as

a source of information around compliance-related issues to helping train managers around this new work style and more, HR has offered support and expertise all along the way. Says Jill Wood, director of talent management for the University of Missouri System, “Offering flexible work arrangements, whether on the scale of ROWE or something smaller, can have a significant impact on employee productivity, engagement, morale and loyalty, and can be a huge draw for talent.”

Wood adds that there are several ways in which HR can support and encourage flex work environments. “We can articulate the benefits of such an arrangement to employees and the organization; provide training to managers and employees around flex work options and considerations, managing remote employees, and setting goals and expectations in this type of environment; be a role model within our organizations by offering flex work in our own departments; and last but not least, be open to exploring new options when it comes to how work gets done.”

That last one is a biggie, says Gillispie. “When I brought the ROWE idea to the table, I wasn’t immediately shut down with a ‘this will never work’ speech. Instead, we engaged in a ‘how can we make this work’ discussion.”

### Bringing Out the Best in People

In today’s mobile, technological, multitasking world, we need to think differently about how we get work done. Just because an employee is present in an office eight hours a day five days a week doesn’t necessarily mean that individual is producing results. Different people have different work styles — some are early to rise, some are night owls; some prefer a desk and a computer, some would rather work on a tablet on a park bench; some need routine, some would rather take things as they come.

By leveraging employees’ different work styles, habits and preferences, MOREnet has created an employee-driven, high-performing, results-oriented work environment. “The ROWE model is based on autonomy, accountability and trust,” says Gillispie. “Our team members appreciate the freedom we give them to work how they choose and the trust we place in them to deliver results. And because of this, we get their very best efforts each and every day.” 