How rigid should you be when employees want flexible hours?

The following member discussion took place in the MGMA Member Community (mgma.com/community)

I have a question regarding the hours billers work. The hours have always been 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. I have a fairly new group of billers — new to me, anyway — and all are often late. They work a total of eight hours, but their arrival time is anywhere between 8 and 8:30, and then they leave between 5 and 5:30. I’ve been warning them, and they are on an official verbal warning letting them all know that the next tardy is a write-up. … Their argument is that it is impossible for them to finish and leave on time, so they vary their arrival time based on when they leave. They state that if they are in the middle of posting money, they can’t stop, etc. I have been with this office seven years now, and this is the first group that has not been able to work with the 8 to 5 schedule successfully. At the same time, I’m not a biller, and while I can understand their argument of not wanting to stop in the middle of a large multiple payment check, I have to assume that it is possible to maybe not start a large multiple payment check close to your ending time. There is always accounts receivable (A/R), zero explanation of benefits and I’m sure lots of filler work to do to manage the time better. Am I being too rigid?

Anonymous MGMA-ACMPE member

If we look at substance before form, the first thing I would look at is your A/R. How is it? What are your days of revenue in A/R? If your A/R is in good shape and they are getting their work done, then maybe this is not a problem. I would ask them to call if they want to come in early or want to come in a little later so it is approved by you. If you approve this, it does not open the door for others to do it.

Lawrence Schindler, MHA, lschindler@yahoo.com

This is definitely an excuse, and a bad one at that. If they’re adjusting their hours back based on when they can leave, why can’t they adjust their hours up just as easily? The total amount of time is net. The real question is does it affect their morale to schedule that flexibility into their schedules? It might be worth changing your policy to allow for leeway (i.e. +/- 30 from 8 a.m.) if there is no downside to giving them that latitude in arrival/departure time (e.g., throws off meeting schedules, etc.). But also consider: You are able to have an extra hour (7:30-5:30) of billing staff availability to answer patient questions, and the only cost to you is looking like a nice boss (assuming there is no downside or interruption to your work flow).

John Doyle, MHA, office manager, Minnesota Mental Health Clinics, St. Paul, doylejpmd@gmail.com

Note: MGMA-ACMPE does not endorse any solutions put forth by participants on the specialty group email forums. We urge readers to explore the legal issues — federal, state and local — that might arise from a particular course of action.
... The question I would ask is whether a rigid schedule benefits the practice. Would a more flexible approach result in better productivity, improved retention and reduced turnover, etc.?

Of course, it isn't impossible for them to manage their time so that they arrive and leave on time. However, what does the practice gain if they do so?

If these folks aren't answering the phone or engaging in other customer service activities, I have a hard time seeing how a little variability in their schedule causes a problem, and it may actually be beneficial in terms of coping with a variable workload and keeping employees happy. I have used variable scheduling for noncustomer service billing staff for a long time (stipulating that one earns the right to work without management supervision, and work hours are scheduled in advance to coordinate coverage), and it has been beneficial for everyone involved.

David L. Smith, FACMPE, senior vice president, client services, Integrated Medical Partners, Lawrence, Kan., david.smith@integratedmp.com

Being a business owner for more than 15 years, I have found that flexibility in work hours is golden handcuffs. We try to provide as much flexibility as the business allows. All our employees know this and appreciate it. They also all know that the business’ needs come before the individual’s and respect that. Turnover in our office is almost nonexistent, and we do attribute part of that to flexibility. I realize many medical practices might not have the luxury of adopting this flexibility, but if you can, I recommend doing so.

Gerry Malloy, CMM, Global Health Management Services LLC, Tamaqua, Pa., ghms@ptd.net

I absolutely agree with the comments supporting the importance of flexibility. However, the situation presented is not actually about flexibility as much as it is about staff going against office policy and determining their own hours. ... It’s a slippery slope when you, as an administrator, condone bad behavior, and it seems to me that is what is going on here. They have chosen to ignore the rules and then, when questioned, are giving very poor excuses for why they are doing so. I would review the hours and staffing ratios with the billing supervisor and devise a plan to stagger hours that suits both management and staff. I would also make it quite clear that tardiness [will] not be tolerated. Additionally, I would make it clear as to how I would like to see these types of issues handled in the future.

Linda Crawford, practice administrator, Coastal Carolina OB/GYN, Conway, S.C., lcrawford@coastalcarolinaobgyn.com

I oversee a group of 35 ... in our central billing office. I allow the supervisors to be flexible in the hours their staff works. Customer service folks work 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. on Fridays, or 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. This ensures that they are staffed appropriately when the phones are on and patients [are] calling. ... The billers come in at various times ... and my collectors work alternate four 10-hour days making sure that there is adequate phone coverage five days a week. Lastly, my electronic data interchange person works a half day on-site and a half day from home. ... The staff appreciates the flexibility, and the work is always done!

Francine Sembert, director, Eagle Business Services, Greensboro, N.C., fsembert@eaglemds.com
... Part of my billing staff works 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. They’re early risers, no kids to get off to school and like avoiding traffic at those commute times. They have demonstrated that they do come in and work when not everyone is here yet. It causes no problems for the practice, and they enjoy a privilege at zero cost to the practice.

Kacy Baitz, Waco (Texas) Gastroenterology Associates, kbaitz@wacogastro.com

If their work hours are 8 to 5, then if they are not at work at 8 a.m. (clocked in and ready to work), then, yes, they are late. The comment on not getting work finished exactly at 5 p.m. is not an answer I would find acceptable from my staff ... of course, none of us could be done exactly at 5 p.m. — or any other time, for that matter. Part of being an employee is being responsible for managing your time. ... Sounds like the billers are trying to dictate their own schedules and feel they can come and go as they please. If you need to change shifts, change shifts, as others have mentioned — however, that is the time the employee needs to be there, not a few minutes after.

Linda Carroll, CMPE, CPC, CPMA, manager, Alaska Foot & Ankle Specialists, Anchorage, admin@akfootankle.com

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