
Case studies: Family-friendly practices

With the changing demography of the workforce, it is inevitable that much of the changes introduced under Work/ Life Balance are focused on the need to balance child-rearing responsibilities and work pressures. More women entering the labour market, the increase of women being appointed to senior positions, the growth in dual-income households, – such factors have brought about a review of the way of organising work to take families into account.

Providing workplace crèches, supporting the cost of childcare, family support groups, keeping jobs open-ended when departing for maternity leave, providing job share arrangements, – responsible and progressive employers are exploring many avenues to help their employees lead productive and balanced lives.

Miriam – job-share

Miriam works as a middle manager in a large public sector organisation in Munster. She has spent almost six years in full time education attaining a PhD. Following a short time in research she opted for a management career in the public sector.

She describes herself as a woman who has created herself at different junctures in her education and work careers.

"In the current climate there are lots of opportunities to recreate yourself, in this sense one has to grow one's own job."

This also applies to being able to redesign the job to fit in with the organisation's needs as well as one's changing personal circumstances.

Following the birth of her first child Miriam became increasingly convinced that she wanted to spend more time at home with the baby. She was aware of this personal dilemma as she left to take up her maternity leave, but opted to make no decisions until after the baby was born. However, following the birth of her baby it was clear the dilemma would not go away and she knew that she needed to discuss her needs and feelings with her line manager. Miriam was also clear she did not want to stop work altogether for two reasons. Firstly, she really liked her job and secondly she felt it was very important that a woman retains the potential to earn money.

The Organisation

The organisation provides a range of family friendly options agreed with trade unions, including job sharing. To avail of one of these options one negotiates with one's supervisor.

She and her supervisor had a frank discussion where she laid out her willingness to be flexible around the method to be adopted. At the outset no one structure was mentioned. When the discussion was finished her supervisor said,

"It looks like we are talking about job sharing. It was that easy" , said Miriam.

The supervisor advised her to think about this for a week and if still interested he would advertise the other half of the job. This allowed her the space to consider the financial implications of opting for job sharing and to firm up on her commitment to the new arrangement.

Benefits of job sharing I was confident in my ability to make it work.

The main benefit is that she has time with her child. The benefits to the organisation are that it has retained a highly motivated and creative manager. Both job sharers work at the relationship and as a result there is a real excitement in having professional support and partnership with another person. Miriam and her partner are convinced that the organisation is getting more than the sum of two persons working half time.

Concerns

One issue that needed to be managed concerned the staff. Initially in the job sharing arrangement the staff felt that when the second job sharing manager joined the office on Wednesday, the staff had two days work done, but the manager was full of start of the week energy. This could have had implications for the continuity and smooth running of the work. The matter was discussed with the team and this has ensured an awareness that allows team members to express their views and the managers to operate a more understanding approach to the staff. The essence of success for the team is that any change needs to involve all the parties, not just the immediate employees availing of the family friendly service.

In conclusion, a creative solution has ensured that two dynamic and participative middle managers are now providing a committed, professional service to their organisation, and they also have more time to be with their families.

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The Penguin Group

Family Friendly Employer of the Year 2004

Date of Study: 2004

Size: large

Sector: private

Region: UK

Type of Business: Book publishers

Penguin has a strong ethos about positive parenting and its value both to children and to the business. The company fully understands the wisdom of retaining talented people when they become parents and their demographics show that it is possible to reach the top and still have time for family life.

In a firm with a high proportion of female employees, 10% are likely to be pregnant or on maternity leave at any one time. Within the confines of a demanding job, Penguin tries to ensure that parents get as much time with their children as possible, within the confines of a job. Their measures to encourage this include up to 30 days annual holiday leave, extra time off for new mothers and four weeks paid paternity leave for new fathers. In addition parents can take up to 15

days compassionate leave for days when children or their carers get sick. There is a positive approach to all requests for part-time and flexible working wherever feasible and a 6 month career break available for family or developmental reasons.

As well as time, the organisation supports parents via the provision of a childcare allowance towards the cost of care of pre-school children (up to £95 per month) and is aiming to establish a 'parent's forum' to provide a mutual support network. Additional support comes from an employee counselling service, on-site occupational health centre and a stress-relieving gym.

Parents and kids get to spend more time together, not just when they are small but for special events like concerts, sports activities, medical checks or when they are ill etc. Children benefit from the free children's books that are a perk to parents at Penguin and are encouraged to feel involved with their mum and dad's workplace. For example, they get invited to parties and book launches, such as Madonna's book launch tea party.

As well as internal communications, Penguin benefit from positive external publicity about their work ethos. They have worked closely with Amicus and the NUJ (Trade unions) to develop and promote their policies and this has helped to encourage take-up. Recruitment materials outline what 'family friendly' policies are on offer and the company's values around these issues are promoted right from the start, during the induction process. Information is kept up to date on the company intranet site but HR also spend a lot of time talking to people as they recognise people would often prefer a person to a computer.

Absenteeism at Penguin is very low at 1.6% and the employee attitude survey shows a high level of satisfaction with the organisation's approach to work-life.

Family friendly working extends right to the top of the organisation. For example, Francesca Dow, Managing Director, Puffin, leaves work at 2pm in order to fetch her children from school at 3pm. She makes up the time in other ways and is able to support and encourage others in her team.

"My staff know that they can leave to have a child and there will be support and a job for them when they get back. Having to juggle work and a baby is challenging and the women who choose to do that tend to be very determined and make sure it works – for them and for us. That's important to me because it helps me retain valuable employees".

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HSBC

Family Friendly Employer of the Year 2005

Date of Study: 2005

Size: large

Sector: private

Region: UK

Type of Business: Banking and finance

All employees at HSBC have the right to request flexible working arrangements. A number of functions are now working collectively to develop local flexible working pilots and studies, with the aim of increasing employee engagement and optimising space planning. Key learning points will be shared with the whole Group and will contribute to a global set of minimum benchmarks on flexible working.

HSBC has led the field as a business with an extensive nursery network. There are 86 nursery partnerships throughout the country, providing 850 places for bank employees. These are subsidised to the tune of £1.5 million and provides each parent with up to 50% off their usual nursery fee. From October 2005, the number of places has been increased to over 400 UK-wide and, in addition, parents with children up to the age of 16 may apply for Childcare Vouchers via a salary sacrifice scheme.

A number of specialist forums exist which are funded by HSBC but run by employees for employees. These include Working Parents Networks which meet regularly to share ideas and discuss parenting issues, balancing work and home demands and coping strategies.

HSBC policies mean that children get to spend more time with their parents and know that in an emergency, their parents can be with them when they need them. They also get to experience what it's like to work for a good employer that values family life and there is a 'Take our Daughters and Sons To Work Day' which promotes awareness of the workplace, the diversity and opportunities that exist within it. Feedback from evaluation forms completed by the young people who attend is always very positive. There is also an annual Family Fun and Sports Day held during the summer holidays.

HSBC supports a huge array of educational and charitable projects to support young people. There is an HSBC Education Trust which helps disadvantaged children to build self-confidence and high self-esteem through a range of projects. It supports Outward Bound projects, sports challenges, Young Enterprise and a whole host of other projects, which demonstrate its commitment to young people.

In its most recent attitude survey, 75% of staff agreed that their workload allows them to maintain a good balance between work and life. The bank doesn't want employees to feel guilty by working flexibly and working parents know they will be rewarded on the same basis as any other employee, rather than being penalised for taking time off to look after children.

These family friendly policies have helped the bank to recruit, motivate and retain the very best people and to achieve the highest levels of performance and productivity. The nursery scheme, in particular, has contributed to the retention of

highly skilled employees and the maternity returner rate is constant at 80%. Flexibility also helps to serve the requirements of customers and HSBC has a flagship branch in Milton Keynes where the entire team work in a flexible way to suit their and customer's needs. These measures also help to reinforce the image of the company as having an ethical approach to employment, and in their last survey 88% of staff felt that the business operates ethically.

A number of initiatives are led by senior management to help create a flexible working culture. They have championed 'hot-desking', so that people can work either in the office or at home and resources have been made available to ensure that people have the technology to work away from their desk. The company also helps to drive the national agenda by hosting round table discussions and events for groups campaigning on behalf of parents and carers.

Information about policies is communicated via the company intranet and also detailed in staff handbooks. New initiatives and pilots are shared by all, via the company news circulars, direct mailings to home, the company TV channel, videos and through the employee forums and diversity training and development for managers.

Feedback from parents demonstrates the enormous value of HSBC's childcare support. One parent stated she could not have continued to work if the bank hadn't allowed her to change jobs when her child started school. Another says that she will be saving over £5000 per annum by joining the new childcare scheme as she has three young children.

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