

# Harnessing the Power of Flexible Working

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In 1930, Keynes predicted the working week would be significantly reduced, to 15 hours a week, due to the advancement of technology and the drive for people to want more leisure time. While we have seen growth in our working hours increase since then, the desire for balance continues. In the future, or indeed now, the impact of technology on knowledge workers will result in a change in the work we do; we are likely to work less. That is, less sifting through information, processing data and spotting patterns.... We should see this phenomenon as exciting, rather than daunting. We should adjust our value to the workplace to complement automation of processes and collaborate to develop solutions to improve productivity. Also, services should be cheaper as the supply chain shortens, therefore won't need to work as much.... we can enjoy life!

In order to achieve an effective transition to a flexible workplace, it is critical to ensure you have a sense of purpose. If you design and implement a policy enforced upon you by regulation, rather than establish the benefits and foresee the issues, the business will come unstuck. The result will be departures of talented staff or even litigation off the back of poorly implemented policy. Preparation and foresight into the challenges and benefits are paramount.

## The purpose – why are you doing this?

We are resistant to change; if it works, why change? Tradition has meant we are trapped in the Victorian model: the work we do, how we dress, behave – our biggest challenge to flexible working and the culture of the office. When people seem miserable en-route to work, is it work or do they resent going to an office the same time, every day?

## Communication

Communicating upfront is key. If not, both parties will be on the back foot. It will be clear you have thought through how flexible working with work and therefore be able to respond positively to requests and discussions on different working patterns. It is often forgotten, this is a negotiation and needs to work for both sides.

## Reward / Bonuses

The question of reward is often asked. Should bonuses be pro-rata according to the time worked or be awarded upon performance. This depends on the role. If the role is time dependant then yes; if performance and output focused, no, reward should be measured on results and outcomes. The model of reward purely on time spent at a workplace can be counterproductive to how well you perform and therefore outcomes.

## Is this a gender issue?

Flexible working began as a women's agenda, however we are seeing more men wanting to work differently. The new policy does not discriminate on gender nor reason for requesting flexibility, which is opening up requests for all manner of reasons. That said, men do find it difficult to legitimise their request, find it hard to get off the career ladder, largely down to their heritage, expectations of them in terms of career and family.



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## Be bold and proud..

It is important as we float toward this change of working practices, we identify where, when and how businesses and leaders are already doing it. It is recommended business be open about their attitude toward flexibility, promote the benefits and not hide behind it.

## Attracting and Retaining Talent

Be upfront and ask staff – how do you want to work? While not promising anything, if you don't know how best they could do their role, how can you agree objectives. This approach empowers your staff to have the conversation, one they might have wanted to, but afraid to.

Attracting talent – if flexibility is something you want to offer, include it in the job specification, what flexibility would work for the role or that flexibility will be considered. This results in strong loyalty because the role has been specifically designed for the candidate and suits their needs.

## Equipping Line Managers

Important for line managers to be equipped with the skills and training to have the conversations, not just to handle individual requests but to promote effectively how businesses are managing the workforce. This stems back to 'your purpose'. Business needs to be clear why they are doing this and why it is good for both parties.

## The Narrative - "Part Time"

There is a concern over the narrative of flexible working. What does part time mean? Are "part-timers" not as committed as full time employees? The question bears assessment of productivity rather than time. It is often reported that as part time, you do 5 days work in 3... The challenge to 'part time' is, the business can achieve more from the employee than they are wanting to allocate. If you agree to work 3 days per week and extra effort is needed, it is possible to increase your time. However, if you are full time / 5 days, "extra time / efforts" are limited – you basically run out of time in the week! Part time gives the individual flexibility and the business more latitude. The onus being on the 'part-time' employee to manage capacity to ensure they don't experience workload creep.

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*Sheffield Haworth Interim Consulting provides senior, flexible resourcing solutions. The demand has been fuelled by an increased appetite for experienced, accomplished professionals to work in an agile way, returning their skills and knowledge to their field of expertise. This in turn offers businesses a flexible solution to navigate their change agenda or looking for alternative ways to engage with senior talent without the long-term commitment.*

*Executive Shift is a charity supporting the use of flexible working for executive jobs so that talented individuals can contribute to business and get more out of life.*



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