
Case studies: Flexible working

Working flexibly is one of the more popular ways in which a company can work together with their employees to establish a balance between the business's goals and the individual's need to organise the non-paid part of their life.

The increased use of part-time workers to meet irregular opening hours, "hot-desking" in different locations, working in school terms only, career breaks, changing working times to suit family responsibilities, – managers need training in organising staff times, a flexible and imaginative mindset to make this work. Implications for customer service, considerations about career development and promotions are all impacted. But universally, opinions are: where flexible working is working well, the benefits to both the business and to the individual are indisputable.

MSN UK

Innovation Employer of the Year 2004

Date of Study: 2004

Size: large

Sector: private

Region: UK

Type of Business: Computer software

MSN have boldly tackled the macho culture in a sector renowned for its long hours, heavy turnover and burn-out of young, enthusiastic staff.

Rapid growth and success for the business (part of the global company, Microsoft) has not always been so beneficial to MSN's staff. This was highlighted in an employee survey which indicated that presenteeism¹ was leading to significant loss of morale. Determined to do something about this, MSN have dedicated the same drive to this problem that they apply to any other business issue. Starting in 2002, they embarked on a cultural change project which has resulted in work-life being integrated into business objectives, with measures to combat excessive working hours. Their strategy includes a range of options open to all staff and this is constantly monitored through monthly pulse surveys, 6 monthly work-life appraisals an annual global survey and discussion forums. Working options now include home working, different location working, flexi hours, compressed working and sabbaticals.

MSN recognised that flexibility can't work without regular communication between team members, managers and clients. The project opened up a new dialogue with people and created an environment where people now talk openly about the working culture, work-life and diversity. From the start, managers were

¹ Presenteeism – the pressure to be at work long hours, even though much of the time may be under-productive.

made responsible for supervising at local level their team's work-life balance arrangements. This was done via weekly reports from each team which helped to ensure that issues were dealt with as they arose, communications remained current and success were celebrated.

Work-life is now enshrined in operational objectives – in project planning, evaluation, discussions, decisions, objectives and business commitments. Managers received mandatory training on managing flexi teams and 1-1 coaching for extra support to assist in the transition of working patterns with team members. All the UK leadership team participated in the project and worked at the local level with their teams as well as committing financial resources needed over the 22 month period of start-up.

Communications also included team events, promotion in the newsletter, developing computer share points and having work-life balance as a fixed agenda item at leadership team meetings.

The 2002 staff survey, prior to the culture change programme, indicated that staff morale was very low, with 64% indicating that they were thinking of leaving the company. Now, 89% say they would stay longer if they could work flexibly and 78% think that flexi working has improved work productivity and efficiency. 71% say customer reaction to MSN UK flexible initiative has been "I wish we had the same" and 83% of external clients think MSN UK is a cutting edge employer. The impact on employees' quality of life is significant with 84% saying it has lowered stress levels at home and 64% finding it has improved travel to and from work. It has also taught people to work smarter, rather than harder – 61% have learned more efficient working practices and 64% agree that long hours does not equal high output.

Mark West, program manager, works 7.30-3.30 so that he can spend time with his new baby and give his wife a break when he gets home. One drawback is that he misses out on after-work activities and the networking that this allows. He arranges meetings so that he does not suffer because of this, but says he is happy to relinquish socialising so that he can look after his children, saying "It's horses for courses".

Mark previously believed that by leaving early he was damaging his career prospects, but feedback from his manager has revealed no problem with his performance and that flexible working will have no negative impact on his reviews or job future prospects in the company.

85% of MSN now work flexibly, including 49% of men. Significantly, everybody has 'outperformed' during the period of culture change, with a 66% growth in the business. As a result, the success of the project has had a major impact, not only in the UK, but globally, where it is now being rolled out to other parts of Microsoft, including the United States.

(Reproduced with permission from Working Families website)

Jean – career breaker

Jean is on leave from work to care for her parents. She has worked for more than twenty years for her employer. In the past two years she has noticed that caring for her parents had begun to take more and more of her time and energy. At first it was just a weekend or an occasional evening. However, within the first year of her father's ailing health she noticed that it was taking a lot more of her time. This also meant that her workday was often disrupted by a call from her parents' home to deal with an ever-increasing number of needs. Indeed it was her immediate supervisor who suggested that she think about one of the firm's family friendly options.

The Organisation

The organisation has a range of family friendly policies, which include job sharing, reduced working hours, e-working and tele-working as well as unpaid leave options, all implemented with the support and agreement of the trade unions.

Following Jean's supervisor's sympathetic response to her plight, Jean discussed her ideas with her siblings, who all live abroad. They agreed to help with the financial cost of Jean giving up her salary for the duration of her unpaid leave from work. This allowed her to decide to make the application for a two-year career break. While she was unsure as to how much time she would actually need, her employer agreed that she could apply to return to work before that should her caring arrangements for her parents change in any fundamental way.

Benefits

The value of being able to devote her time fully to caring for her parents has ironically meant she has more time to pursue some of her own personal hobbies.

"After twenty five years working, it is a joy to take time out and find I can devote myself to caring for Mum and Dad but also catch up on things I had neglected for myself."

While on career break she is pursuing further education courses in her local college. This is an unexpected bonus. She does know that the care of her parents will increase as time moves on but now she has time to access all the support services. While she was at work she did not have the time to phone the various organisations that offer advice and help with older people. She also says the stress of taking time out of the workday and leaving in the middle of meetings to respond to a distress call is gone.

"It was neither fair on me or my colleagues or my boss."

The organisation is benefiting because this employee is deeply grateful to have an opportunity to care for her parents. She also has the security in knowing that she has a place in her organisation at the end of two years.

Concerns

Career breaks are mostly taken up in this organisation by very young employees, who tend to take time out to travel the world, and by those with younger children. In other words, the majority are employees at the beginning or early middle stages

in their career. Jean is aware that she is already past the mid career point at this time. This may have implications for any further promotion as well as having an impact on her pension entitlements.

In conclusion, however, she is aware of these issues and realises that the benefit of the career break has been not just to give her precious time with her parents but also to allow her space to think about how she might like to develop herself on her return to work.

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Newcastle Building Society

Size: large
Sector: private
Region: UK
Type of Business: Banking

Background

Newcastle Building Society employs 799 staff, of whom 529 are at the Principal Office in Newcastle, 270 are in branches and around 30 in subsidiary companies (although the flexible working policy does not formally cover the subsidiary companies).

The Society introduced the policy with the aim of becoming the 'best employer' in a tight labour market.

Flexible working arrangements

The policy gives all staff at the Principal Office (and to some extent in the branches) the right to request flexible working arrangements; not just those with young or disabled children or those that have worked for the company for over 26 weeks. [See right to request flexible working]

Newcastle Building Society defines flexible working as 'any working pattern that is different from the 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, working week' but states that 'any working arrangement must meet the needs of both the Society and the members of staff and for this reason not all flexible working arrangements will be applicable to every branch, department or role.'

In addition, the Society has a separate but linked written policy on working from home.

Take-up and patterns currently in operation

A total of 85 employees have 'flexed their contract' with the following patterns:

- 32 consolidated (compressed) hours (9 of them managers)
- 30 reduced hours (10 managers)
- 9 different working times (1 manager)
- 1 term-time only contract
- 13 working from home

One training officer works full time hours but in four days a week of compressed working, rather than five. The Society still get the same amount of training time from her as she does her admin work between 8.30 and 9am and 5 and 5.30pm when most staff are not available for training.

One of the 40-odd members of staff in the customer lending department at the Principal Office works full time but her 35 hours are compressed into four days to allow her to have a day off each week. She requested this as a preferable way of working for herself rather than the more typical reason of childcare. Her request was processed and agreed within two weeks.

She now works from 8.45am to 6pm, with 30 minutes for lunch, four days a week with Fridays off. Her manager said having Fridays off depends on business needs and the day off was subject to change, though this has never happened.

She is very happy with the arrangement and would recommend it to others, but points out that not everyone would be happy with the longer days. One problem is, she is applying for a higher post in a department where flexible working will not be available.

A member of staff in the Telecare department – which has 21 members of staff – works 20 hours a week, 10am-2pm five days a week. She wanted to switch her work hours to enable her to take Wednesdays off, so requested to work until 4pm on Mondays and Tuesdays to make up the four hours needed. Her request was agreed within days.

It worked out well because Wednesdays tend to be quiet days in that department – another member of staff had a request to have Mondays off turned down. She is not sure what will happen at 'statement time' – which is a very busy three weeks once a year.

Reasons for requests

Childcare is a major reason for flexible working requests but others have included working a nine-day fortnight to allow more time to spend with a spouse or partner and one who wanted to study.

Rejected requests

Requests that have ended up with a lot of debate are where HR feels the individual is not being reasonable. Usually requests have been reasonable as staff have thought it through themselves.

One request rejected was from a manager who wanted to compress her full-time hours into a four-day week. However, it was felt that the very early and late hours would be lost to the Society as there were no staff to be managed at those times. It was agreed she would reduce her hours to four normal days a week, the 5th day's money would be allocated to someone else and a new role for somebody could be created.

Response of line managers

There have not really been problems, and around 20 of the managers themselves have 'flexed' their contracts.

Union involvement

The union on site is Amicus, which generally enjoys good relations with the Society's management. The policy was initiated by management, who gave a draft to union officers for comment. All was agreed pretty quickly as the union was happy to have more generous provision than was required by law.

The union has had no involvement with the running of the policy, as matters are agreed directly between the individual concerned and the management.

Generally the union feels that the policy is currently working well, although it has a number of concerns, including:

People are often not aware of the policy, particularly if they are not parents of young children;

Flexitime arrangements are unduly restrictive and not operated fairly across the board;

The ability to work flexibly depends very much on what type of job you have. For example, if your job involves answering phone calls from the public, there is much less flexibility than for purely computer-based work; and

Flexible working arrangements are given on a first come, first served basis. If someone already has an agreed flexible working pattern, and another flexible working request conflicts with it, the request will be refused.

(Reproduced from Trades Union Council (TUC), UK)

Chris – part time worker

Currently Chris is attending a full time degree programme and is also working 28 hours a week. Before leaving school he started to work part time for his local supermarket. Now that he is in university he uses the income from his supermarket job to support himself at college. He is different from most of his friends who do not work while they are at college. Chris says,

"I love my college course."

He is now the most experienced part time employee at his workplace. The academic time frame is 9.00 a.m.- 5.00 p.m. almost every day. Part time work is carried out in the evenings and at the weekends.

The Organisation

His employer has an equal opportunities policy and relies heavily on part time staff to carry out the work. According to Chris and his boss the supermarket operates a part time and reduced hours policy. Staff choose the hours that they are willing to work and the store works the needs of the operation around the staff's availability. This can change from week to week, where a person may work ten hours one week and twenty hours the second week. While some staff have the same rota each week Chris operates a flexible system. Time off is also respected once an employee makes their request a week in advance.

Chris has proved himself to be a reliable and experienced worker. He has a good relationship with his boss. Now and then he needs a break to finish an academic project or do his exams. His boss is supportive of Chris at these times and he is not assigned to work while he dedicates himself to his studies. Chris would call this unpaid leave.

Benefits

This flexibility is a feature of the management of the store and one which has clearly benefited Chris, allowing him to achieve his goals of full time education and sufficient money to support himself. The demonstrated flexibility is clearly benefiting the store and the employee.

Another benefit to Chris is that the store is close to where he lives and in his very busy schedule this is a huge help. He also confesses he would miss the store and the camaraderie of his workmates if he were to give it up.

Concerns

Chris has heard his academic teachers say that students are advised not to work while at college. He is aware that as he moves through the four-year degree programme the demands on him to produce academic work will increase. He is concerned as to how he will balance the reality of his financial needs against wanting to achieve his academic goals. This means that he will continue to need his job. Grant assistance is a possibility but Chris is clear that it will not meet all his budgetary needs. Another concern is the pressure that can be exerted by a manager asking him to come to work on his precious free time. In his personal life, Chris has very little time for his girlfriend and his other friends.

In *conclusion*, Chris has demonstrated that he has found a way that allows him learn a lot about the reality of work, while at the same time pursuing his academic goals. He has an understanding of the nuances of management already which will give him a head start in joining the full time work force in a few years time. He has already had a good experience of fair play in action and has learned that flexibility and the freedom to negotiate around one's personal needs can be managed. Thus a very busy enterprise can achieve its goals in a way that allows an employee also achieve their personal goals.

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