

Making flexibility work

Practical ideas for small businesses

Many small and medium sized businesses and organisations have had to adopt flexible working arrangements to help them meet the needs of their customers and to get the job done. Now, there is an additional incentive to think about flexibility – increasingly employees are looking for flexibility to help balance and integrate their work with the rest of their life.

In some ways this helps employers and managers. Get it right and it is a win-win situation. But it can make managing flexibility more complex as there are more factors to think about. This is particularly true when profit margins are tight, where resources are limited and the nature of the work imposes quite specific requirements.

We asked a range of New Zealand businesses and organisations* to tell us how they made flexibility work for them. This booklet provides their practical and sage advice for owners and managers of other small and medium sized businesses. There is a range of ways to introduce and manage flexible working arrangements and the issues will be different for different organisations. So too are the solutions.

Not all of the ideas here will be relevant to you, but we are confident that you will find some ideas that will help you either strengthen some of your current management practices, or support you to try some new options.

Thanks

Many organisations generously shared what they have learnt about managing flexibility in the best interests of their business and their employee's work/life balance. We would like to thank them for their openness, their honesty and their hard won wisdom.

In particular we would like to thank:

George Henry and Co Ltd, Unity Books (Wellington) Ltd, Iko Iko, Amcal Cuba Mall Pharmacy, Brackenridge Country Retreat, West Coast Regional Council, ESOL Home Tutors (Wellington) Inc, The Chateau on the Park, Pedantic Maids Home Cleaning Service, Midas Car Care (Newtown), Starfish Ltd, Havana Coffee Works Ltd, Superior Industries Ltd, Marauni Surf Life Saving Café, Elements Café, Providore Food and Catering, Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce, Martinborough Vineyard Estates Ltd, SF Wellington and WellStop Inc. Thanks also to Top Drawer Consultants for preparing this booklet.

*The organisations were from the food and beverage, NGO, retail, business, health and personal service sectors. They employ between eight to 20 employees.

Department of Labour

TE TARI MAHI



April 2007

The content of this document is a guide only. It will not answer every question and should not be used as a substitute for legislation or legal advice. The Department of Labour takes no responsibility for the results of any actions taken on the basis of information in this booklet, or for any errors or omissions. For more information on work-life balance or other workplace related matters visit www.dol.govt.nz

ISBN 0-478-28102-1

Contents

Overview	1
What do we mean by flexibility?	1
Who needs flexibility in their working arrangements?	1
Why do employers choose to offer flexibility?	2
Key principles	3
Getting started	4
Things to think about	4
Making it work	5
Managing rosters	5
Managing time-in-lieu	6
Managing annual holidays	7
Managing parental leave	8-10
Managing part-time work	11-12
Managing job-sharing	13-14
Managing people working from home	15-16
Casual employees and relievers	17
Lessons Learnt	18
Set the scene from the beginning	18
Teamwork can make it easier	18
Keep track of what is agreed	18
Keep it fair and consistent	19
Keep an eye on things	19
When problems arise	20
Avoiding overload as the owner or manager	20
Avoid setting it in concrete too soon	21
Sometimes you have to say 'no'	21

Overview

What do we mean by flexibility?

There are two key elements to flexible working arrangements.

Hours and/or place of work are other than the traditional 40 hour week worked Monday to Friday, at the employer's place of business.

This might mean working more or less than the 40 hours a week, working variable hours, working non-standard hours e.g. late or early starts or working only parts of the year. It may involve working from home. These arrangements might be on an intermittent or regular basis. Employees may be working different patterns which reflect the work they do and their personal situation, rather than all employees working the same.

Employees have some ability to choose, negotiate or request specific work arrangements

This means that both the employer and the employee have some input into what hours the employee works and what leave they can take. This may be through reaching a mutual agreement on varying the number of hours worked at different times. It may be through the employee choosing which shifts they want to sign up for. It may be the team as a whole sitting down and working out what hours are the best fit for the work and the preferences of the team members. Or, it may be the employee signalling early their preference for when they take annual holidays, or a day off to attend a specific event.

Who needs flexibility in their working arrangements?

Many employees need flexibility in their working arrangements. The employers we talked to cited examples of:

- students
- people doing other work e.g. freelance photographer
- people serious about sport
- people with a range of family responsibilities including elderly relatives and partners with long term illnesses or disabilities
- people with their own health issues
- people on the Domestic Purposes Benefit or other benefits
- people with other interests e.g. need leave during the film festival
- people involved in the arts
- people moving towards retirement.

For some, flexible working arrangements mean that employment is now possible, whereas before it was all too difficult. For others, it provides the possibility of combining work with other aspects of their lives, rather than having to choose between them.

Overview

Why do employers choose to offer flexibility?

The employers we talked to said the benefits they have gained through offering flexibility include:

Getting and keeping the right staff

Offering flexibility has helped employers get and keep the right staff in a tight labour market.

If I couldn't get women with children, who can only work restricted hours, then I wouldn't have anybody.

A suburban restaurant owner explained that skilled people are sought after. To encourage their chef to work in the suburbs they try to give him all or some of the weekend off to be with his family.

To get the best people I need to give them as much freedom as possible.

I don't think that businesses like mine keep staff because of the wages – they are all about the same in our industry. It is about people thinking you treat them well and having respect for them.

Getting the best from staff

People are more committed and trustworthy when you have a personal relationship with them and treat them as whole people – and take their needs seriously. They feel that you care and take them seriously.

Getting flexibility in return

Most employers have times when they need flexibility from their employees. A rush order, wanting to extend opening hours, a sudden resignation or someone calling in sick. These employers found that they were more likely to get a positive response to requests for flexibility if they had an established track record of being flexible about employee's needs.

Better customer service

Good customer service is critical to most small businesses. For many employers, this was one of their key motivations for being flexible.

For some, it is about building and maintaining a relationship with their customers.

Having committed staff that stay with you means customers get the same people each week.

For other employers it is about the quality of the service their staff provides. If being flexible and responsive means that they keep employees longer, they get a return on their investment in training staff and as a result offer customers a better service.

In some cases it is just making sure that customers enjoy the interaction with their employees.

If people don't want to be here it shows to the customers.

Enhanced reputation

For some flexibility has been about getting more interesting staff.

People with a life tend to be more interesting – they reinforce our culture, brand and image.

For others, it is about reputation.

It's not possible to run a business with lower end wages if you are not flexible – no-one would work for you or they would ruin your reputation.

Overview

Key principles

Experience suggests that there are some key principles for managing flexible working arrangements successfully.

Be real

Know your constraints, and then look for the possibilities for being flexible.

It's about give and take

There has to be clear expectation from the beginning that this is about give and take by both the employer and employee.

'Win/win' for the business, the team and the individual

Arrangements that do not work for all three will not be sustainable in the long term.

You can't always treat people the same

It is important to think about people as individuals with different needs that will change over time. Instead of creating an environment where there is only one way of doing things, where possible create one that is flexible enough for all employees to contribute fully.

Share the responsibility

Involve staff in solving problems and finding better ways to do things. Be up front about work pressures and demands. Encourage them to sort out amongst themselves, as much as possible, any work problems or competing demands before turning to you or their manager.

Communicate

Flexibility works well if there is good communication between you and the individual concerned, and you and the full team. In particular it is important for everyone to understand who makes what decisions.

Keep an eye on things

Most of the time things will go smoothly. But when it doesn't, it is much easier to intervene early, rather than when problems have grown.

Don't set it all in concrete

Business needs change. Individual's needs change. You will need to be able to respond to both. Often it is useful to start with a trial that can be extended, adapted or halted, depending on how well it works.

Keep it legal

Make sure you know what your rights and responsibilities are under employment legislation, and what you have agreed to in your employment agreements. When necessary, get specialist advice.

Getting started

Many employers will already be using some flexible work arrangements. If you are only starting, or want to take a more organised approach to providing flexibility, you may find the following ideas useful.

Think about where your business is going

What do your customers want from your business?

- when do they want to use your services or access your products?
- what kind of turnaround time will they be satisfied with?

What do you want from your business?

- do you want it to grow?
- do you need it to be more efficient or productive?
- do you want more time to do other things in your life?

What kind of employees do you need?

- will you need anything different from your employees in the future?
- what is the typical skill mix and experience of your most successful employees? What helps attract and keep these kinds of employees?
- what kinds of work arrangements are people asking for?

Think about when flexibility may or may not be possible

Be clear about what your business needs are, as far as staffing levels and skill mixes. Identify the busy periods of the day, month or year when full staffing is needed, and where there may be room for more flexibility. Although you will want to be open to new ideas or other ways of doing things, you do not want to raise expectations that cannot be met. You may find it useful to talk to other employers about what they do.

Talk with your employees about the issue of flexibility

Ask them how well the current arrangements work for them. Get them to think about better ways to manage the work so that it meets the needs of the business and your customers as well as their personal needs.

Involve people in finding solutions

If people do identify areas that could work better or are currently causing difficulties, work with them to identify possible solutions. Check that the ideas fit with people's employment agreements and the relevant legislation.

Trial some of the solutions

It is usually better to try one or two things at a time, rather than make many changes at once. Agree how long something will be trialled and how you will decide whether it is working or not. Make sure that everyone involved knows that it is only a trial. If your employees belong to a union, you may want to inform or involve the union.

If it works, make it 'part of the way we do things round here'. This may mean including it in training for new staff, negotiating changes to employment agreements to reflect the new ways of working, revising or updating policies or guidelines or including it in performance discussions.

Work life balance arrangements can be included as part of the provisions in individual or collective employment agreements and may reflect how hours are scheduled and organised in practice, the need for healthy and safe hours to be worked and the ability to combine work with private life. This can be as a result of two-way communication, staff consultation and collective bargaining to create meaningful work-life balance opportunities.

Making it work

Based on their experience, employers provided the following suggestions and advice for managing different flexible work arrangements.

Managing rosters

Designing rosters

- Work with staff to predict work demands as much as possible so rosters can be designed accordingly.
- Discuss with people what their preferences are, being clear that you will try to accommodate, but can't promise to meet them.
- It is useful to have some core workers working reasonably predictable hours that the roster can be built around – semi permanent rosters.
- Be clear about minimum staffing requirements, in relation to numbers of staff, skill and experience mix. This makes it easier for people to negotiate and organise swapping days.

Planning rosters

- It is useful to plan rosters in advance. It gives more predictability for staff and for you. However there is a balance between doing weekend rosters far enough in advance so that people can plan weekend travel or commitments, with having it close enough to the time to minimise last minute changes.
- It is useful to have at least one full time 'anchor' person per shift. It helps provide continuity and stability.
- Check the rosters at the staff meeting each week.
- Work with staff to develop clear protocols for rosters e.g. not working more than six days in a row, two days off together is the norm, optional hours will be shared between interested staff. Employers found this takes time to develop and get agreement on, but the results including reduced absenteeism and ease of finding people to fill rosters, more than make up for it.
- Give everyone (even in other areas) a copy of the roster so everyone knows what is going on.

Flexibility around rosters

- Have clear procedures and principles for doing shift swaps.
- When swapping get people to write down what they have agreed to and have both sign it. This is useful for clarifying agreements, minimising misunderstandings, and helping you sort out any problems later if they occur.
- If there are requests for sudden changes, ask for a bit of space and time to check out all the factors involved to see whether it is possible.
- When you have to turn down a request for a roster change, explain why.
- Talk with the team about unreasonable requests such as not thinking about colleagues, having too many 'turns', cutting someone less assertive out or asking for a day off when it's going to be hectic.
- Be clear when the business needs to be non-negotiable and when individuals need to be non-negotiable; for example the staff member who is prepared to work late when asked, except on Thursdays when they have a regular commitment. It is useful to remember and respect that.

I think people would say that I'm fairly cautious with requests. Firstly – in a small workplace such as ours – it can't be assumed that it can happen but I'll do my best. Secondly, I need time and space to organise it. Sometimes the answer is a flat "omigod we can't do that". And then I usually find a way. But finding that way means not assuming that others will welcome the ask. So it's important to be creative about the solutions and communicate the progress.

Making it work

Managing time-in-lieu

Time-in-lieu is when people who work extra hours can take the equivalent time off later. Sometimes it is done on a casual and informal basis. Other times it is managed quite formally. Employers find it a useful strategy, but one that needs to be managed carefully.

Where does it work? Where doesn't it?

Employers found that time-in-lieu works well when:

- the work does not require specific hours to be covered
- employees are self managing and self motivated
- busy periods are counterbalanced with quieter times when leave can be taken.

It does not work as well for jobs where there is limited scope for taking the time-in-lieu. In these situations it may be better to use over-time, with a budget you can control.

Setting the boundaries

It is useful to set clear boundaries for using time-in-lieu. Remember that accrued time-in-lieu is a cost to your business. You may want to consider:

- Is there a limit on how much time can be accumulated?
- Is there a limit as to when time-in-lieu can be accumulated? Is it at any time, or is it restricted to specific periods of the year when workloads are high?
- Is there a fixed period in which the time-in-lieu needs to be taken, for example two weeks, a month or a year? This will depend on the nature of your work and how you manage your budget.
- Who can access time-in-lieu? Is it related to specific jobs or to how long people have been working for you?

- How much time can be taken without prior arrangement and approval, e.g. one hour?
- Do you need to limit when it can be used?
- Does it need to be used particularly for short breaks such as a half day or a late start to go to a personal appointment, or can it be used to extend annual holidays or to reduce hours during school holidays?
- Can it be used when there are regular work demands such as evening meetings or would this be better managed by adjusting the working hours on the day?
- Does it need to be used up before annual holidays are taken?

Making it work

To ensure that time-in-lieu works, employers have found it useful to:

- Make sure the boundaries for accumulating and using time-in-lieu are clearly understood by all employees.
- Make sure there is a consistent approach to the use of time-in-lieu across the organisation or a clear rationale as to why it might differ.
- Keep an eye on the amount of time-in-lieu being accumulated. Is it appropriate, or does it suggest that the workloads need to be adjusted or that more staff are necessary? Can your business carry this cost?
- Watch for people coming in unexpectedly or unnecessarily and then claiming for time-in-lieu.
- If you suspect time-in-lieu is being misused, address the issue early.

Making it work

Managing annual holidays

When are holidays possible?

Managing annual holidays is about balancing the needs of your organisation with the needs and preferences of your employees.

- Make sure you know the rights and responsibilities under the Holidays Act 2003.
- Work with staff to identify any times of the year when work demands mean that leave is difficult except for emergencies. Make sure that new employees know about these times as well.
- Sit down as a team and work out cover for times like school holidays.
- Involve the team in developing rules for managing annual holiday requests over busy periods. For example, one retailer has a rule that only those who need to travel to be with family for Christmas day can have Christmas eve off.
- Be clear about minimum staffing requirements, in relation to numbers of staff, and skill and experience mix. This makes it easier for example where people might negotiate and/or organise swapping days.
- Encourage people to plan taking annual holidays in advance. Stress that the more notice you are given, the more likely that the request for leave can be agreed. Prompt them to think about things they may want leave for such as religious holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, sports events, arts festivals or periods when they might expect to need a rest (e.g. after a busy spell).
- Encourage people to apply for leave in writing. Document all agreements.
- Use visual representations e.g. wall planners so people can see where there are windows of opportunity for taking annual holidays.
- Be open to people wanting to negotiate additional annual holidays in return for a lower salary.

Make sure that staff use their annual holidays

In some organisations the issue is not about meeting people's leave preferences, instead it is about getting them to take leave. Lots of accumulated annual holidays are not good for your balance sheet, and not good for your employee's health and well-being. It can be useful to:

- Monitor annual holiday balances carefully, with a prompt point to remind you and the employee that leave needs to be planned and taken.
- Monitor stress levels in conjunction with leave balances.
- Encourage people to plan leave periods. Use occasions such as scheduled performance discussions, business planning or anniversaries to prompt action.

For further information:

Department of Labour

www.ers.dol.govt.nz/holiday_act_2003

This website has information about the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees under the Holidays Act 2003.

Making it work

Managing parental leave

Being prepared

- Make sure you know the rights and responsibilities under the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987.
- Do not assume that people will want to manage having and bringing up children in the same way that you or your family may have done, or may choose to do. They may have different needs, levels of support or range of options. They may have a different approach to their career. Their children may have different needs.

Before they go on parental leave

- When you know a staff member is expecting a child, talk with them about leave options, their rights under the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act (1987) and their preferences.
- Ensure they are familiar with their parental leave rights and responsibilities. Make sure they know how much paid and unpaid parental leave they are entitled to.
- Consider whether the work they do or the environment they work in presents any hazards to their, or their unborn child's, health or safety. Work with them to find ways to remove or reduce these hazards.
- If possible, make a car-park available, so they can attend medical appointments easily.
- Make sure that their job and relevant systems and processes are well documented and up to date, so that others can step in and take over easily when needed.

Covering the absence

When you have a reasonably firm indication of how much leave they are intending to take, start to think through the options for managing during their absence. Obviously the more notice you have the better, but be wary about pushing people into making a premature decision and having them change their mind at a later date. Employers in this project found it useful to work with the employee going on parental leave and others in the team to explore the following questions.

- What work has to be done during their absence?
- Does their position need to be filled? Where work is project based, it can be easier to reschedule projects for their return. If there are plenty of other people available to fill shifts and rosters, you may not need to employ an additional person. If work loads are light, you may be able to redistribute the work.
- Does all their work need to be covered or just specific parts?
- How might this work be undertaken? Does it need to be covered by one person, or could it be shared among several?
- Does the work need to be done by people who already know your business or your customers, or could it be done by someone new?
- Does it need to be undertaken by an employee working regular hours, or could it be covered by getting casual or temporary staff in periodically when the demand builds?
- Who might do the job?
- Is there someone else in your business who would like the opportunity to take on the role as career development?

Making it work

- Could the key elements of the job be redistributed amongst others already in the organisation, with additional support being brought in to reduce their workload e.g. additional administrative support?
- Are there employees who would like to increase their hours during this period?
- Are there any ex-employees who might be interested in coming back during this period on either a full-time or part-time basis?
- Are there any contractors or consultants that you already work with who might be interested in coming in during this time?
- Are there people in allied organisations who might be interested in coming across for a fixed period of time?
- Do you need to recruit externally?
- If appointing a person to fill the role, be clear that it is for a fixed term to cover someone on parental leave, and will end when the person on parental leave comes back to work. Specify this in their employment agreement.
- If possible, make arrangements in time for the person going on parental leave to participate in the handover of the work.

While they are on parental leave

Keep in contact. You want them to continue to feel part of your company.

Contact them regularly

- If your organisation is undergoing significant changes, make sure they are included in briefings or sent all the information that people at work are given.

- Invite them to morning tea or work social functions, in particular for welcomes and farewells for other staff.

Keep them up to date

- Make sure they stay on e-mail and mailing lists for information coming into, or being sent out by your business.
- Invite them to relevant in-house training sessions.

Keep them involved

- Invite their participation if you are consulting other employees about changes or developments.
- Check whether they are interested in working on a casual basis while they are on unpaid parental leave, either by undertaking an occasional shift, or carrying out a relevant project from home. Make sure they have applied for and finished taking their paid parental leave before doing any work for you.

Making it easy to return

As soon as you know when they will return, or some weeks before their parental leave ends, talk with them about how they would like to return. Be flexible about how they may return. Be prepared to consider part-time work or a staggered return to full-time work.

Think about how you might make it easy for them to continue breastfeeding if that is relevant.

- Is there a suitable clean, private space available she can use? This may be on your own premises, or a space that you organise jointly with other small businesses in the immediate area.
- Would it be possible to adjust the length and/or timing of breaks, so she can feed her baby?

Making it work

This may include a longer lunch hour so she can go to her baby rather than have the baby brought to her.

- What rosters and shifts would work best with breastfeeding routines?

For further information:

Department of Labour

www.ers.govt.nz/parentalleave

www.ers.govt.nz/publications/index.html

The parental leave website provides an overview of employer's rights and responsibilities regarding parental leave, a useful summary of employees paid and unpaid leave entitlements and the publication link is to a Best Practices breastfeeding guide.

EEO Trust

[www.eetrust.org.nz/toolkits/
breatfeeding.cfm](http://www.eetrust.org.nz/toolkits/breatfeeding.cfm)

Practical information and links to other information sources on breastfeeding at work.

Making it work

Managing part-time work

Part-time work can be a good way of matching the needs of your business with the needs of employees.

Setting it up

Think laterally about how part-time jobs might be structured including:

- hours per day
- days per week
- hours per month
- set core hours, with the flexibility to increase these when work demands increase
- combinations of part-time work and full-time work e.g. to cover school holidays or to fit in training for a competitive athlete.

Don't assume that it is only women with young children who will want to work part-time. Increasingly a wide range of people are choosing to work part-time to enable them to combine paid work with other activities or responsibilities, to cope with ill health or as a transition to retirement.

Reduced hours

You may have employees who want to move from working full-time to working part-time. This may be for a period of time such as returning from parental leave or coping with a family crisis or illness, or on an ongoing basis. If so, you may want to consider the following:

- Could you make this work for your business?
- What arrangements might work for you and for the employee? Consider work flows and peak periods on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

- How will you scale down the job? Do you need to:
 - Reduce the number of tasks?
 - Reduce the size of the tasks?
 - Select the particular tasks which are best suited to their skills and the hours that you agree they should work?
- Will this leave work that needs to be managed in another way? Do you need to:
 - Redistribute the work to others, taking care that you are not overloading them?
 - Increase, by agreement, the hours of another worker who is interested in working longer?
 - Bring in additional support?
 - Use technology or develop processes to do the work more efficiently?

Be careful that you are not setting up a situation where the part-time employee is expected to do a full-time job in part-time hours.

Making it work

Employers gave the following suggestions and advice:

- Establish mutually acceptable times for working, and include the details of what has been agreed in the letter of appointment and/or employment agreement.
- Make sure you give your part-time employees what all your employees deserve – clear instructions and expectations, regular feedback, training opportunities and consideration for promotion.

Making it work

- Use wall charts so everyone knows what days and times people work.
- Depending on the nature of your business, establish a core time when all staff, including those working part-time are present. Schedule any staff meetings during that time.
- If your employees don't work at the same time, alternate the days and/or times of staff meetings, so that everyone can attend at least some of the time. Write up decisions or important information from these meetings and keep it in a place where it is easily accessible to those who were not there. Expect all employees to check what happened if they were not able to attend, or set up a buddy system where someone who did attend takes responsibility for updating a person who didn't.
- Try to hold at least some of your social events at times when your part-time staff can also attend.
- Make sure part-time workers are recognised and accepted as a legitimate and valued member of the team.
- Use e-mail and text messaging to keep all employees up to date.

If relevant, think through how you want them to handle ongoing contact with clients.

- Do they need to let clients know what hours they will be available?
- Do they need to let clients know who they can contact outside of those times?
- Are systems needed so that another staff member is kept informed of their work and any particular issues that may arise while they are not there?

Employers recommended establishing 'crisis' arrangements in advance.

- Do your part-time employees have any flexibility to work additional hours on major projects or to attend meetings outside their scheduled hours?
- Is there any scope in your budget to pay them for additional work if it is required?
- Is it appropriate to contact them by phone outside of their normal working hours?

Making it work

Managing job sharing

Formal job sharing is still not common in New Zealand organisations. However we talked to employers who have used job sharing and were positive about the experience. They benefited from access to a wider range of skills, better coverage and greater flexibility in getting the work done. Although job sharing in New Zealand has typically been used in task or process focused jobs such as reception or manufacturing, in other countries it has been used successfully in a wide range of roles including management positions.

Setting it up

Some businesses formally set up job sharing arrangements, where it is an integral part of both employee's employment agreement. The agreement needs to include what will happen when either partner leaves the position.

Common arrangements include:

- Initially offering the remaining partner the position on a full-time basis. If they are unable or unwilling to do this, the organisation tries to recruit an appropriate partner.
- If this is not successful within a set period of time, the remaining partner is deployed elsewhere if possible. If not possible, the employment is terminated.

You may want to seek specialist advice in drawing up the agreement, and advise the job-share partners to also seek advice before signing.

Others formally set it up as two separate part-time jobs, where continued employment is not dependent on the job-share partner, but the work is organised as a job share arrangement.

You don't need to know why people want to job-share, although most will be happy to tell you, but you can specify that there must not be a conflict of interest with any other employment.

Structuring the job share

It is critical that this works for your company as well as for the employees. You may find it useful to consider:

- Do you need coverage of the full work day, every day of the week or would it be more useful to have partial or total overlap to cover peak work periods and hand-over times?
- Does the job share need to add up to 40 hours a week, or would it be better for it to be more or less than that?
- Do you want to split the job by hours e.g. mornings and afternoons, or by tasks, responsibilities, clients or portfolios?
- Are there particular tasks that you need both partners to be involved in or meetings that you need them both to attend?
- How will you decide how the job is allocated? Do you want to suggest the arrangement or do you want the job share partners to come up with a recommendation that you consider?

Making it work

Employers have found it useful to do the following:

- Arrange for any initial training to be done together. This saves time and will help them build a good working relationship.
- Ensure communication systems are established and reviewed regularly e.g. handover processes, client files, project management plans, briefings.
- Make sure that all people in the organisation understand the arrangement, and who they should approach on specific issues.

Making it work

- Where relevant, make sure that clients or key contacts also know who they should approach on specific issues, whether it is one of the job-share partners or either.
- Regularly check how the arrangement is working.
- If problems occur, discuss them openly and work together to find solutions.
- Agree how and when the arrangement should be reviewed.

If one partner is attending training or on leave (sick leave, bereavement leave or annual holidays) you can't automatically expect the other to cover; but you can discuss their availability to cover their partner's absence. It will be cheaper to pay them for the extra hours than employing temporary staff.

Most organisations prefer to assess people's performance separately. However you may wish to include how well they are making the job-share work as one of the performance criteria.

Making it work

Managing people working from home

Working from home is a strategy that is increasingly being used by small businesses for some jobs. There were employers in every sector we spoke to who were using this option either on an occasional basis, as a regular component of the job or the usual way of working. Examples included winemakers, designers, policy analysts and community workers; staff carrying out research, developing proposals or managing phone contact with customers. Sometimes it is suggested by the employee, to make it easier to care for family or reduce travelling time. Sometimes it is suggested by the employer when the area the employee needs to service is closer to their home than it is to the office, or where office accommodation is restricted. However for it to work, it needs to suit both the employer and the employee. It needs to be voluntary, not compulsory.

The following are some of the things that are useful to consider if you are thinking about employees working from home on more than a very occasional basis.

Is it a realistic option?

For the work:

- Does it suit the type of work?
- Does the job, or the parts of the job that would be done from home, have clearly defined and agreed objectives and timeframes?
- What impact, if any, would it have on customers or clients?
- What would be the impact on the rest of the team?
- Are there confidentiality or security issues that could be compromised?
- Will they require resources that others may need to access at the same time? Could this be managed?

For the employee:

- Does this suit the employee's style of working?
- Are they self-motivated?
- Could they cope with the isolation and lack of social interaction?
- Do they have the time management skills required?
- Do they need a separation between work and home?
- Does the employee have the appropriate working environment at home?
 - space and lighting?
 - furniture and equipment?
 - peace and quiet?
 - the understanding of family, friends and neighbours?

For you:

- Do you have a sufficient level of trust in the employee for this to work?
- Can you focus on what they achieve, rather than watching them as they work?
- Is this an option you would consider for all relevant types of work or is this a reward for trusted, high performing employees?

Making it work

Agree before you start

Reaching agreement before you start will help avoid many of the problems that can occur:

- What hours do you expect them to work? Are they set, or is it at the employee's convenience so long as they get the work done? Do they need to let you know?
- How, and how often, do you expect them to be in touch with the office?
- How will you or other team members contact them?
- Are they expected to attend team meetings, training or briefing sessions?
- How can clients contact them?
- How will you be confident that their work space is safe and meets legal occupational and health requirements?
- What equipment will you provide, and what do you expect them to provide?
- What costs e.g. power, internet access, phone, will you meet and what do you expect them to meet?
- Are there implications for your insurance cover?
- What procedures will be used for handling and storing sensitive or confidential information?
- If the arrangement does not work, what process will you use for adjusting or terminating it?

Making it work

- How can you both be clear about what they are expected to do?
- How will they report progress?
- How will you make them feel part of the team?
- How will you keep them involved with social events? How much notice will they need?
- How and how often will you monitor that the arrangement is working for them, for the rest of the team and for the organisation?
- How will they access technical support for computers or other technology?

Making it work

Casual employees and relievers

For many, the use of casual employees and relievers is critical to providing flexibility around leave and rosters, as well as managing any other absences from the workplace whether they are related to illness, bereavements or training.

Employers who have been successful in using casual employees use the following strategies.

- Make sure the pool is big enough. Sometimes this is difficult for a small organisation on its own, so some, such as in the retail sector, have joined together to have a joint pool. Others work to keep in touch with previous permanent employees who might be interested in working on a casual basis.
- Make sure that they do get some work on a reasonably regular basis. This keeps them engaged and familiar with your systems and equipment. It keeps them as a familiar face for other staff and sometimes even customers.
- Make them feel like they belong to the company. Include them in social events. Keep them informed of developments and changes in your business.
- Use incentives such as retaining staff discounts. This can be linked with being prepared to work a minimum number of shifts, say over a three month period.
- Use times when your casual workers are available and interested in picking up extra hours, such as students during university holidays, to plan training for other staff or to encourage them to take their annual holidays.

Lessons learnt

This section expands on some of the key principles and explores some of the lessons that employers have learnt about managing flexible working arrangements.

Set the scene from the beginning

When recruiting

Many surveys show that flexibility at work is at least as important as money for many employees. If you can offer flexibility, use it to help recruit staff. Include it in your job advertisements, job descriptions and web site.

When selecting

Look for staff who will work well in a flexible environment. Be clear that flexibility is about give and take. Explain what flexibility you can offer. Explore what flexibility is available on their part.

When people start work

Be clear about your expectations regarding flexibility. What's possible and what is not. How they might access flexible arrangements. What you expect of them as far as notice and communication. What you expect of them in return such as backing up other colleagues, and where they can, covering for others so everyone can take a turn.

When requests are made

It is important to reinforce that flexibility is about give and take when people make requests for flexible arrangements.

That's fine, so long as you will...

This time okay, but it may not be possible in the future...

Given how flexible you have been in the past, I am happy to ...

Plan for flexibility

Several employers talked about how the need to be flexible led them to being much more structured and organised in how they manage their work. One employer took a 'what if they won lotto?' approach, to ensure that if any staff member did not come to work, someone else could cover for them, at least on a temporary basis. This required them to document key processes, have clear guidelines for new staff, deliberately cross train staff so they could cover for each other and have good systems for monitoring progress on work. As well as being good risk management and help them streamline the operation, they found they had much more scope for responding to employee's needs for adjustments in hours or leave.

Teamwork can make it easier

Strong teamwork makes flexibility much easier. This is about people knowing each other well enough to understand and be sympathetic to each other's needs, about knowing each other's jobs well enough to be able to back each other up, and having a sense of joint responsibility for the success of the company and getting the job done. Good teams are more likely to find solutions for themselves, rather than leaving it to the manager to have to decide and organise.

Keep track of what is agreed

Several of the employers had learnt the hard way that it is important to write down the agreements they made with their employees and include it in, or attach it to, their employment agreement. Putting it in writing is useful for checking that you have the same understanding of the agreement you are making, clarifying expectations, for ensuring that critical details don't get forgotten, and minimising the chance that later you and your employee have a different memory of what has been agreed.

Lessons learnt

For similar reasons it is also useful for staff to write down any arrangements they make, such as swapping shifts or days off. Even if they have to check it with you to okay the arrangement, getting them to write it down and both sign it gets them to take responsibility for making it work, and reduces the chance of you having to untangle misunderstandings later.

Keep it fair and consistent

Access to flexibility needs to be as fair as possible. This means that decisions to grant or deny requests need to be justifiable and explainable. Employers were aware of setting precedents. They were clear that if you are to do it for one person, you need to be able to potentially do it for another if the situation is similar.

Opportunities need to be spread across the organisation. People may need to take turns at accessing flexibility.

It is important that flexibility for one person does not mean that others carry extra and unpaid work. Everyone has issues in their lives and it is important that one person does not dominate.

This does not mean that everyone has to be treated the same way. Individuals will have different needs at different times. Employers advise that you need to have rules, but not rigidity.

Set a clear standard but take each situation on its own merits.

They are also clear on the need to be fair, but firm.

Not the same as being stupid or too soft – if they don't perform or take advantage of the team – they are out.

Be prepared to have the hard conversations.

As businesses grow, it is often sensible to delegate responsibility for managing, at least some of the staff, to a manager or team leader. Care is needed to ensure that there is a consistency in approach to issues of flexibility between owners and managers. Different approaches can lead to setting one or other up as 'the bad guy', undermining the other's authority and sending staff conflicting messages. It is useful to agree on a common approach in advance, regularly update arrangements and document the type of issues that are arising.

Keep an eye on things

All the employers in this project found that it was important to keep an eye on the flexible arrangements they were using, and on the impact they had on the organisation and its work. In a very small company, this involved the manager or owner observing on a daily basis and taking time on a weekly or monthly basis to step back and reflect on how things are going. When the organisation is larger, systems are useful to pick up patterns and trends that managers may not see directly. In particular employers suggest watching:

- Workloads - are they reasonable, realistic and fairly spread?
- Hours - are people working more or less hours than needed? Are the hours of work sustainable? Is the use of overtime, or the accumulation of time-in-lieu, appropriate and affordable?
- Workflow - are there bottlenecks or blockages that impact negatively on people managing the downstream work? Is the work managed in a way that minimises the need for unpredictable or last minute overtime?
- Type and number of requests for flexibility - are patterns emerging that suggest the need to revisit rosters or job design? Are the working arrangements compatible with each other and with the needs of the business?

Lessons learnt

- Performance - does the performance of people working in flexible arrangements meet expectations?

These employers are looking for sustainable working arrangements that do not compromise the organisation's performance, cash flow or the future availability of staff.

When problems arise

Employers were clear that this is the exception rather than the rule, but sometimes flexibility can be misused or might not work for the business or the team. Employees may manage the shift system so it is regularly to their advantage and other employee's disadvantage. Poor performance may not be visible initially if employees control their own hours or are working from home. They may claim more hours than worked or than the job justifies.

Warning signals of potential problems are typically found in patterns of behaviour rather than one off incidents. Employers found that they were usually associated with other issues such as poor performance or personal problems, rather than just a misuse of flexibility. Problems are signalled by the attitudes or comments of the person involved, or of their colleagues towards them, or sometimes the employer just has a gut feeling.

When they suspected a problem employers found it useful to start by watching more carefully and asking pertinent questions. They found that generally if people knew they were being watched, the problem was rectified.

Fix it while it is still small. Ask questions early. Send the signal that you are keeping an eye on things.

When that isn't enough, a direct conversation may be needed to:

- discuss your concerns
- provide an opportunity for the employee to respond
- clarify what your expectations are and what they need from you to help them
- identify what steps you and they will take to meet those expectations and when this should be done by
- identify how you will follow-up in the future to ensure your and the employee's expectations are met

It is important to remember that as an employer your responsibility throughout the relationship is to ensure that you are making decisions fairly and consistently. A Department of Labour publication, 'An Employer's Guide to Employment Relationships' illustrates some good processes in how to identify, deal with and prevent problems in employment relationships.

www.dol.govt.nz

Other Department of Labour publications about employment relations can also be found on this site.

Avoiding overload as the owner or manager

For some business owners and managers providing flexibility for their employees has provided them with flexibility in return. For others however, staff flexibility has been possible because the owner or manager picks up the extra hours or commitments. Some see this as part of their job. Some like the sense of ownership and control this gives them.

Taking the additional load yourself may be necessary at certain stages of the business, for example in the early days or when times are tight. It may be okay at certain stages of your life when you do not have other commitments or when work is so exciting that you don't have the need for other interests. But there is a risk of overload. It may not be sustainable.

Lessons learnt

Managers and owners who have made flexibility work for both their employees and themselves, rather than at their own expense, have used the following strategies...They delegate.

Only way you can be flexible – if something happens, there has to be others who can deal with it.

Some find it useful to have 'rules' and structure about when they will spend time at work and with family or other commitments. They have learnt to redress periods of high intensity, with time off or reduced hours.

One owner of a very successful business who has successfully reduced his hours advises:

- Pick and choose your customers.
- Be clear about what days you are not going to work. His customers have responded well.
- Judge success on more than just financial returns.

These owners and managers find it helps to be open with their staff if they are under pressure, stressed or frustrated. They have also put in place other avenues for support, both personal and professional e.g. business mentors or coaches.

Avoid setting it in concrete too soon

Employers have learnt to be wary about immediately agreeing to things on a permanent basis without the ability to review, check that it is working for everyone, and adjust arrangements as required. Make sure that this expectation is part of any initial discussions, any agreements and any documentation.

Things aren't static – they're always evolving. You need to be careful you don't trap yourself into a situation that no longer works.

Sometimes you have to say 'no'

Be clear about the constraints on how much flexibility you can offer. These may include providing cover for specific hours or areas of work. Constraints may be related to peaks in work demands, availability of suppliers or customer needs. Then you can figure out what flexibility is possible - where, how and when. Remember the way that things are usually done may not necessarily be the only way things can be done. For example one café found that it was fine to have one of their bakers come in earlier than normal so they could get to a regular sporting commitment.

Consider saying yes to requests for flexible arrangements, before you say no, but don't say yes too quickly. You have to think about the impact on others in the team. You have to think about the impact on the work. You have to think about the impact on the business and its customers. There will be times you need to say no.

I had to learn that sometimes the things you would like to provide for your staff as a human being – because you know about their issues and you respect them – are not possible for the business to do.