

Managing Flexible Working Practices

Quality flexible work can benefit employees and employers, the economy and communities. It is about people having the opportunity to make changes to the hours they work (over a day, a week or over the year) the times they work or where they work. It is also about how careers are organised, how transitions in and out of work are managed, and how flexible work is managed in the workplace so that employees and businesses benefit.

Examples of quality flexible work include:

- varying starting and finishing times
- annualised hours or term time working
- part-time working
- working from home or tele-working
- job sharing
- selecting or influencing own rosters or shifts
- flexible break provisions
- flexible leave/time off provisions (paid and unpaid)

There are two key elements to flexible working:

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 or 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 involve the team 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 being able to request their annual leave for a time of their choosing, or a day off to attend a specific event.

Who needs flexibility in their working arrangements?

Many employees need flexibility in their working arrangements:

- students
- people doing other work e.g. freelance photographer
- people serious about sport
- people with a range of family responsibilities including caring for 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 people flexible working arrangements mean that employment is 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.

Some reasons why employers offer flexibility:

- Getting and keeping the right staff - offering flexibility can help employers get and keep the right staff in a tight labour market.
- 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 for a variety of reasons – a rush order, wanting to extend opening hours, a sudden resignation or someone calling in sick. Employers with an established track record of being flexible about employee's needs are more likely to get a positive response.
- Better customer service - good customer service is critical to most businesses. For many employers this is one of the key motivations for being flexible. By being flexible and responsive they keep employees longer and get a return on their investment in training staff and as a result offer customers a better service.

Some key principles for managing flexible working arrangements successfully:

Be real - know your constraints then look for possibilities for being flexible.

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



Create '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.

Recognise that people are not 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.

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 the employment legislation. When necessary, get specialist advice.