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## Life at Work

Amy Joyce



### **Independence in the Pursuit of Happiness**

Workplace Freedoms Offer Benefits for Employers as Well as Employees

*By Amy Joyce*

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When Andrew Axelrod was in his first job with the strategic finance group of Ernst & Young in Atlanta several years ago, he thought a lot of handholding tripped him up. "That makes it very unproductive because they stand over your shoulder and double-check everything," he said.

He soon discovered that the more he explained how he planned to proceed with a project, the less his boss micromanaged him. He was given an increasing amount of independence once he showed that he could be trusted to proceed the way he thought he should.

"By producing good work, doing a good job, plus really communicating with the people I was working with, I was able to step away from the big brother, dad thing," said Axelrod, who is a summer away from starting Stanford's MBA program. "It helped . . . both me and them."

Workers want their independence. And we're not talking layoffs.

In choosing a new job or career, 95 percent of Americans say they want independence in how they do their job, according to a survey by Ajilon Office, a staffing firm based in Saddle Brook, N.J. That same percentage want a relationship with their direct supervisor that "allows them the freedom to voice their concerns openly and honestly."

Workplace independence does not just mean a flexible schedule. It also means the chance to explain ideas, create and be able to take a chance.

Brian Salkowski can easily tick off a few examples of some little freedoms he has given his employees as mid-Atlantic director of Ajilon Office. There was the woman who needed to work from home several days a week because of family issues. Then the two workers -- one who comes in early in order to leave early,

and one who comes in later and leaves later -- who needed the schedule flexibility.

And, he finds, the more willing he is to be a coach rather than a dictator, the happier his employees are, the more productive they are and, hence, the happier he is.

"You can create a more appealing workplace and environment. When people feel they have ownership or independence, they tend to be happier," Salkowski said.

Salkowski thinks he understands all this from his own years of being managed . "I think back on my career, and I think about when I've personally tried to increase the amount of independence that I had in the job," he said. There were too many times when he felt micromanaged rather than guided -- so he uses that as an example of how not to manage.

It often is necessary for an employee to figure out what would constitute independence for himself or herself, then ask for it. If a worker is trusted, has been at the company for years or has proved himself in other capacities, it should be simple for management to give the go-ahead to just go ahead.

Granted, no worker will charge into the office shouting the Mel Gibson "Freedom!" war chant, but independence is something many employees look for as they search out a new employer or judge their current one.

**Heather Bradley, of Flourishing Co., knows that lack of independence is a huge reason employees don't stick around. In fact, it was a major contributor to her branching off to start her own workplace-coaching company after spending years in human resources of major corporations. She always said she would leave if things ceased to be fun, and they did.**

**"For me, the bottom line was really feeling like I was making a contribution as me," she said. "The thought of being a drone is more than I can ever handle."**

**Her D.C. area company now works to help employers realize that a little independence goes a long way when it comes to smart, attentive, engaged and fruitful employees.**

**Bradley defines workplace independence as having a say in how work gets done while understanding there are rules and guidelines to follow.**

**"Independence comes with being more creative, more innovative," she said. "And the system doesn't always accommodate that."**

**She hates seeing the drawn faces on the Metro in the morning. But many workers feel they do not have the chance to try a new idea or create something different from the normal Dilbert-like rat race. Bradley knows it does not have to be that way, and did what she could to make sure she did not get stuck on the treadmill that is sometimes called work.**

It's not always easy to coach managers to be coaches rather than bosses, said Amy Richman, a senior consultant with WFD Consulting in Watertown, Mass. She works with organizations to help management teams make a transition from "command-it" style, she said. Some people intrinsically get it; others have to learn how to let go. But letting go does not mean a manager is not managing anymore. It simply means learning that coaching is another tool to being a good manager. A manager can delegate something with direction and still give employees independence, Bradley said.

But it is not entirely up to a manager to create this environment. If employees want a more autonomous job, they have to figure out what their own goals are within that organization, then express them to their employer.

That autonomy means taking on more responsibility for coming up with ideas, Bradley said.

As Axelrod did. "So many times, people don't really know you feel comfortable doing it on your own," he said. "You need to speak up."

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