

Creating part-time jobs

An employer may make a strategic decision to create part-time jobs as a result of the perceived business benefits; or part-time working can occur by default and piecemeal in response to employee requests. A well developed business-based strategy will enable the employer to select those arrangements which are most appropriate to his business. A number of factors are likely to influence the decision:

- The nature of the business, its peaks and troughs and the timescales of the operation. For example, a retailer may be looking for increased staff cover at times when customers are most likely to shop, whereas a manufacturer may need to cover production peaks and troughs during a 24 hour, 7 day cycle.
- The types of jobs and attendant skill levels that make up the organisation. While we believe that almost every job can be worked on a more flexible basis, some (typically supervisory or managerial) will be more appropriate for job-sharing, while others (such as retail assistant or call centre operator) lend themselves to part-time hours.
- The size of the enterprise. For example, reassigning tasks and activities may be easier in a large organisation with more employees to share the load.
- The reasons for introducing part-time work and whether this is as a result of recruitment difficulties, a desire to increase staff retention or a response to employee pressures. For example, while an employer may wish to split one job into two half-time jobs which he feels can be easily managed, an employee may prefer to work a reduced week of 3 or 4 days.

When introducing part-time arrangements in response to workforce needs, bear in mind that different sectors of the workforce will have different needs. As a rule, employers tend to be more understanding about work-family conflicts for women and policies on flexible working tend to be aimed at them. But a survey of working men carried out by New Ways to Work in 1995 identified a growing demand among men for more flexibility to balance work and home lives. Men are more likely to favour job-sharing as a means of working reduced hours while avoiding the negative status of being a 'part-timer'. (It is also for this reason that employers are increasingly using terms such as 'key time worker' to reflect the valuable contribution made by these employees.)

Part-time working at senior levels

Evidence suggests that part-time working at senior levels is becoming more common and more acceptable. For example, a survey by the Institute of Management found that 49 per cent of respondents had part-time employees in managerial and professional grades.

A further survey of 71 organisations in the public and private sectors carried out by IRS in 1997³ found that a significant proportion employed part-time staff in highly skilled jobs. The conclusion is that the image of part-time staff as uncommitted and second class is becoming outdated.

The evidence also refutes commonly voiced objections that flexible working is not appropriate at the most senior organisational levels. For example the 'Balanced Lives' survey conducted by New Ways to Work found a number of respondents were working at senior levels, and 40 per cent were involved in managing others. The highest full-time equivalent salary was £100,000 while six men were in jobs with full time salaries between £30,000 and £60,000.

"More than anything else, there is a need to re-examine the assumptions we have about the role of time in the evaluation and development of high level careers. For too long it has been assumed that long hours equate with productivity, an assumption anchored in assembly line work."

Balanced Lives: Changing work patterns for men, 1995

The opportunity to work part-time at senior levels can help redress the under-representation of women in senior and managerial positions. The current lack of women senior managers and directors is a huge waste of resources and potential and provides the employer with a greatly reduced pool of employees from which to recruit and develop senior managers. Furthermore, some jobs of a specialist nature may not need full-time cover, particularly in smaller organisations. To quote a respondent to the Balanced Lives survey, "The Chief Executive (who I report to) said we hire you for your brains not the number of hours you sit in an office."

An increasingly accepted way of introducing part-time working into traditional full-time - particularly managerial - jobs is through the use of job-sharing. For example, retailers Boots and ASDA both offer job-share schemes at senior levels to facilitate the retention of highly skilled staff with management capability.

Work redesign

There are no immutable rules about how to structure part-time work but in arriving at decisions an employer has an opportunity to change existing working practices. It can provide the justification for re-evaluating what work needs to be done and for discarding work which is no longer of benefit to the organisation.

Where restructuring occurs in response to an employee's desire to work less days per week, it can provide an opportunity to reassign some of his or her tasks, creating a larger job for someone else who may welcome more responsibility.

Restructuring a job in this way can also help recruitment for hard to fill vacancies. It may be that an existing employee is willing to cover the more specialist aspects of the job on a reduced hours basis, while a new, less skilled, worker can be recruited to cover the rest of the work.

Where several employees wish to work reduced hours it is often possible to 'pool' the saved days to create further part or full-time positions.

Using technology to ease administration

A common concern about the introduction of part-time working is that it will increase the administrative burden placed upon the organisation. Until recently this was likely to be true but new software packages not only reduce the burden but can also enhance management information enabling overstretched managers to make more informed decisions about work scheduling.

The newest packages operate in conjunction with Windows-based technologies making them extremely user-friendly. Since they are accessible whenever a computer is switched on they are particularly useful for recording the activities of staff working unsociable (.e.g. night time) shifts.

Typically, a package can be used to monitor hours worked, including overtime hours, and sickness absence - with the potential to be linked directly to payroll for pay adjustments. Most packages provide standard management reporting facilities and the reports can be used to analyse trends over time thus improving the planning and management of future workloads. In addition, employees can chart their own progress against agreed learning objectives and managers can review their records at convenient times.

Available systems fall into two groups: smaller HR specific packages typically offered with an option to integrate with payroll; and HR modules for larger, enterprise wide systems.

HR specific packages tend to be more popular among respondents to the IPD's regular Computers in Personnel survey. They are usually quicker and easier to install and the product most appropriate to the needs of the business can be selected. They are more likely to be relevant for smaller businesses with fewer employees and some can be upgraded as the business grows, although not all of them interface easily with other software.

Enterprise wide systems are much larger, more expensive and take longer to install, with the HR module being one of many covering every aspect of businesses processes. They tend to be easier to integrate and to upgrade. Where an organisation has made the decision to install an enterprise-wide (or ERP) system, managers are likely to find the HR module can be harnessed to manage many aspects of reduced hours working.