

Fair Workweek bill would give workers stability they deserve op-ed

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FULL TEXT

In this context of labor shortages and rising economic uncertainty, Connecticut corporate leaders and policymakers must take steps to ensure that our businesses remain competitive by making our workforce more productive while controlling costs. We must build an economy that supports small businesses, but also treats our more than 250,000 food and retail workers with the respect they deserve.

The Connecticut General Assembly is considering such legislation that provides retail and food employees with reasonably predictable work schedules and compensation for being on-call.

Many businesses adapt their staffing levels to demand as needed, so they rely on advanced automated software tools to work on "just-in-time" or "on-call" schedules for their employees, calling them in for shifts on short notice to fill any gaps in service, or dismissing them early when demand fails to materialize.

Unfortunately, these practices are burdensome and stressful on employees. Humans are creatures of habit and we tend to like having somewhat predictable lives. Research has shown that having to deal with erratic time, transportation and family arrangements is extremely stressful. Unstable schedules make it much harder for workers to stay current with their bills, pay rent or put food on the table. Many employees are paid less than a living wage, necessitating a second job that is hard to hold when they are called in with very limited notice. Further, for employees who are parents, an unpredictable schedule means they see their kids less often, making it difficult to ensure the children are being successful in school.

House Bill 5353 would start to address this issue by focusing on large retail employers - those with over 500 employees - and requires workers be given predictable schedules and fair compensation for working on short notice.

This legislation is good for employees and their families but it is also good for employers.

Companies with erratic schedules have much higher employee turnover and employees who are much more likely to just walk away or quit when given the opportunity. Turnover is costly. Experienced workers are more productive; disgruntled employees are more likely to drag their feet. The process of hiring new workers takes time and effort; reviewing applications, interviewing possible hires and training them takes up staff time. In an age where workers are quitting their jobs in great numbers (in no small part, to find a job with better wages and schedules), these costs can add up quickly.

A few years ago, The Gap, conducted an internal experiment. A few of their stores changed how they scheduled workers, posting their schedule two weeks in advance, making shifts more stable. The results were clear and immediate: stores with predictable schedules had much lower employee turnover, had marked increases in productivity (5%, unheard of in retail) and saw on average a 7% sales increase, way ahead of the industry norm. Employees loved the changes and managers enjoyed both spending less time dealing schedules and having much happier workers.

Other companies, like Walmart, have followed suit in recent years, giving workers more stable schedules. Treating workers with respect is not just a matter of economic fairness or a moral imperative, but also happens to make

good business sense.

The industry, however, has been slow to change.

House Bill 5353 will largely adopt the practices pioneered by The Gap and others of two-weeks advance notice for schedules. The proposed bill is similar to regulations already in effect in Seattle, Chicago, New York and Oregon that have had an immediate positive effect on workers - and has helped businesses retain and promote talent. Fair Workweek will give workers the stability they deserve - and make Connecticut businesses stronger in the process.

The writers are members of the East Hartford town council

Caption: The Connecticut General Assembly is considering legislation that would provide retail and food employees with reasonably predictable work schedules and compensation for being on-call. Wangkun Jia /Getty

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