

Working Better:
A managers' guide to...

Flexible Working

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This guide is designed to help business managers discover and implement innovative working methods which improve productivity and customer service, save money, and enable employees to balance their work and personal lives.

Introduction

Your people are critical in ensuring customer satisfaction and delivering value. They are usually more committed and motivated to achieve what the business needs when they have flexibility in their working arrangements.

Giving employees greater control over how, when or where work is done requires a flexible, open-minded attitude from managers at all levels. It is not a soft option or a matter of 'just being nice'. It is a business challenge. How you, as a manager, respond to demand for new working patterns, and how you introduce them, will determine how successful they are for your business and your people.

Introducing and managing new ways of working may seem daunting. But experience shows that it does not have to be that way and the rewards of doing it well can be huge. Taking the first step may be the most difficult part. This guide is here to help you.

The guide covers:

- The **business benefits** that firms can achieve
- **Key principles** for introducing flexibility
- Advice on **creating a flexible workplace**
- **Key management skills** required
- **Case studies** of innovative working in large and small firms
- A **problem-solving Q&A** for challenging situations



Section 1

Business Benefits

Britain's labour market depends on flexibility for success. British companies, especially small and medium-sized businesses, have a reputation for client-centred service.

Cost pressures, especially in tough economic conditions, mean that businesses must ensure all their staff are motivated and focused on creating value while at work. Holding onto experienced and skilled staff is also important to maintain quality and contain costs.

Building on this, the best employers recognise the benefits of two-way flexibility to ensure they can provide quality services when customers need them. New ways of working have spread rapidly over the past decade, driven by the demands of the 24/7 economy and technological advances.

There is also legislation to help people manage their jobs and caring responsibilities. Parents' top priority for improving work life balance is to have a wide range of flexible jobs. The law gives the 'right to request' flexible working to parents of children up to and including the age of 16, parents of disabled children up to 18, and carers of adult relatives.

Employers must consider requests seriously and give objective business reasons if they have to turn them down.

More employers are now voluntarily taking action to encourage new ways of working, not because of the regulations but because flexibility is widely seen as good business practice that can benefit companies and employees. They are making alternative working arrangements available to **all** their staff when there is a good business case for doing so. This helps to create a fairer working environment for everyone. It also gives managers a powerful tool to respond to both customers' and employees' needs.

Case Study

An adaptable business model

West Bromwich Tool and Engineering Company

This Midlands engineering business, with a turnover of around £6million, is part of the car industry supply chain and has to respond quickly to changing customer demands.

‘Our employees have to respond to our needs by being flexible,’ says owner Stuart Fell. ‘They also need us to give them flexibility because they have families and relatives and live in the real world.’

The firm makes pressed metal components, such as parts for instrument panels and seats, for large manufacturers like BMW and Nissan that operate 24 hours a day. They employ about 100 people with nearly 50 different working arrangements that change over time, as a result of regular discussions between staff and supervisors.

‘On paper, it seems very complicated, but it works very well and the company and employees each get what they need,’ says Fell. ‘Most importantly, this adaptable and ever changing arrangement has proved to be capable of producing high performance and is not complicated to manage. I could name employees who would not work for us were it not for the flexibility we offer. I also know there is business we have won because we have been able to respond quickly to a customer demand.’

The two-way dialogue with employees proved helpful when the firm had to move to a four-day week, putting everyone on 80 per cent pay, for three months during the 2009 recession. ‘It comes down to having a relationship that’s based on trust. When we told them these were extraordinary circumstances and things were bad, they really understood that it was serious and necessary and believed that we were telling the truth.’



Stuart Fell, Owner,
West Bromwich Tool and
Engineering Company

‘I also know there is **business we have won** because we have been able to respond **quickly** to a **customer demand**.’

The business has four shifts on the shop floor, where some employees start at 6am and others finish at 10pm. Three team leaders, two men and a woman, are contracted to work 39 hours per week. At least one must be on site until 5pm and has to be available to respond instantly if a customer calls out of hours with a problem – which can be at any time of the day or night. In return, they can vary their start and finish times to fit in with their personal lives.

The firm's 12 clerical workers have a wide range of start and finish times, and some work term-time only, to suit their circumstances and the needs of the business. The firm's three directors also work a variety of hours. Two are full-time and one part-time.

Not every proposed arrangement is workable, and flexibility has to involve both sides. 'Sometimes people need to come in early or stay late to get something done,' says Fell. 'The team leader has to have a constant dialogue with the team and find a way to make it work.'

Employees approach their supervisors if they want to vary their hours, and between them they come to an arrangement. 'It's something I encourage because it works and people value it. On occasions we have consciously made suggestions to people to work flexibly.'

The firm offered flexibility to one engineer when he and his wife started a family – even before he realised he might need it. 'We thought: we don't want to lose him to a competitor. If we offer him flexibility, he's going to have a job he can't replicate because, particularly for men, most employers don't offer flexibility.'

Fell says it is crucial for companies to adapt to the wider changes around them. 'We're moving from a command-and-control society to one where people will expect to be flexible. It's a big, long process but one which managers need to be tuned into. The organisations that don't adapt will end up the dinosaurs. They won't be able to move fast enough or recruit people to work for them.'

Key lessons:

- Flexibility is a two-way arrangement
- Business and customer needs come first
- Support from the top is essential
- Clearly define people's objectives
- Delegate rather than control
- Start with a trial period to see if it works

Response to economic ups and downs

There is extensive evidence of the business benefits of new ways of working in both benign and tough economic times (see ‘How business benefits’ page 10). Flexible working arrangements can cut costs, boost productivity, motivate people and release more potential. Most employers who have introduced flexible working say it has had a positive impact on the business, according to a British Chambers of Commerce survey.

Many companies have used flexibility creatively to respond to recession, enabling them to cut costs while retaining skilled staff. This avoids the expense of hiring and training people again when the economy recovers.

Reduced-hours working in its many different forms (part-time, job share, term-time working etc) can be used to redistribute work across more posts and avoid redundancies. For example, electronics and audio company Richer Sounds encourages its staff to move to a four-day week when business is slower.

Businesses can struggle to keep staff engaged and loyal when wages and bonuses are frozen. Offering more time off – even at the expense of pay – can be a way to maintain morale.

In the 2009 recession, nearly two-thirds of employers were introducing or considering changes to working patterns – and using flexible working in particular – to cut costs and retain staff, according to a CBI survey. Here are some examples:

- Most staff at **KPMG**, one of the big accountancy firms, volunteered to work a four-day week or to take a sabbatical on reduced pay if necessary, so the firm could avoid big job cuts.
- **Fairline**, a luxury yacht builder, asked some employees to work a two-day week temporarily, while offering them 60 per cent of normal pay on non-production days.
- The **Financial Times** newspaper offered staff an extra week or more of holiday at 30 per cent of pay.
- **Honda** closed its Swindon car factory for four months. When workers returned, they agreed to cuts in pay and hours.
- Law firm **Norton Rose** asked staff to volunteer to work four-day weeks or take sabbaticals on reduced pay to avoid job losses. Most agreed, and hundreds moved to shorter weeks.

How Business Benefits

If managed well, flexibility leads to:

Better performance:

- Increased efficiency and productivity
- Improved customer service cover
- Staff understanding each other's roles better
- Greater employee satisfaction and loyalty

Cost savings:

- Higher staff retention, lower recruitment and training costs
- Reduced absenteeism, overtime and workplace stress
- More efficient use of office space

Better people management:

- Enhanced reputation as an employer
- Access to new talent pools
- Better succession planning

Environmental benefits:

- Less commuting by employees working from home or satellite offices



Case Study


Measurable results

BT

BT is a pioneer of flexible working, having introduced it more than 20 years ago as a business strategy. Over 75,000 of its 86,000 UK employees work flexibly in some way, from senior managers to contact centre employees; nearly 17 per cent of staff work from home.

Flexibility has achieved these business results:

- Absenteeism **DOWN**: 20 per cent reduction among home-workers
- Travel **DOWN**: reduction of 1,800 years in employees' commuting time, saving 12million litres of fuel
- Office costs **DOWN**: £500million reduction in property portfolio
- Productivity **UP**: Home workers up to 30 per cent more productive than office colleagues
- Call-centre service cover **UP**: customers able to contact BT when convenient to them
- Quality **UP**: Home-based call centre operators give comparable or better quality responses than office colleagues



Helen Webb,
Retail HR Director,
Sainsbury's

‘Flexible working is paramount in retailing. We have to have conversations with people at least twice a year about moving their working hours to fit changing trading patterns. What’s important in these conversations is being very clear about the “why” without dictating the “how”.’

Section 2

Key Principles

To make a success of flexible working, follow these key principles, which apply to both employers and employees:

- **Flexibility is a business tool**

It is about managing the head count and workflow effectively to achieve results for the business. It works best when it improves performance and customer service. Get it right and it is a winner for the business, customers and employees.

- **Business and customers come first**

Everyone should be entitled to make a case for working flexibly, but there will be situations where a specific arrangement will not work because of commitments to customers. Where this is the case, look at other options that may work better for all sides. Manage client expectations from the outset.

- **Different arrangements work for different types of business**

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Rigid off-the-peg arrangements are less likely to work. The best working arrangements are tailored to the job and individual.

- **Flexibility involves give-and-take**

Responsibility for making it work must be shared by employees and managers. Together you need to assess opportunities and challenges in any proposed arrangement openly and honestly.

- **Leadership is essential**

You need to have buy-in from senior managers or directors to implement workable solutions that benefit the business. Individual managers must translate this support into tangible results for their teams.

■ **Additional resources can make it work**

Your role as a manager is crucial in securing the resources for change, if they are needed, for example by seeking additional IT equipment and support.

■ **Presence does not equal performance**

It is important to judge the performance of flexible workers by measurable results and outcomes, not by how many hours they work or how long they stay in the office.

■ **Arrangements are not forever**

New working patterns need to be flexible enough to respond to business requirements. In all cases you need to maintain a dialogue – both sides should keep the possibility of change alive through regular review.

■ **Flexibility can work for all**

Do not make assumptions about who will and who will not want to work flexibly. Most employees will respond positively for a range of reasons beyond childcare or other caring commitments.

■ **Avoid penalising people's careers**

Employees choosing flexible working should not suffer in terms of career development. Business need, performance and skills should be the basis for promotion. As new job opportunities arise, employees and managers should discuss and decide the location and hours of work required.

Case Study

Bakers rise to business challenge

Sainsbury's

Shoppers today want to be able to pick up a fresh loaf of bread at any time. Bakers in Sainsbury's stores mainly used to work fixed night hours so that warm bread was on sale only first thing in the morning, and intermittently through the day.

Responding to customer demand meant a change to the bakers' established hours, which had long fitted their personal lives.

One of the first stores to make the change was Camden, north London. Instead of suggesting or imposing a big change in working hours, store manager Ziggie Singh sat down with the 15 bakers and explained what the business was trying to do. He asked how they would achieve it if they were the management team.

Bakery manager Lawrence Ijejh and his team of bakers went away and came up with a flexible system of two to three baking shifts a day to maintain a regular supply of fresh bread. They also agreed to rotate their hours each week so that no team member had to change permanently to a new shift that did not suit them.

'It was more of a pull than a push style of management,' says Singh. 'We felt that making the bakers understand the reasons for the change was the most important factor in making them willing to accept the change. The key messages throughout the process were all about "improving the department and the service to our customers".'

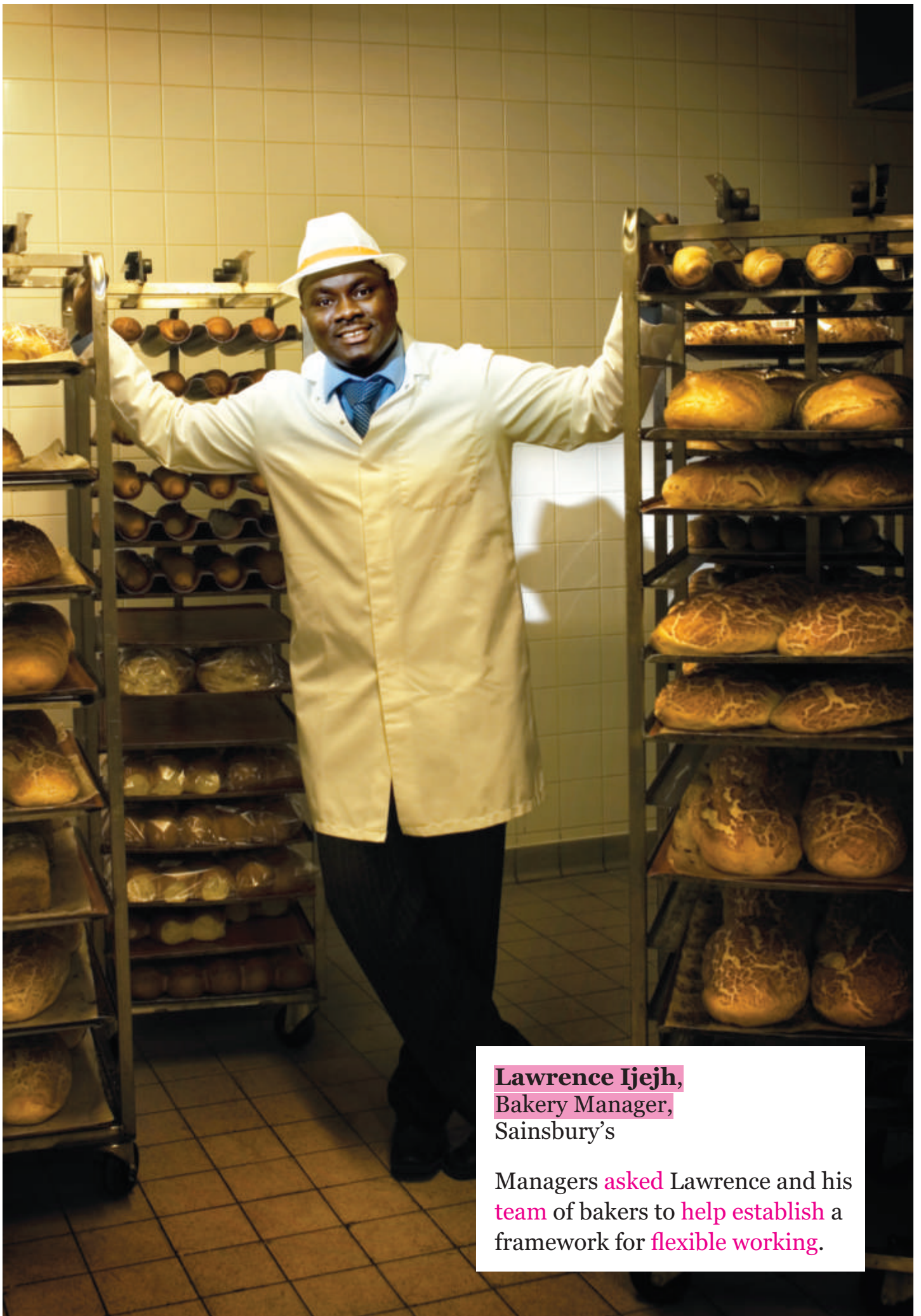
'We took their thoughts and feedback into consideration. The team members were encouraged to have quality debates, leading to insightful decisions. During the initial consultations, a framework was set up for the flexible working hours. This included two late shifts for each baker per week. Surprisingly, this was quite welcomed by the bakers as it gave them the opportunity to do something besides work when they were on late shifts, and the same when on early shifts. Being involved in the whole process made the bakers more enthusiastic about the change.'

After the change was made in 2007, bakery sales increased by more than 65 per cent in the first year. They are currently up 12 to 13 per cent year on year in the Camden store, says Helen Webb, Retail Human Resources Director for Sainsbury's. Employee satisfaction in the bakery has risen 10 per cent since the change, to 93 per cent.

'Camden was a catalyst and it's the example we've used in every bakery in the country, where we've made the same change,' says Webb. 'Flexible working is paramount in retailing. We have to have conversations with people at least twice a year about moving their working hours to fit changing trading patterns. What's important in these conversations is being very clear about the "why" without dictating the "how".'

The supermarket group has recently invested in developing managers' skills, with particular emphasis on the need to earn commitment and respect from colleagues. This means treating people as individuals, listening to them and involving them in change.

In difficult economic times, having a large, flexible workforce has an additional benefit, she adds. It enables the company to respond easily to requests for different working hours when employees' personal circumstances change. They may, for example, want to increase their hours if their partner has lost their job. 'In most cases that would be possible.'



Lawrence Ijeah,
Bakery Manager,
Sainsbury's

Managers **asked** Lawrence and his **team** of bakers to **help establish** a framework for **flexible working**.

Creating a flexible workplace



Section 3

Creating a flexible workplace

This section gives you the six key steps to introducing and managing flexible working successfully.

1. Where to start

- Whether it is an immediate business challenge, a longer-term improvement in performance, or an individual request for different working hours, greater flexibility can provide a solution.
- First identify the needs of the business, customers and staff, particularly in the part of the company that you manage. Could you achieve better results with more flexible working arrangements?
- You can see how employees might benefit but are not so sure about the business benefits. Ask yourself: would this help to attract and retain skilled staff and keep them motivated?
- Examine the way work is currently organised. Are there peaks and troughs which could be handled more efficiently with more or fewer employees available at different times?
- Could customer service be improved by longer opening hours, with employees staggering start and finish times? Could you save on office space or make better use of equipment by enabling employees to work remotely part of the time?

2. Making it happen

- Discuss the flexible approaches possible with the whole team and involve them in how work will be accomplished, customer needs met, and productivity maintained or improved, and what communication will be required.
- Give them the opportunity to make suggestions and raise concerns. They usually know what would work best, so explain what you want to achieve and ask the team to present ideas for change. Delegate, do not dictate.
- An effective approach is to give teams responsibility for devising their own flexible working solutions to achieve improvements for the business (see Sainsbury's page 15). As the manager, you will need to set the parameters – what cover is required, what mix of skills is needed at different times, how the team will communicate with each other, how problems will be resolved.
- You will need to build an open, trusting environment in which everyone feels they can benefit. You will need to manage and measure performance, provide feedback and communicate consistently, while keeping an eye on how to improve working arrangements further.

- Make sure you get support and permission to make changes to working patterns both from senior managers and individuals. You may need to make a business case for change, and for the necessary resources, to your senior team. It may also require careful negotiation with individuals who may be unwilling to change working patterns.
- Try a pilot first to gauge the benefits and iron out any problems before everyone commits to it.

3. Creating the right environment

- Businesses often find it works best to open up flexible options to everyone, not just those with young children or caring responsibilities. Arrangements based on the business case rather than an individual's personal circumstances can be fairer for the whole team. Remember, though, that employees who choose to follow the 'right to request' procedure must be treated in accordance with the legislation. (For more information on this, go to www.businesslink.gov.uk and look for 'Flexible working – the law and best practice', under the section Employing People – Work and Families.)
- Many businesses, particularly smaller ones, offer a great deal of informal flexibility, which is often important to individuals because of short-term changes to arrangements. This creates a positive climate in which employees are more likely to be flexible in return, for example by putting in extra time when things are busy. But there will be times when you need to formalise longer-term working arrangements, and a well-communicated, company-wide policy makes sense.

- You may believe a particular job cannot be done flexibly, but keep the options open for yourself and the individual. There may be an alternative work pattern which suits you both. If you turn down a request on business grounds, be clear about your reasons and prepared for the possible consequences. Try to find a compromise. If you are dependent on the employee, consider who has the skills to replace them in the event that they decide to seek work arrangements elsewhere better suited to their needs.

4. Measuring performance and results

- Clearly set out what you expect people to achieve, and to what deadline, whether for a short-term project or for their regular job. Discuss your expectations with them. Agree any core hours when they have to be in the workplace, how you will appraise and reward them, and how you will communicate with each other.
- You may need to redefine how you measure employees' effectiveness and productivity. Focus on what employees produce and the potential impact on customers, not on how many hours they spend at work.
- Set firm dates at the outset to review arrangements and ensure they are working for all concerned.
- Decide how to evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements, for example impact on customer relations, recruitment, absenteeism and productivity. Then work out a method for monitoring these and reporting back regularly both upwards and to the team.

- Managing remote workers does not have to be more complicated but does require consistency and transparency. Good management principles apply and you need to be confident you can manage what you cannot see. Be consistent in arranging and carrying out appraisals. People working away from base can feel isolated. Keep in regular contact, and involve them in social activities to maintain good relationships and to ensure they don't feel 'out of sight, out of mind'.
- Flexibility needs to work for all concerned and trust is the key. If you feel things are not working out for some individuals as well as they should be, tackle this head-on and resolve any problems quickly.

5. Communication

- Talk to all your staff and keep reviewing the arrangements. Do not be afraid to make suggestions for change – and do not assume that an individual's arrangements are set in stone.
- Have an open discussion about how flexibility affects people's responsibilities and how they can be contacted when they are away from the workplace. Keep customers and your managers informed of progress and seek feedback on the improvements you and your team have achieved.

6. Lead by example

- Changing culture in an organisation takes time. Work with other managers to structure senior jobs more flexibly and show it can be done. Use recruitment and promotion opportunities to redesign jobs and open them up to flexible working.
- If you're working flexibly yourself, you'll need to:
 - Make clear when and how you will be available – mobile, email etc – and what your team should do in an emergency
 - Set out what your expectations are of the team
 - Set an example by sticking to your flexible arrangement as far as possible
 - Delegate and trust people – think about who can deputise for you and how this could be a development opportunity for them

Case Study

Finding the right balance

National Grid

The Company Secretary's department, which services the board and top management, is not usually a flexible place. At National Grid, which runs gas and electricity transmission networks, Company Secretary Helen Mahy believes she is an exception in working flexibly and encouraging her team to do so.

'This is perceived as a traditional area and there's a view that you have to be where the board is and where the management and head office are,' she says. 'Yes, you do – but you don't all have to be there at the same time.'

Mahy, who in her dual role as Group General Counsel and Company Secretary has around 180 staff in the UK and US, works half a day each week from home during the winter to deal with domestic arrangements for a few hours before returning to work in the evening. 'If there was an emergency I wouldn't do it, but it helps my work-life balance and I keep my diary clear.'

A senior colleague she recently appointed also works from home from time to time. About half her UK team of 70, from recent graduates to more mature staff, have some type of formal or informal flexibility. This has helped to recruit and retain skilled people, she says.

There is a ground rule that someone must be in the office every day – so while many staff work flexibly, not everyone can work from home on Fridays.

Managers working flexibly must tread a fine line between being available and being a good role model, she says. 'There's a perception among employees that managers *say* they're working flexibly when in fact they're working all the time. You have to be quite disciplined and show them that the reason you're not in the office is because you need to do something else that day between 4pm and 6pm. So don't log in and check your emails until 6pm.'

The same applies to managing flexible workers. 'The key is setting the rules of engagement and abiding by them as a manager,' Mahy says. 'You may ask them if they'd mind checking their emails late one day, but don't expect them to do it all the time. If they start doing it all the time, stop them. Conversely, if people are abusing flexibility, you have to come down very hard on them and be seen to be doing so.'



Helen Mahy, Company Secretary,
National Grid

‘The **key** is to **trust people** to **work responsibly**.’



Syd Nadim, Chief Executive,
Clock

‘We’re in the top 100 new digital agencies, we’re **successful** and we’re **making money** while creating an environment for people to **enjoy their lives.**’

Section 4

Key management skills

This section is to help you think about the skills you have and the key skills you may need to develop in order to manage people flexibly.

■ Communication skills

You need to keep talking to people, whether or not they are in the workplace all the time. Asking them how things are going and seeking their views on business challenges will show you continue to value their contribution. Good communication is needed to negotiate change, review work arrangements and suggest improvements.

■ Planning and organisation

As a manager, you are responsible for meeting business goals and getting results. The organisation of resources is your direct responsibility and control remains with you. With a team working different schedules, you need to plan meetings carefully and find times when you know everyone can be present. Try using video-conferencing or teleconferencing if it is hard to get everyone together. You may need to agree core daily hours, or a fixed time each week when everyone is expected to be there for meetings and handovers.

■ Managing by output

It is important to set clear expectations and objectives and check regularly on people's progress in meeting them, but not to 'micro-manage' them. Measure their performance on outcomes rather than the hours they spend at work. Avoid judging them on their reasons for working flexibly, provided they get the job done. (See IBM case study page 30.)

■ Trust and delegation

Some managers feel they are losing control if employees are not under their watchful eye. Flexibility involves giving individuals responsibility and trusting them to get on with the job. (See Clock case study page 26.) You may need to delegate responsibility for how results are achieved – what matters is that you get the right results.

Case Study

Fair rules for everyone

Clock

Clock is a small, award-winning digital agency employing about 30 people. Most of the employees are men and most work flexibly. The firm designs and builds websites, develops brands and creates online marketing campaigns for companies including BBC, Channel 4, Football Pools, JD Wetherspoon and News International.

Based in Hertfordshire, Clock finds it can pay its highly skilled people lower salaries than some of its competitors because it offers them a better quality of life. The flexible working arrangements are a powerful recruiting and retention tool: the firm has only had five leavers in 11 years.

It operates 'core hours' of 12 pm to 2 pm to ensure most people are in the office during the daytime. Apart from that, individuals are given objectives and deadlines and the freedom to achieve these the way they think best. Clients may contact them on their mobile phones. Flexible hours mean the office is staffed from 8am to 9pm.

Web designer Rob Arnold was able to work remotely while completing his

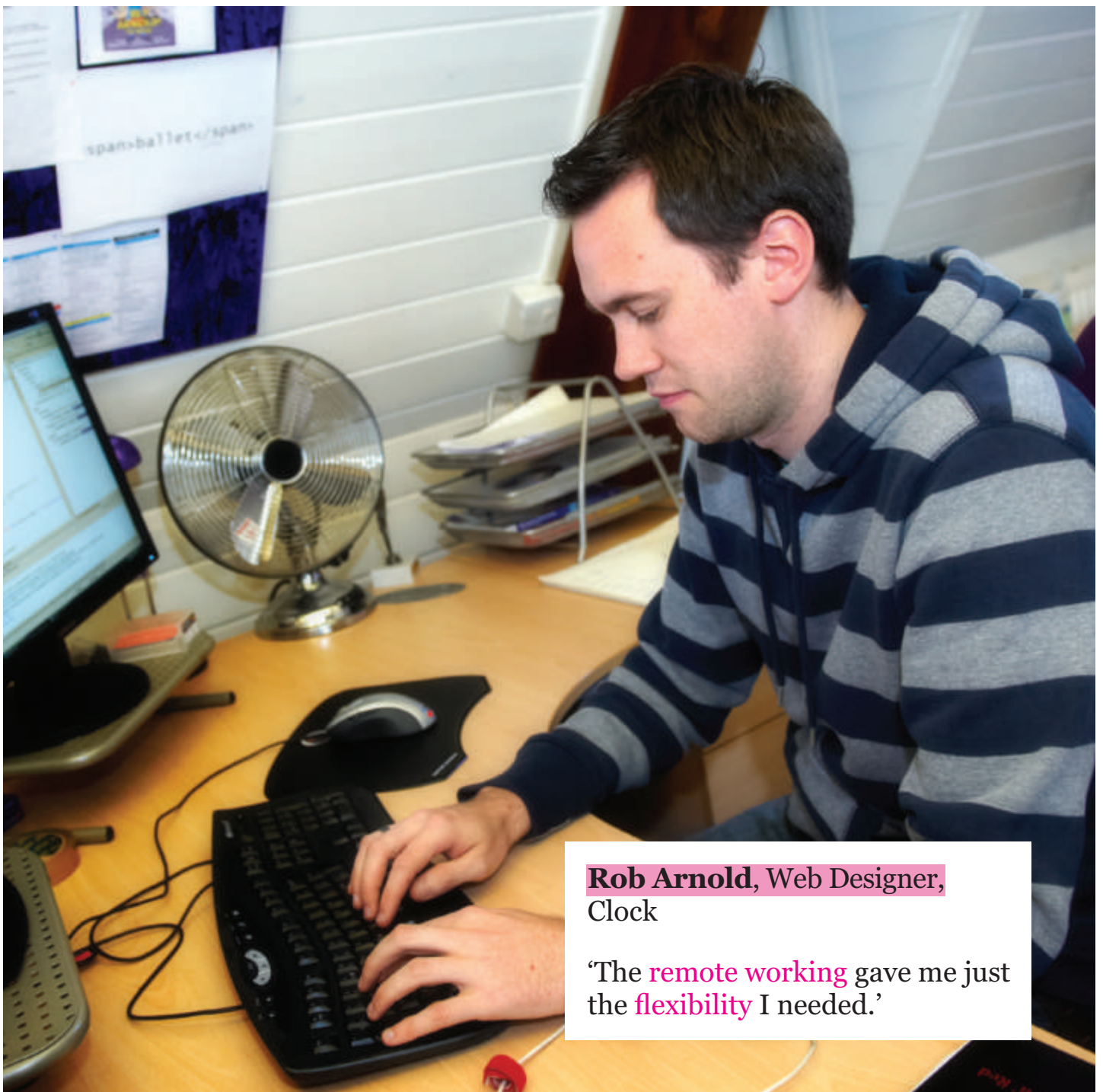
university degree. 'The remote working gave me just the flexibility I needed, I was treated like a person and given responsibility which gave me the opportunity to shine.' He has since been promoted to studio manager.

Everyone is equipped with a laptop and broadband at home so they can work there when necessary, for example while waiting for a special delivery. Syd Nadim, Chief Executive, says flexibility is good for his clients, the business and employees. 'We're in the top 100 new digital agencies, we're successful and we're making money while creating an environment for people to enjoy their lives.'

With government funding, Clock invested in advice from Business Link Hertfordshire to draw up policies on flexible working, part-time working, remote working, and career breaks / sabbaticals. 'One of the biggest challenges is perceptions of fairness,' says Nadim. 'If one person gets one thing, other people say "Why can't I have that?" Having policies makes it fair, workable, replicable and enforceable.'

He recommends:

- Making sure everyone in the team understands that his or her working arrangement, whatever it is, impacts on everyone else.
- Trusting people and giving them responsibility. 'If you really trust people and really rely on them, they are more reliable and trustworthy. If they know you don't really trust them and you've got a "plan B", it's easier for them to let you down,' he says. 'Let go and watch how well other people can deliver and perform.'
- Being firm and fair in applying the rules: if someone abuses your trust, take swift action to show them and the team this behaviour is not acceptable.



**Rob Arnold, Web Designer,
Clock**

'The **remote working** gave me just the **flexibility** I needed.'

Section 5

Flexibility for everyone in all types of jobs

People often think of flexibility as something for working mothers. In reality, it takes many forms, benefiting businesses in a wide range of sectors and individuals at every stage of their lives or careers.

Demand for flexible working is growing. Customers want responsive service, often round the clock. More and more employees want balanced lives – fathers as well as mothers, older as well as younger workers, people who are caring for relatives, and people who want time to pursue further study or a personal hobby or interest.

Some jobs appear more suited to flexible working than others. However, even jobs that have to be done at fixed times or in fixed places can accommodate forms of flexibility that work for the business and employees.

When considering new working patterns, first ask yourself:

- **WHEN** does the work have to be done? Does it have to be done at a particular time of day to respond to customer needs or production processes? Or can it be done at any time, provided certain objectives or targets are met?

- **WHERE** does the work have to be done? Does it depend on being in a specific place, or could it be done anywhere, provided the employee has the necessary IT and other resources to keep in contact and deliver to target?

Here are three **innovative examples** of how flexible working can be applied differently in different sectors and types of jobs:

Axiom: No fixed abode

The legal profession has a reputation for long hours and inflexibility. Yet legal work often does not need to be tied to a place or time. Technology has encouraged the emergence of new firms like Axiom Legal, which provides tailored services for corporate clients in the US and UK but has no big offices and few overheads. Its lawyers have flexibility about the clients and projects they take on, and whether they work from home or clients' offices. Axiom says the low overheads mean its fees are about half what a traditional firm would cost, making them more competitive.

McDonald's: Shift swapping

To help employees juggle work and family life, McDonald's launched a Family Contract in 2006, enabling two family members who work in the same restaurant to cover each others' shifts without prior notice. The scheme was extended to friends in 2007 and re-launched as the Friends and Family Contract.

BT: Phone home

Call centre operators do not have to be in call centres. In Scotland, BT has transferred some call servicing to employees based at home, where they are equipped with telephone and internet connections. This 'homeshoring' provides employment for people unable to go out to work, for example carers or disabled people. The home-workers do several short shifts a day, with breaks in between, which respond to typical peaks and troughs in customer calls.



Case Study

Small price for freedom

IBM

IBM has more than 115,000 mobile employees around the world. Managers have to be adept at communicating with people they do not see on a daily basis.

Alison Gregory is a Senior Managing Consultant in IBM's Human Capital Management Service in the UK. She has lots of experience managing people across different locations. As a senior manager, she also works flexibly herself to have time with her three children.

'Managing people who work flexibly or remotely means that you just have to do more of what you should be doing anyway,' she says. 'You have to be more focused on outcomes, better at communication, more explicit about your expectations, more regular about checking that work is going the right way. You might have to schedule short, but more frequent, calls to chat with somebody working for you in another place. Team communication won't happen by accident when you walk by someone's desk, so you have to create that time deliberately.'

She says it is important to give people responsibility. 'I have often said: "it is up to you when, where or how it is done – so long as it is on time, it is good and the client is happy".'

She is flexible about her personal working arrangement. She usually works three days a week, but sometimes has to work five to meet business needs. 'I will swap those extra days for time off in the school holidays, which is helpful to my family, so it is a win-win.'

She feels a responsibility to be available to her team. 'I always tell them to call me if they need something that cannot wait until Monday, but they only call me on my days off perhaps 10 to 20 times a year. Sometimes it takes less than five minutes to clarify an issue, sometimes I have a much longer discussion. It is my way of ensuring that my flexible schedule doesn't have any negative impact on the team's performance – which means that I can continue to work flexibly. Keeping my phone with me is a small price to pay for the freedom I have in return.'



Alison Gregory,
Senior Managing Consultant,
IBM

‘I have often said: “it is **up to you** **when, where or how** it is done – **so long as it is on time**, it is **good** and the **client is happy**”.’

Section 6

Problem-solving Q&A

Common concerns for employers and managers are:

- The likely cost of introducing new ways of working
- Whether employees will act responsibly
- How customer service will be affected

Here is a Q&A featuring different situations to help you think through your approach to new ways of working, to consider the needs of the business, customers and staff, and to find solutions that work for everyone.

Q1. We are only a small business with limited resources. Isn't flexible working a luxury we can't really afford?

A1. Introducing flexibility does not have to cost a lot. Flexibility is rarely expensive and often the simplest changes have the most impact.

Many smaller businesses already work quite flexibly and so you may have already introduced different ways of working without any significant cost implications.

Working flexibly is not just about working remotely or from home it also works for those who have to be in a fixed place, a factory or office (see West Bromwich case study page 6). It's not about a major capital investment, it's about how you plan and organise work to get the best out of your resources.

Q2. If I let employees work from home or work non-standard hours, I cannot control what they do. I am not sure I can trust them to carry out the work. What should I do?

A2. As with any employer-employee relationship, you need to establish an element of trust. It is however often the case that employees who have been offered the opportunity to work flexibly become more loyal to their employer and are willing to 'go the extra mile' in return.

If you're worried about their performance, tackle that first. Otherwise, the blame for any subsequent failure of the new arrangements will be wrongly attributed to flexibility rather than to performance. That would jeopardise future efforts to introduce greater flexibility.

If there are no performance issues, what's holding you back? Start with a pilot if you are unsure. You will most likely be pleasantly surprised by the results. However, if anyone abuses the arrangement, you must deal with that swiftly and decisively for the sake of the business and the employees who are playing by the rules.

Q3. I am busy running my business unit under heavy cost-cutting pressure. I have one person on 80 per cent hours, another on a three-day week, and a third working term-time only. This adds considerably to my workload. Are there any shortcuts?

A3. If you manage these people the same as anyone else in your team, including setting objectives and monitoring outputs, this should not add to your workload. Maybe you can adjust the way you manage people so that it is less time-consuming for you. Weigh up the time it takes you against the productivity you get from your flexible employees – it may be time well spent.

Q4. I know several of my team would like alternative working arrangements, but our clients would not be happy. How can I reconcile these things?

A4. It is important that any changes work for your clients. Quite often, clients are also grappling with flexible working, and sharing experiences with others can be very helpful.

Clients need certain things to happen at certain times. If your team can work flexibly together, they may be able to ensure these requirements are met, and be happier and more productive themselves.

Agree what the essential requirements are and see how you can meet them within the team. Could some staff be on call, without having to be in the workplace? Then take your proposals to your clients.

Q5. I want to offer flexible working to my staff. But there are seven people with young children in our workforce of 17 and I am worried how our small business will cope if they all want to work at different times. What should I do?

A5. Be open and honest about the business needs with the whole team.

Ask for their input in planning how work could be done differently. Consider what are the essential times that must be covered and think about the type of work that needs to be done. Some jobs lend themselves to working at home or can be done outside traditional hours, while others are best done when the office is less busy, for example systems maintenance.

Your staff may think of ideas you have not considered. You may have employees who would prefer to work at different times, days or seasons from others. Employees with no children might prefer to work during school holidays and take more time off during term-time.

You can, of course, refuse a request if it will adversely affect your business. However, by involving staff, most employers can find a solution that works for everyone.

Q6. A key employee wants to change her working hours so she can do a course in business administration. I do not believe her job can be done flexibly and I want her to be in the office between 8am and 4pm when we face the main workload of the day. What is the answer?

A6. Have you asked her when she can be in the office? Perhaps she can cover these core hours, but take some unpaid leave when she has course assignments to complete. How would you normally cover for her if she was on holiday?

Try to negotiate a compromise. She is a valued employee and you risk losing her if you are completely unable to accommodate her request. Whatever compromise is reached, it must work for her, the wider team, the business and your customers.

How about a trial period for her working different hours? She will be keen to make it work. Will you?

Q7. I am keen to encourage flexibility in my team, but I do not have the support of senior management. What should I do?

A7. Senior management backing is important. Try to understand their concerns. Are they about control, or cost, or quality? Is it just fear of the unknown?

What are the essential business requirements that you and your team have to meet? Can you demonstrate to senior management that they can be met by working flexibly? Work out the benefits to the company – reduced staff turnover and training costs, increased productivity, perhaps less office space required. Spelling these out should help you to win their support. You may then be able to run a trial in one area to test the benefits. You could also talk to customers who have made it work, share this information with senior management, and give them a copy of this guide.

Q8. I have just agreed to one of my staff working a more flexible schedule to accommodate his family responsibilities. Other employees have been complaining there is one rule for him and another for the rest. How can I be fair to everyone?

A8. Flexible working will only be a business benefit if it is consistent and fair across the whole organisation.

First, it is important to have clear and rational criteria that apply to all cases. Second, ensure that you and your

employee have worked out how to cover for any time when he is not available, so that his workload does not fall unfairly on others. Third, consider if there are business barriers to others working flexibly and, if there are, whether they can be overcome.

If you have done all these, you can address complaints fairly; explaining what the eligibility criteria are and what cover has been agreed. You will also have the information to consider and approve other requests – or to refuse them if they would adversely affect the business – and to negotiate compromises where necessary.

Q9. To get on in this firm, you have to give a bit extra. Two of my team work reduced hours and I don't feel I can ask them to take on more. At the same time, I may be denying them the opportunity to shine and win promotion. What's the answer?

A9. Talk to them. Explain your dilemma and see what they suggest. Do not ringfence your flexible workers and treat them differently from the rest of the team as they may grow to resent this and you could be penalising them for working flexibly.

You may find that at this stage in their career they just want to carry on doing their current role. Or they may want promotion, in which case talk to them about additional responsibilities they would be willing and able to take on to help them to make a promotion case.

If they wish to continue working reduced hours, the additional responsibilities could be proportional. For example, if a full-timer takes on responsibility for building two additional account



relationships, perhaps your part-timer need only build one additional account.

Q10. One employee is sticking rigidly to her special working arrangement and threatening a grievance dispute if I pursue my request for her to alter it slightly. What should I do?

A10. ‘Inflexible flexibility’ is a problem. Consult your HR department – or at least make sure you are familiar with the grievance process in your organisation. Decide whether her behaviour would be acceptable in someone working standard hours.

Then sit down with her and explain clearly why you need her to be flexible. Ask her what is causing her concern. Does she have particular commitments to meet, or

does she fear an attempt to change her hours is the thin edge of the wedge and that you might want to make her work full-time again? You may be able to allay her concerns or reach a compromise.

Q11. My team is increasingly working flexible hours and meeting deadlines independently. They seem happy. As the team leader, though, I fear that my job will become superfluous. Am I right to worry?

A11. It sounds as if you are doing a great job. It is likely that flexibility is successful in your team because of your skills, not despite them. Just make sure that you share the credit and make your boss aware of the great job that you and your team are doing. Are you ready to take on new responsibilities? If so, this success could be part of your case for promotion.

Case Study

Pilot leads to widespread change

Addleshaw Goddard

Addleshaw Goddard is a UK law firm with offices in London, Leeds and Manchester. Over half of the 1,300 employees are lawyers, and 60 per cent of all staff are women.

The firm aims to provide the best possible service to clients while promoting a working environment where people are valued for their skills and the results they produce, and not for where, when and how they work.

Flexible working is available to everyone. Over 16 per cent of staff have formal flexible working arrangements such as reduced hours, job-sharing and term-time working. Many more work flexibly on an informal basis, for example working from home sometimes.

Among the partners, 11 per cent work flexibly, more than half of them women. Some members of the governance board, nearly 40 per cent of whom are women, work flexibly.

The process:

There is no fixed approach to flexible working. Instead, the firm looks at the needs of the client, the firm, the team and the individual.

It embarked on assessing how flexibility could work in practice by launching a 'Pathfinder' pilot group of 15 volunteers in 2007. This initial group included partners, associates, trainees, secretarial and support staff. They switched permanently to a new way of working, moving into a desk-sharing area of the office with full IT support (laptops, Blackberries, mobile phones, printers, scanners) to enable them to spend more time working from home, clients' offices and other sites.

Flexible working has now been rolled out in many areas of the business. In August 2009, the firm started working in a totally open plan, flexible environment when it moved to a new building in London, where about a third of the staff is based.

Managers are given comprehensive support and guidance when assessing a formal flexible working application. The firm has created a culture where flexible working is seen as a business tool, not a concession for those wishing to work part-time or for those with caring responsibilities.

The results:

- Flexible working fitted in well with the firm's culture: people are used to working in teams spread across offices and to working remotely.
- Service standards have been maintained and in some cases improved where people work flexibly.

- Talented individuals are choosing to join the firm and flexible working is contributing to this: half of the externally hired partners recruited in the last two years have been women.

Lessons:

- Good communication is essential. The firm uses its internal website, The Source, to educate its people about the benefits of flexible working and to highlight role models.
- Measure the take-up of flexible working and feed this back to senior management and board meetings to ensure the business benefits are tracked and understood.

Section 7

The impact on employees

The impact on individuals of being able to work flexibly cannot be underestimated. For some, it literally means the difference between working and not working. For most people, it transforms their ability to cope with the often-conflicting demands of work and home. Even relatively small changes to working patterns that enable greater autonomy can improve people's health, enjoyment and sense of being valued.

Four individuals tell their stories below:

Time for the unexpected

Dharmbeer Omparkash had been working full-time for his Midlands-based employer for less than a year when his brother in Australia asked him to travel to India to help him organise three family weddings.

Omparkash, 50, a press operator at West Bromwich Tool and Engineering Company, needed three weeks off to make the trip to help with the Hindu festivities. However, he had not accumulated enough annual leave to take such a long break.

The company nevertheless gave him the time off, most of it unpaid, so that he could fulfill his family duties. When he returned to Britain, he was ill for a week, so he was away from work for four weeks altogether.

'The company was very, very helpful,' he says, adding that it was 'fantastic' to be able to visit the Punjab, attend the weddings and see the Golden Temple at Amritsar. 'I usually spend holidays visiting my relatives around the UK. I hadn't been abroad since 1983.'

Fellow press operator Linda Britton has 17 grandchildren and sometimes needs time off at short notice to provide her children with emergency childcare.

Britton, 57, usually works a 2pm to 10pm shift at the press works, five days a week. 'If I need to change my hours for some reason, they've let me do that, and I make up the day at another time,' she says. 'A couple of weeks ago, I had to help with my grandson. I rang them up in the morning and they let me have the day off. If they need me to help them out at other times, I come in if I'm able to.'

She has been with the company for 14 years. 'I've worked quite a few places and this has been the best one for flexibility and helping you out. It's one of the reasons why I stay. Everyone knows one

another. It's like a big family. And the directors talk to you like people.'

Reduced hours revive lawyer's energy

After 25 years as a corporate lawyer, working long hours on mergers, acquisitions and joint venture transactions, Ian McIntosh wanted greater work-life balance and a change of role.

As he turned 50, he took advantage of an option to work flexibly at Addleshaw Goddard, the firm where he is an equity partner.



Dharmbeer Omparkash,
Press Operator, West Bromwich
Tool and Engineering Company



Linda Britton, Press Operator,
West Bromwich Tool and
Engineering Company

For years he had been working 14 to 15-hour days, including a lot of travel. In May 2009 he switched to a four-day week, reduced his transactions workload and took on a new role leading the development of the firm's offering to its financial services clients.

On Thursday evenings, he switches on his 'out-of-office' message. 'Officially I don't work Fridays and I make quite big efforts not to look at my Blackberry those days. My secretary, who really helps here, looks at my emails and phones me if there's something urgent.' If McIntosh has to work on a Friday, as happens occasionally, he takes a day in lieu.

Has it made a difference? 'Yes. I feel a bit fitter and healthier. I've done some swimming and cycling with my son. I've read books, listened to music and talked (and listened!) to my family more. I've

found I have a greater sense of energy and possibility, and also more urgency and achievement in the four days I work. I also get a bit more sleep.'

As a partner, he admits it's hard to switch off totally. Clients and other contacts sometimes phone his mobile on Fridays. 'The things they are talking to me about are really urgent for them, and that's the service the firm has to provide, but I'm sure we will evolve better how we cover that as a business.'

His working arrangement is still an exception in commercial law. 'There's a long hours – and strong service – culture and a sense that this is what's expected,' he says. 'However, the people I work with in the firm, whether it's partners or other staff, see it as a really good sign that the business is comfortable with me doing this.'



Ian McIntosh, Equity Partner,
Addleshaw Goddard

Flexible job helps disabled archivist keep working

Katherine Thomas works for the Welsh Assembly Government as equal opportunities adviser to the museums, archives and libraries of Wales. A qualified archivist, she has an energy impairment that means she can no longer work full-time and finds travel very tiring.

Trying to find a manageable job ‘was an absolute nightmare because so few organisations offer part time or flexible working in my field’, she says. She found her current job with the Welsh Assembly Government because it accepts part-time applications for full-time jobs. It also offers flexibility. While she had to relocate from Derbyshire to West Wales to secure suitable employment, the arrangement means that she can now pace herself, to her own and her employer’s benefit.

‘The Welsh Assembly Government’s attitude to part time and flexible working basically gave me a chance, when no one else would, and allows me to use the abilities I have, to benefit them, instead of forcing me into a position of unemployment or employment which is not commensurate with my abilities.’

‘With flexible working, I can do a really long day with travel when needed and have the next day off to recover. Over the month I will work my contracted hours. This works for me, and it works for them. I have been in post now for over four years and have never taken a day off sick.

‘It really is a win-win situation and I am aware of no other employers who would work with me in this way. The attitudes of most employers thus discriminate against me as a disabled person and also prevent them from accessing high quality potential staff who don’t “fit” their mould.’



Katherine Thomas, Equal Opportunities Adviser to the Museums, Archives and Libraries of Wales, Welsh Assembly Government

Section 8

Useful links

There are many sources of information on how to implement flexible working arrangements in detail. Here is a list:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission Working Better: www.equalityhumanrights.com/workingbetter
- Equality and Human Rights Commission Transformation of Work interactive guidance: www.equalityhumanrights.com/transformation-of-work
- ACAS: for guidance on flexible working see www.acas.org.uk
- Business Link: for a tool on what type of flexible working would suit your business, go to the section on 'Employing people'. The tool is called: 'Choose the right type of flexible working'. www.businesslink.gov.uk
- Working Families: see 'Lifecycles: building business success through effective employment practice' and also their interactive tool called Retune to help employees and managers shape new working arrangements for senior roles. www.workingfamilies.org.uk
- TUC 'Changing Times' website pages provide practical advice for employers on achieving a better work life balance in the workplace: www.tuc.org.uk/work_life
- WiseWork, consultants in flexible working: www.wisework.co.uk
- Workwise: a not-for-profit initiative, which aims to make the UK one of the most progressive economies in the world by encouraging the widespread adoption of smarter working practices: www.workwiseuk.org

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