

24-48 versus 48-96 Work Schedules

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Research on family distress among shiftworking households, including firefighters, have revealed that the offtime pattern of the shift employees' work schedule is the most significant determinant of family well-being. In other words, is the firefighter at home and positively interacting with his/her spouse, children and other family members often enough and for long-enough duration to be a viable family member?

There are four key aspects of offtime schedules to consider. The first is the amount of **consecutive hours available to be a fully-present, active family member**. In the 24-48 schedule, many firefighters report that they have only one evening out of every three to interact with their family members, free of worries about preparing for the next on-duty day. By comparison, the 48-96 schedule provides three evenings out of each 6-day schedule cycle when the firefighter can attend to his/her family unencumbered by work concerns.

Two other offtime factors are the **amount and frequency of weekend offtime** afforded by the work schedule. With so many North Americans living in dual-earner households, where the non-shiftworking spouse most often has a weekday, Day-shift job, weekends increasingly have become "prime time" for families. In this regard, numerous surveys have shown that family members prefer full weekends off as compared to split weekends where either Saturday or Sunday are scheduled offdays but not both. Full weekends typically enable families to travel away for recreation or visits with nearby family or friends, without children having to miss school or the spouse having to miss work. In comparing the 24-48 and 48-96 schedules on weekend offtime patterns, there is no doubt that the 48-96 schedule provides better quality weekends for firefighters and their families. First, with respect to Friday-night offtime patterns, firefighters on the 48-96 schedule work two Friday nights and then have four consecutive Friday nights off. This Friday-night offtime pattern enables shift employees to engage with their children's school sports teams, most of whom play on Friday nights, for more consecutive weeks than does the 24-48 schedule. This opportunity is particularly valuable at the end of each sports season when post-season championship games are played in succession. As to Saturday and Sunday, the 48-96 schedule requires firefighters to work one full weekend out of every six (17%). However, this missed weekend is surrounded on either side by five consecutive weeks where the firefighter has one or both weekend days as off-duty days. Moreover, the trade-off benefit in this schedule is that 50% of the weekends or three consecutive weekends out of every six are full 2+day weekends off. Contrasted with the one 2-day weekend off out of every three (33%) provided by the 24-48 schedule, there clearly is more weekend

family time available on the 48-96 schedule.

The last offtime factor to consider is the **consecutive time spent away from spouse and children**. There is no doubt that a 48-hour on-duty assignment results in more consecutive time away from family members than a 24-hour on-duty assignment. In those families where there is high dependency on the firefighter for security, care and/or maintenance needs, the longer time away from the family will create heightened distress for both the family and the firefighter. In families where the non-shiftworking spouse functions with more independence, the consecutive offtime afforded by the 48-96 schedule will be viewed as more beneficial and valuable to the family unit, offsetting the negative feature of greater consecutive work time. Thus, the importance of this consecutive work time will vary based on internal family dynamics.