

## **FLEXIBLE WORKING: COMMON CONCERNS**

### ***Flexible working requires more administration which means more work for managers and the HR/Payroll department.***

Some types of flexible working may require more administration, particularly during the early stages when they're being introduced. This is most likely where hours change periodically (for example where a woman with school-age children changes her hours to match school holidays); or where a full-time job becomes a job-share. However, most flexible schemes do not require constant monitoring. A request for flexible working arrangements can also provide an opportunity to review and change existing working practices. It can provide the justification for re-evaluating what work needs to be done and for discarding work no longer of benefit to the organisation.

### ***It's the thin end of the wedge – once we agree to flexible working we won't be able to control what's going on.***

Successful flexible working arrangements start with well thought out policies and procedures. Once implemented they must be carefully controlled. **Flexibility is not an excuse for poor performance.** Where there is evidence this is happening the organisation's normal disciplinary procedures should be applied.

### ***People will want to change their hours all the time – it will be difficult to manage.***

Most people who want to work flexibly are looking for a stable non-standard working arrangement. Within this they'll need a routine pattern into which they can fit other commitments. Apart from sudden domestic emergencies they're unlikely to deviate from the pattern. However, there will be a period of adjustment as the organisation (or department) becomes used to the idea a particular worker is not available at certain times of the day or week.

### ***How will we be able to keep track of who is working, when, if everybody works flexibly?***

Where a member of staff elects to work a non-standard arrangement, the primary onus is on him/her to ensure work colleagues and customers understand when s/he is working. Staff should also be reminded this is not a one-time requirement. It is up to the individual to remind others of the new working arrangements periodically to ensure that s/he is kept in the communications loop.

### ***Really motivated people want to commit more, not less hours to their work.***

It is a common misconception that the number of hours at work equates with quality of work produced. However, the reverse is often found to be the case. The stresses of trying to balance long working hours with home commitments can have an adverse effect on individual performance. This, in turn, is likely to result in reduced productivity and more visits to the doctor (all in work time!).

### ***Flexible working is not possible in this type of job.***

It is possible to come across jobs where a specific type of flexible working arrangement is not feasible. However, it's typically the case that most jobs can be carried out with some degree of flexibility. Before dismissing the possibility, a manager should consult with the relevant employee(s) to hear how they might accommodate flexible working and continue to carry out their duties satisfactorily. This is becoming increasingly important, as without a well-reasoned business argument for denying flexibility an employer may find himself accused of a breach of employment legislation.

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### ***What about the impact on our customers' needs and the level of satisfaction we can provide them?***

Conflict with client needs/demands is often a major argument for not introducing more flexible working arrangements. However, it is often the case that clients are already introducing such arrangements themselves and may have more understanding of the situation than they're given credit for. Even where clients are not embracing flexibility, it's usually the case that they're more interested in receiving an acceptable level of service, rather than concerning themselves with how this has been provided. Typically, flexible workers have found that when they advise clients of their new arrangements and discuss their potential impact on client expectations, it's possible to overcome many of the perceived and actual difficulties.

### ***Not all jobs can be worked flexibly – how will we ensure fairness and consistency?***

Fairness and consistency are more about approach than about providing everyone with identical flexible working options. Not all staff will want the same arrangements. For example, the parent of a school age child may want more flexibility in the working day, whereas someone who is studying for a qualification or pursuing a hobby may want more flexibility in the working week or year. Where a particular type of flexible arrangement is not possible, an alternative could be suggested. The emphasis is on an open discussion between the staff member, the team s/he works for and the manager. In this way the majority of requests for flexibility can be accommodated. In the minority of cases where flexible working is truly impossible, the individual should feel that all the options have been considered and they have been treated fairly.

### ***It's not fair, though, is it? Flexible working tends to benefit staff with young families, whereas single people find themselves picking up the slack.***

Where an organisation has a culture committed to work-life balance for all, no single group should be either winning out or bearing the brunt of arrangements. It's also true that people's needs change as they go through life. For example: single people are often happy to work longer hours and where they have outside commitments to look for (for example) compressed working arrangements to give them a full day off. Parents often want a shorter working day and school holidays off. Those with elder care responsibilities may welcome a later start to their working day or the opportunity to work at home.

The essential factor is a culture that embraces the belief everyone is entitled to work-life balance, and works towards a win-win situation. It should not be a case of a small minority benefiting at the expense of everyone else.

### ***We tried it once and it was a disaster.***

This is often the most common argument of all. Everyone has a horror story to tell about an employee who abused a flexible working arrangement. It's important to remember that such abuse is just as likely where an employee is working standard hours, and in such circumstances appropriate disciplinary action must be taken. It's also important to reiterate that the introduction of a flexible working arrangement needs to be carefully planned and managed. Where such an arrangement is proposed effective communication (between the individual(s) concerned, co-workers and manager) is essential.