



Flexible working: a smarter way to run a business?

What is flexible working? A number of surveys have revealed that more than 95 per cent of workers relate flexible working to having the ability to adapt their way of working, to suit both the employee and the employer.

Research indicates that more than 55 per cent of companies have introduced flexible working solutions for their staff.

In recent years, an increasing number of employers have reacted to social and economic changes – for example, the need for many families to have two earners - by introducing working patterns that enable employees better to balance their responsibilities to their jobs and their responsibilities to their home lives.

The effect of increased employment legislation also means that many more employees are now entitled to request more flexible working patterns.

However, introducing good work-home life practices benefits not only employees but also employers. By reducing the amount of stress that many workers feel attempting to juggle both careers and the demands of family life, employers can help to create a happier and, therefore, more productive working environment.

As well as boosting productivity, good work-home life arrangements can lead to better quality of work, a reduction in

sickness absence, increased staff loyalty and commitment (and, in turn, reduced recruitment costs) and higher workforce morale.

There are other advantages that can sharpen competitiveness. Properly managed, flexible working patterns can produce a more agile business, one better able to cope with fluctuations in demand and shifts in the market. Shift work and flexi-time, for example, allow a business to remain productive for longer without increasing the number of hours that individual employees work. Home working can help reduce office overheads.

Introducing work-home life policies

Before implementing flexible working policies, you should first assess your business needs and how these can be furthered by new working practices. The type of flexible working must also be considered: how does it fit both the operation of the business and the lives of the employees?



Business UPDATE

Employees ought to be consulted on any changes; this will help them appreciate the effects of particular flexible working patterns from their own point of view and from that of the business too.

Survey response?

What is the hardest part of implementing a flexible working strategy?

Reasons given include:

- Too expensive to implement and support
- Lack of knowledge/commitment at Board level
- Fear of fragmenting the team structure
- Lack of commitment from employees
- Senior management doesn't trust its staff to flexi-work
- Supplying/supporting resources needed by flexible workers

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Statutory flexible working regulations

Do you have the statutory right to request flexible working? Not everyone has a statutory right to flexible working as rights tend to relate to applying for a different working arrangement to help for the care of a child or an adult. The directgov website provides a series of questions (search flexible working) which will advise up-to-date indication as to statutory rights. Regardless of your statutory rights you can still ask your employer if you can work flexibly.

The request for flexible working

Although parents have the right to apply for a change in their work patterns, the law does not give them an automatic right to work flexibly. This is because employers will not always be able, through force of circumstance, to accommodate the changes asked for by working parents.

Employees should make their applications in writing. The first thing the employer should do on receiving a written application is to arrange a meeting with the employee. The meeting will give everyone the chance to discuss the employee's request for a new work pattern and to examine whether it can be managed by the business.

After the meeting, the employer should write to the employee either agreeing to or refusing the application. If the application is accepted by the employer, then that employee's terms and conditions may have to change accordingly. If the employer has turned down the request, then they must set out, clearly and briefly, the business grounds on which the proposed work pattern was not accepted. The employer must also explain the appeal procedure open to the employee.

Types of flexible working

There are various types of flexible working. Flexible working patterns can affect the number of hours employees work, the times they work and where they work. Which types best suit an employer will depend on the size and nature of the business and on its workforce.

Part-time

Part-time working is useful for covering breaks in the normal working day, extending working hours or covering peak or busy times.

Term-time working

This enables employees to cut back on their hours or to take paid or unpaid leave during school holidays.

Job sharing

A version of part-time working, job sharing involves dividing the duties and hours of a full-time position between two (or sometimes more) people.

Flexi-time

Flexi-time means that employees can decide when they start and finish work provided they work a number of core hours.

Compressed working weeks

The number of hours worked by an employee in a week are concentrated into fewer working days or longer blocks of working time. Although the total number of hours remains the same, by working early or late an employee can use the additional hours to take a morning, afternoon or whole day off work at some point during the week.

Staggered hours

Employees start and finish work at different times. Staff have the opportunity to re-arrange their work times while the employer can keep the business operational for longer.

Annual hours

The hours an employee works is calculated across a whole year, taking holidays and the number of contracted hours into account. Most of the hours are divided into a number of set shifts; the remaining hours can be used to work at short notice when, perhaps cover is needed to help with peaks in demand.

Zero-hours contracts

Workers agree to make themselves available for work when required but without setting a fixed number of hours or times.

Teleworking and homeworking

Employees work from home or from somewhere other than their employer's office or premises.

Summary

Not all businesses are necessarily in a position to offer their employees flexible working. Those that are, however, could find there are a number of benefits. And, with the nature of work changing and with the technologies available to employers developing all the time, they could well be helping to shape the workplaces and offices of the future.