

Best practice: the benefits of flexible working

In the latest of our best practice series, Xenia Taliotis looks at how an elastic approach to office hours can be a tool both for recruiting and retaining staff



Caption: Illustration by Jordon Cheung

Flexible working was once nothing more than an -unofficial perk, something generous employers used to reward long-serving staff. Rarely amounting to much more than being able to start late or leave early (with the hours made up at lunchtime), it may have scored high on gratitude, but low on delivering that elusive work-life balance.

That should all have changed in 2014 when British workers gained the right to apply for flexible working. Three years down the line, however, many employers have yet to make this a reality, despite growing evidence that allowing staff to work when, how and where they like (within reason) benefits the business at least as much as the staff. For example, in Vodafone's 2016 international survey of 8,000 employers from small- and medium-sized enterprises, public sector organisations and multinational corporations, 83% of respondents said flexible working had boosted productivity and 61% that it had increased company profits.

Hilary Lindsay, immediate past president, ICAEW, and a passionate advocate of flexible working, is urging member firms to build it into their working practices. "Employees clearly want flexibility, whether that is to look after children, elderly parents, themselves, or to pursue other interests. If managed properly, it shouldn't impact on delivery of work or on clients, and firms ought to be able to carry on with business as usual. That's the point we want to stress; that and the fact that practices that don't embrace flexible working stand to lose talent."

Jessica Pillow, founder of Pillow May, runs her business on an entirely flexible working model, which, she says, suits both her staff and her clients. "We have

many clients who are also trying to juggle home and work commitments so many of them are only too happy to chat outside office hours. One of my clients is a surgeon so will often be in theatre or in clinics all day. The only time he can phone is in the evening, and he's by no means an exception."

Pillow set up her firm in 2009 with flexibility at the heart of her business plan. "Admittedly, Pillow May was all about enabling highly skilled mothers to return to work without compromising their 'parenting' time, but as our business expands, I'll be hiring men and women whose circumstances are such that they cannot work rigid office hours. As employers we need to retain talented people within the profession, and flexible working is one way of doing that. I wouldn't do it if I wasn't seeing results - the benefits to my firm and to me are enormous."

Pillow is aware that some accountants shy away from implementing flexible working because they fear it will damage their client relationships, but that shouldn't happen if communication is good. "You need to be honest with them from the beginning. You can't fudge the issue, or pretend that you'll be working standard hours. We tell all our clients when we'll be available, and they trust us that the work will be done on time and within budget. As long as the work is delivered on time, within budget and without the quality suffering, then there's really no problem if it gets done from five to nine instead of nine to five."

Pillow May is a small business, and small businesses are, by their very nature, more agile and responsive to change. But how has 2014's legislation affected larger practices? "We're doing our best," says Richard Heasman, a partner at mid-tier Kreston Reeves. "We're learning as we go along, though logistically, it is more difficult for bigger firms to adapt their working practices to suit their staff than smaller ones. We have more than 450 staff and hugely diverse services, and flexible working is more difficult to introduce in some departments than in others: it's not suitable for audits, for example, because they require intensive, short periods of full-time work: they are really not something you can pick up and put down at your convenience."

Nonetheless, says Heasman, "we do have staff doing flexible hours and job-sharing, working part-time or from home, so we are finding a way of accommodating their requests. The trick is to align the desires of the staff, with the needs of the clients so that the business doesn't suffer. That's paramount."

Keys to success

Communicate - with your clients, staff, family. Set parameters, particularly if working from home. Your colleagues and clients will need to know when they can contact you, and your family need to know that they can't interrupt you when they please.

Have the best technology you can afford. For the model to work well, you have to be paperless - or as close to it as possible. All staff need remote access - cloud services are ideal, for you and your clients.

Everyone has to use the calendar religiously. People are responsible for themselves, but you're still the boss, so you do need to have a good idea of who's doing what and when - not to check up on them, but simply to remain in the loop.

Trust is key. You and your clients must trust that the work will get done on time and on budget. Accepting that is the first step to building good flexible working relationships.

Make sure you have a good practice management system so you can easily re-allocate work if needed and so that you can keep track of all the work at all stages.

Five live tips

01

Flexible working shouldn't mean always working. You can find yourself checking and answering emails throughout the day. Even though you're not in an office, try to have a rough start and end to your day. Equally when you are working, turn off all notifications and concentrate.

02

Don't ignore your working relationships. Flexible working often means infrequent visits to the office. If that's the case, make sure you schedule regular meetings - not to discuss work but to have a coffee or a drink, just so that you don't forfeit the social interaction that is a key benefit of office life.

03

Start gradually. Decide which days are flexible, and let your clients know that, for instance, their main practitioner will be working remotely on Thursday afternoons. Then, as you, your staff and clients adapt to the change, you can work towards total flexibility if that suits your firm.

04

Make sure you manage expectations. All staff with more than six months' service have the right to request flexible working, but you also have the right to turn it down if you can show it will damage your business. Work out what is and isn't reasonable and go with that.

05

Implementing flexible working is good for your business. It drives productivity, is both a recruitment and retention tool, and reduces operational and office costs: fewer full-time employees means fewer people drinking cups of tea and, eventually, smaller offices.