

Flex it, Work it

While considering future work organisation, many employers will be thinking about and reflecting on their experience of temporary flexible working arrangements during the coronavirus pandemic. This includes flexibility around hours to help employees commute outside busy times, home schooling, working from home and more choice on working hours generally. Employers may be expecting a sharp increase in employees requests for flexible working arrangements.

Your experiences as the employer and business needs will determine if you consider a full or partial switch to homeworking for your employees and flexible arrangements such as compressed hours, annualised hours, job sharing, flexitime or agile working.

Wellbeing

Giving employees greater control over their work-life balance can have a positive impact on their general health and wellbeing. For parents of small children, and employees looking after an elderly relative, being able to flex around medical appointments, school runs, and other logistical issues makes being a carer and an employee easier.

Reducing the commute by work from home frees up time, energy and headspace and being able to work when, where, and how an employee wants increases employees' sense of control.

Career Development

When senior level flexible roles are made available, people who need to work flexibly can progress their careers, making best use of their skills and improving their job satisfaction. Widespread skills shortages mean employers need to take account of individuals' preferred working arrangements if they are to recruit and retain the best staff

Flex it right

Flexible working can help make the most of today's diverse workforce and reduce skills shortages. In addition, most employees have the legal right to request flexible working.

While flexible working can result in benefits to your organisation, there are also potential barriers to its introduction, including resistance from line managers. Training and support for line managers will be particularly important if a scheme is to be successful.

When investigating the possibility of introducing flexible working, you should consult employees and managers. It is good practice for employers to make flexible working open to the whole workforce.

You should identify the procedure for handling requests for flexible working, ensuring that the assessment criteria for deciding whether to agree to a request are objective. While a company's procedure for handling requests should be broadly neutral, its flexible working policy can set out its statement of intent.

Flexible working has becoming an increasingly important issue for employers' employees, and business owners. There are three main reasons why you should consider introducing flexible working options for your employees.

- Changes in society have created diverse workforce, parents may have children at a point when their career is already established, and working employee are increasingly involved in caring for elderly parents. Extended periods of leave may be required for religious pilgrimages or visits to an employee's native country. In general, employees wish to pursue their own goals, interests, and ambitions alongside their commitment to their company.
- Widespread skills shortages mean that some employers must take account of employee's preferred working arrangements if they are to recruit and retain the best staff.
- Legislation gives most employees the right to request a move to flexible working.

Barriers to flexible working

There are many barriers to flexible working, operational difficulties, additional pressure on the employees who are not involved in flexible working, a detrimental impact on customer service; resistance from managers to the necessary changes; the effect on the quality of work; discontent among employees not included in flexible working; and difficulties in communicating with employees to name a few.

Even though a company's decision to introduce flexible working will have been taken at senior management level, the organisation's first line and middle managers can make or break the initiative. This is because they have considerable influence over the organisation's culture, whether attendance at the office for long periods of time (presenteeism) is expected; and they will be responsible for making any flexible working arrangements work in practice.

Flexing the right way

You cannot afford to ignore flexible working. At any time, you might receive a request from one of your employees to work more flexibly. It is, therefore, good practice for you to plan and consult employees and managers about

the potential demand for flexible working; the possible drawbacks and barriers, and the extent to which they could be overcome; and the types of flexible working that employees and managers would favour.

factors, such as improvements in employee relations, will inevitably be difficult to quantify.

This matters now more than ever

We are at a tipping point with many businesses making decisions about how they will work in the future.

The office of National Statistic showed that 19% of businesses intend to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model going forward compared to 67% who intend to go back to their old ways. Those who intend to continue with homeworking do so for improved staff wellbeing, reduced overheads, and increased productivity.

These are big decisions and will depend on specific sectors, workforces, and further developments as the impacts of the pandemic play out.

You must get the balance right to boost staff loyalty and engagement, and help people do their jobs. We know that flexible working can be one of the biggest factors in retaining the knowledge, skills, and know-how of our most experienced workers, and will be an essential tool to address the challenges that many employers now face.

For assistance in formulating your flexible working policy and procedures please contact Insurance HR Solutions (IHR Solutions) for guidance.

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About the author

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Laura is a HR professional with 20 years' experience with Financial Services, the majority of which has been within insurance and reinsurance. She has UK and International HR experience.

In her role with UKGI Group, Laura works with Katherine Watkins, Head of HR Consultancy and provides objective support to firms on employment law and HR issues. She uses her interpersonal skills, knowledge and experience to work with firms to help them develop strong and resilient HR strategies and establish healthy organisational cultures.

Laura is an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). She holds a Diploma in The Professional Development Scheme.

