
Case studies: Working from home

The growth of Information and Communication Technologies has revolutionised the way we do business. Astute companies have also identified ways of using ICT to organise the way we work. Senior managers, in particular, stay in touch with their office when away on business. Laptops, broadband, handheld PC's, – the opportunities are increasingly limitless to stay in touch with the office.

More and more companies have used the opportunity to allow employees conduct work from home or remote locations.

Brenda – tele-worker

Brenda is a research scientist for an Irish private sector company. She has worked for them for almost eight years since leaving university. In that time she married a farmer. Her employer is located in a medium sized Irish town. She made her decision to seek an alternative arrangement to working at the company premises after the birth of her first child. She also wanted to establish a work arrangement that could include the possibility of a second child to be born close in age to their first. She admits that she had always had a desire to work from home, not just for family reasons but also for professional reasons. Firstly, she wanted to reduce her travelling time to and from work. Her home is about thirty-five miles from the company's premises. Secondly she wanted to carry out the kind of research that could be managed using information technology.

The Organisation

At the time she approached her employer to discuss this idea they had, as an organisation just begun to examine equal opportunities as it affected them. One of the issues which the organisation was concerned about was attracting quality researchers. The relatively rural geographical location of the firm together with the increasing buoyancy in the economy made this a live issue for the firm.

Brenda approached her supervising manager with a well thought out plan.

"Basically if they were unable to meet my request, I was considering becoming a freelance researcher from home."

She hoped that she would not have to resort to this "plan B" as she enjoyed working for her employer.

"When you have just had a baby, you don't want to have to start setting up a new business as well."

Her employer agreed that she could work from home on a pilot basis at first. This was some years ago now. Brenda was a pioneer in that she helped the formalisation of tele- working in her organisation. Indeed this private sector firm now operates a range of family friendly arrangements available to all staff, developed and agreed with the co-operation and support of the trade unions.

Benefits

Brenda has benefited because she has been able to achieve her goals, to start her family and carry out the kind of research work in the way she had always wanted. Her employer has benefited in that she is still working for them and contributing to the development and success of the firm.

Concerns

While the arrangement at first sight presents an idyllic picture, that of a young mother working for a go ahead company from home in the midst of rural bliss, in reality there have been things that were learned in the light of experience.

"At first my friends thought that if I was working from home it meant I was available for a chat and a coffee at any time of the day This was hard at first and then I realised if I did not lay down the ground rules to friends and family, no work would get done."

In the eyes of friends and family, being at home was interpreted as being available for socialising.

The second issue was that of having lots more time with the children. Cutting out the travelling helped, but it soon became clear that reading and writing for work was at odds with parenting. So Brenda brought the children to a minder, who lives close by.

Finally there is the isolation. While Brenda feels she is suited to work that involves a lot of solitude, she still needs human contact. Thus she now arranges to meet family and friends by appointment, just as if she were at work in town.

In conclusion, Brenda has had to work to develop this method of working. On balance she feels, however, that for her particular circumstances tele-working has given her the freedom to achieve her goals, both personal and professional.

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British Telecom (BT)

Carers in Employment (Joint) Employer of the Year 2005

Date of Study: 2005

Size: large

Sector: private

Region: UK

Type of Business: telecommunications

"We recognise the absolute benefits that can be gained for employers, employees and society at large of developing carer-friendly policies."

BT chairs Employers for Carers (EfC), an interest group that includes major employers, employers' organisations and Government agencies. As a Corporate Friend of Carers UK, BT supports the charity and also refers employees to their publications and Helpline.

Policies and practice on flexible working (which is open to all staff) are widely communicated throughout BT via their intranet site "Achieving the Balance". This site sets out in detail what BT policies are, ways of achieving flexibility and highlights areas of particular interest to carers. Through case studies, people are able to see exactly what can be achieved and how BT will help them create a more

flexible life. It highlights case studies of carers – both to demonstrate what flexibility can be achieved and to show role models within the business – all of whom are contactable within BT. Carers particularly value the insights of other carers and welcome the informal community of carers.

BT demonstrates a values-driven, open culture, which focuses on the needs of both the individual and the business: flexible working has achieved 20% less absenteeism than the national average and this figure is reducing all the time. Increased use of homeworking has led to reduced travel costs – savings of £9.7m – plus increased productivity as the home-based workforce reports being 7% happier than their site-based colleagues. BT call centre operators working from home handle up to 20% more calls, giving comparable or better quality responses, than their office-based colleagues. In addition, flexible working has helped BT's staff retention rates – for example, 99% of women return to BT after maternity leave, saving about £5m a year in recruitment and induction costs.

There are benefits to the community as a whole too: in 2001, BT estimates their flexible working policies reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 54,000 tons and conserved 12 million litres of car fuel.

Leadership from the top helps to convey the new culture at BT. Paul Reynolds, CEO of BT Wholesale is the work-life balance champion. Ian Bull, Chief Executive of BT Enterprises is a home-worker and other senior managers work flexibly and have elder caring responsibilities. Senior role modelling helps to dispel the fear of negative impact on career progression, which manifests itself in most organizations.

BT runs an internal communications campaign alongside the national Carers Week. This provides the opportunity to remind many and introduce others to the flexibility BT can provide to carers. During Carers week, staff discuss an issue about caring via Talking Point (an on-line moderated discussion forum). This forum enables people to voice their views and provides feedback on how policies are working within the company. The on-line accessible Diversity TV programme "Think about it" also features articles about carers, and caring responsibilities are featured in the soap-opera drama in the TV programme.

BT recently ran a flexible working competition to understand the depth of their outreach on flexible working. The winning team, which won an award, had a variety of reasons for wanting to work flexibly from wanting, simply, more time at home, to having caring responsibilities for relatives. This was achieved by the team and management agreeing on levels of cover and a common sense approach to meet their day to day business needs. They worked together as a team to devise new spreadsheets to ensure staffing levels were kept to agreed levels dealt with issues such as time recording which were resolved at regular meetings prior to the trial start date. The team have regular meetings to discuss any issues with their line manager who is pleased with the way the trial is running and has no issues regarding performance of the team.

Lisa Crowley who is young, single and a PA to a senior Director in BT Retail Service Agility. She lives with and cares for her elderly mum who is disabled. Her mum is extremely arthritic, which was worsened recently by skin cancer, and now has to use a wheelchair to get around. Lisa manages

her caring responsibilities on top of her work commitments by having a very understanding line manager, having the ability to occasionally work from home and making sure that all the areas of her life are dedicated the proper time needed. She says this is sometimes a struggle but the rewards are worth it.

"What is reassuring is that I don't feel I have to justify any absence. My manager and colleagues are aware of my situation, and they don't mind if I have to use the phone and office time for personal calls. This makes such a difference to me and my Mum."

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