



Family Friendly or Failing Families?

A Family Lives highlight report on progress towards implementing flexible working practices for all families



Forward

Like many working families I struggle to balance work and family life. I have an energetic toddler, a demanding but enjoyable job, a partner that works full-time and no immediate family able to offer regular support. However, unlike so many families that Family Lives has spoken to for this report, I work for an organisation that fully embraces flexible working for all employees, parents and non-parents. Family Lives believes that flexible working is not only better for our employees and the children we care for, but is also more cost effective for us an organisation.

For example, by reducing our central office space to the minimum we need and encouraging working from home on a regular basis, we have reduced annual expenditure in this area by 52%. Savings such as these have enabled us to continue to provide vital services for struggling parents in challenging economic times for the voluntary sector. Strong performance management, utilising free IT services such as skype, lync and a shared document hub have not reduced our effectiveness or availability. In fact, the opposite occurred; we are more connected as an organisation across our central and local teams, we don't make assumptions that something important is automatically communicated via the water cooler and we are able to deliver more in less time. Some of what I do is urgent or needs face to face contact, but much of it isn't and can be delivered more effectively from home or in the evenings after toddler bedtime, away from day-to day distractions.

Working in a flexible manner is not only better for Family Lives, but there are direct benefits to me, my family and my community. I can spend more time with my daughter, I can stick a load of washing on while talking on the phone, I can attend that all important nursery event, I can be involved in my local children's centre.

Life is more manageable and more enjoyable.

This report argues that working like this is an impossible dream for many families. Many workplaces are still unable to see the benefits and cost savings to them of this approach and parents are either being refused reasonable requests to change working patterns or are too afraid to ask. Because of rising living and childcare costs, many parents, especially women, are forced to leave the workplace taking vital skills and experience with them. With the Government's Modern Workplaces agenda imminent and more businesses struggling with overhead costs, now is the time for workplaces to consider change that benefits everyone.

Family Lives would be delighted to help families struggling with this issue through our range of services. We would also love to support any workplace wanting to fully embrace all the benefits of flexible working for all.

Claire Walker, Working Mum.

Director of Policy and Communications, Family Lives.



Executive Summary

Introduction

Over the last decade, flexible working has been increasingly seen as an important tool for individuals to help balance work and family life. Successive governments have introduced rights to flexible working and the Coalition government is looking to increase worker rights through its Modern Workplaces agenda¹. Currently, the majority of parents have the legal right to request flexible working and some employers have introduced extensive flexible work policies for their staff. For forward thinking employers, offering a comprehensive flexible working package is not just seen as a benefit purely for parents, but rather about engendering good business practice which supports all workers: promoting wellbeing, a good work atmosphere and facilitating improved efficiency, retention and performance as well as potential office overheads savings.

Flexible working for families today: laudable aims and stark realities

Recent government figures show that flexible working has become near universal in UK workplaces - with over 95% of workplaces offering at least one flexible working practice² - hence it would be easy to assume that the picture of work-life balance for the UK's families looks quite rosy. Scratch a little deeper however, and you will find that many employees will paint a very different image. Flexible working is still extremely difficult to obtain across a range of workplaces. Reconciling work and family life remains a clear challenge for a number of families; for some parents it even means making tough choices about whether to exit work all-together and this will have significant implications for their families.

Where are we now?

There is long way to go before all families have the opportunity to participate in the workplace in a way that meets both employers' and families' needs. This report looks at recent progress towards getting the family work/life balance right and makes an assessment of the outstanding challenges ahead. Through detailed case study research, this report finds that while many businesses claim to be both family friendly and pro-



flexible working, there is a clear disparity between aims and implementation. Workplace culture and management practice remains fixed on a 9-5 model (or longer hours) and most employers continue to consider flexible working cases on an inconsistent, ad-hoc basis rather than implementing a pro-active, strategic approach to adapt working practices.

Key Findings and Recommendations

On the basis of our case study research, analysis of current flexible working policies and the recent proposals being developed by the department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), this report presents a number of recommendations for both employers and policy makers with a view to improving families' work-life balance through implementing innovative approaches to managing flexible work and by improving policy and practice.

- **Flexible working needs to become normalised in all workplaces. We urge the government to progress the key proposal in the Modern Workplaces agenda to extend the 'right to request' to all employees.** For a number of our case studies, flexible working continues to be viewed as a parental annoyance reserved for some mothers. Whilst this perception remains, parents requesting flexible working will continue to be discriminated against in the

workplace and not be able to reconcile home and work life in a way that meets their needs. For all employers there is a clear business case for promoting flexible working for all employees: flexible working reduces business costs by bringing down staff stress levels, reducing absences and can improve staff retention rates.

- **The government should strengthen and refine the statutory ‘right to request’ with a view to making the process more adaptable to family needs. We urge the government to allow employees to make a second flexible working request within a year and promote the use of flexible working trial periods.** For a number of our case study examples, there is not enough awareness about the purpose and use of flexible working trials. In these cases, this directs employers to move to refuse a request in order to comply with statutory time periods. Using more flexible working trials will allow businesses and employees time to adapt to a new working framework and should be encouraged.
- **The government should look to support flexible working through proposals in the Modern Workplaces agenda to increase flexibility in taking maternity, paternity and parental leaves.** Allowing some element of a phased return to work can ease the transition between full time leave and returning to work. For some employees and employers this period could serve as an informal trial of flexible working.
- **Workplaces must become more proactive rather than reactive in dealing with flexible working requests.** Businesses need to integrate flexible working into their forward planning, job design and proactively train staff to manage flexible working employees. Human Resource professionals should develop extensive support structures to manage flexible working practices and show how managers can develop, monitor and motivate their flexible working staff.
- **Workplaces should look at new information technologies which promote mobile and remote working, many of which can be implemented at low or no additional cost.** In today’s high competitive and globalised economy, remote access

and mobile technologies can significantly improve working productivity and are integral to providing a seamless customer service with limited staff capacity. Savings made through reduced fixed office costs could offset any technological investment needed.

Flexible working: current models and rights for working parents

What is flexible working?

Flexible working is a change to the standard working practice of 35-37 hours per week, worked at set times and at a set place (typically in an office). There are two main types of flexible working practices: 'flexible working time arrangements' which change the time at which employees work and broader 'flexible working arrangements' which include altering the location of work (typically home working) for all or part of the week³.

Common Types of flexible working⁴:

- **Part-time working** – workers are contracted to work less than standard, basic, full time hours.
- **Flexi-time** – Workers have the freedom to work in any way they choose outside a set core of hours determined by the employer. Typically this means being able to come into work later/earlier (and stay later/leave earlier) on days that suit the employee.
- **Staggered hours** – workers have different start, finish and break times, allowing a business to open longer hours.
- **Compressed working hours** – workers can cover their standard working hours in fewer working days.
- **Job Sharing** – one full time job is split between two workers who agree the hours between them.
- **Shift swapping** – workers arrange shifts among themselves provided all required shifts are covered.
- **Time off in lieu (TOIL)** – workers take time off to compensate for extra hours worked.
- **Annual hours** – workers' contracted hours are calculated over a year. While the majority of shifts are allocated, the remaining hours are kept in reserve so that workers can be called in at short notice as required.
- **V-time working** – workers agree to reduce their hours for a fixed period with a guarantee of full-time work when this period ends.

- **Zero-hours contracts** – workers work only the hours they are needed.
- **Home working/teleworking** – workers spend all or part of their week working from home or somewhere else away from the employer's premises.
- **Sabbatical/career break** – workers are allowed to take an extended period of time off, either paid or unpaid.

"I use flexible working to fit around my family life. That is the ultimate reason. I work varied hours – about 15-18 hours a week and I can literally work the hours that I want over the five day period. I fit my appointments around my life really as much as possible"

A Family Lives Family Support Worker

Who can request flexible working?

At present, parents of children aged under 17 years old, parents of disabled children under 18 and carers of certain adults and who have at least 26 weeks of service have the 'right to request' flexible working⁵. Eligible employees can only make one application every 12 months – even if the second request in this period is for a different caring responsibility⁶.

The statutory process of the right to request

Once an employer has received a flexible working application from their employee detailing the type of flexible working they would like to request, they are bound by a legal duty to consider the request seriously with the aim of deciding whether the business in question can accommodate the requested work pattern.

Employers must arrange a meeting within 28 days of receiving a valid application to discuss the proposals and give a decision within 14 days.

Trial Periods: In cases where the employer or the employee is not sure of whether the proposed new

arrangement will work in practice, a trial period can be arranged. Trial periods can be used in the following ways:

- **Before an employee applies.** If an employer knows that an employee will be applying, the employer can agree to a trial period before the individual submits a formal written flexible working request. This process leaves the whole of the formal procedure still available to the employee in the future.
- **For a limited period of time.** In cases where there is an acute need to work flexibly (for example if an employee suddenly becomes the carer of an adult) both parties can agree to an informal temporary arrangement.
- **During the formal process.** If the employee has already made a formal written application, you can agree to an extension of time for the employer to make a decision. The rest of the formal procedure will still be available to the employee.

Employers may only refuse requests 'where there is a clear business ground for doing so.... [and must give] a written explanation explaining why⁷. The current business grounds for refusal are as follows⁸:

- Planned structural changes
- The burden of additional costs
- A detrimental impact on quality
- The inability to recruit additional staff
- A detrimental impact on performance
- The inability to reorganise work among existing staff
- A detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand
- A lack of work during the periods the employee proposes to work

Employees have a right to appeal this decision, for example if they wish to challenge the business case for rejecting the request or to bring attention to new information. In cases where employers and employees cannot resolve the issue of refusal internally, an employee can engage third party conciliation or a mediator. Organisations such as ACAS offer a flexible working arbitration scheme⁹.



Discrimination claims

It is important for employers and employees to be aware that rejecting a flexible working request could open up the possibility of a claim for discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability or age. For example, if you reject the request of a woman returning from maternity leave to work-part time, this could be seen as indirect sex discrimination¹⁰.

Proposals to increase flexible working rights: The Modern Workplaces agenda

As part of a series of reforms intended to make Britain the 'most family-friendly country in Europe', the Coalition government has been looking into proposals to extend flexible working rights, alongside a broader agenda to make maternity and paternity leaves more flexible between parents.

The key flexible working proposal of the Modern Workplaces agenda is to create legislation to extend the 'right to request' for all employees¹¹. This is intended to make flexible working both more accessible to employees and to attempt to reduce the perception that flexible working only has benefits for parents and carers¹².

The government has also proposed that employees should be able to have an additional request available to them in any 12 month period¹³.

Implementation gaps: barriers against flexible working for families

Despite clear progress on behalf of many employers towards establishing flexible working policies over the last decade, this highlight report finds that there are still a number of barriers preventing the implementation of a family-friendly flexible system that works smarter for both employees and business. This section analyses the key figures and statistics on flexible working availability and secondly draws key insights from a series of case studies that demonstrate the continuing difficulties for families in achieving work/life balance and employers' lack of strategies to support these aims.

Where are we now? Key figures on flexible working

A number of surveys and government compiled statistics show that employers have developed flexible working policies and that employees are aware of these developments in working policy options:

- **There has been a clear growth of work-life balance policies that focus on time-flexibility.** In a 2011 CBI survey which captured the responses of 335 UK organisations, 96% of employers offered at least one form of flexible working and 70% offer three or more types¹⁴.
- **The availability of flexible working varies between sector and industry.** In the public sector, nearly all (97%) employers offer three or more types of flexible working arrangements compared with two-thirds (66%) of employers in the private sector¹⁵. Looking at different industries, the Fourth Work-Life Balance Survey conducted by NATCEN for the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) found that employees in public administration, education, health and those within banking reporting the highest rates of flexible working availability. The lowest came from manufacturing and construction¹⁶.
- **The majority of employees are aware of flexible working.** In 2012, the Fourth Work Life Survey found

that 75% of all employees were aware of the right to request flexible working¹⁷.

- **Part time working is the most commonly available form of flexible working.** The Fourth Work Life Balance survey found that 80% of employees reported the availability of part-time working, followed by temporarily reduced hours (56%) and flexitime (48%)¹⁸.
- **A gender-divide in flexible working remains.** The availability of flexible working is more likely to be reported in workplaces that have a relatively equal gender splits or where the employees are mostly women¹⁹. Similarly, the typical working pattern for dual income couples after childbirth in the UK is for mothers to reduce, and for fathers to increase, their working hours²⁰. For example, 2011 Eurostat labour force figures estimate that 43.1% of women work part-time compared to 12.7% of men²¹. While the latter figures for men have increased by a few percentage points over the last decade, achieving good work-life balance remains heavily weighted towards balancing female working roles rather than male.

There is evidence to suggest that many employees are reticent to ask to move onto a flexible working pattern:

- The Fourth Work-Life Balance survey has found that despite 41% of employees surveyed stating that the availability of flexible working was a key reason for making a decision to work for their employer and 57% stating that the availability of flexible working was very or quite important to them now, only under a quarter of employees (22%) have requested a change to their working arrangements in the last two years²².
- Of the three quarters of employees who did not request flexible working, some 15% had not done so due to reasons related to the business/employer²³.

- Just under a third of women (28%), parents (27%) or carers (30%) had made a request. The majority of these cases were accepted (79%) with the outcome communicated face-to-face. Hence, just over a fifth of those with caring responsibilities were rejected²⁴.

As such, while there are clearly moves on the part of employers to develop their offer, there is some way to go before flexible working becomes normalised into mainstream working practice. Moreover, a significant minority of employees with caring roles are struggling to obtain the flexibility that they need in order to combine work and care.

Current barriers to flexible working: the implementation gap

As the figures outlined above demonstrate and in order to comply with statutory duties outlines in the 'right to request' legislation, the great majority of employers now offer at least one flexible working option. However, while most employers would state that they are family friendly and supportive of flexible working, the reality is that many employers are 'family friendly' on paper without committing to it in practice. For many employers, there are a number of 'implementation gaps' and perceived constraints that continue to create barriers for employees wanting to secure flexible working.

Traditional Workplace Cultures

The overriding barrier towards implementing a full flexible working policy is a traditional workplace culture that remains wedded to a conventional 9-5 working pattern (or longer working hours) and where physical visibility and availability is viewed as a key aspect of performance. A traditional workplace culture can lead to flexible working being perceived narrowly; as a necessary burden that is primarily to deal with mothers returning from maternity leave. As such, traditional workplace cultures create a limited vision for flexible working which pits those with caring roles (particularly mothers) against the broader workforce and management and can mean that fathers feel unable to request a change in their working patterns. As Caroline*, a human resources professional in a large outsourcing company of 5,000+ employees states:

“The culture here is quite closed to flexible working – it is really only seen for people returning from maternity leave and it is not seen as wider than that... It is a very male orientated company and there are still an awful lot of old fashioned views. While we are trying to move away from that – as much as you brand yourself as open to diversity and all that good stuff - you can’t actually change the perceptions and judgments of people”

Michelle, HR Advisor, Company X

Encouraging diversity should be a key aim for every employer and introducing flexible working policies for all employees can assist employers to break perceptions of flexible work as 'something for women' which has potential career limiting consequences for this group.

“I know we have a policy, but we simply don’t promote it. We think that it would be an issue on site.”

Lauren, Recruitment Manager, Company Y

A reactive rather than proactive approach to flexible working requests

Organisations that do not translate their flexible working policies into their forward planning and overall strategy will tend to treat flexible working requests on a case-by-case basis. As such, requests will appear 'outside' of the 'normal' business practice which strongly counters against requests being viewed favourably and instead conditions managers towards looking at the business case against a request.

“We have a very comprehensive flexible work policy on paper – but because it is not used widely - it is difficult to use it. A manager will only look at a policy when they get a request. ”

Michelle, HR Advisor, Company X

As Ellen, a law administrator found when asking to move from a 37 hour per week contract to part-time (9:30am - 2:30pm):

“In my initial request I put down solutions as to how it could be managed and I did suggest a part-time job share. When I had my consultation with HR they seemed positive, yet when I got back a letter they said that it wasn’t cost effective to do that and that they needed to cover someone from 9 o’clock to 5:30 pm” Ellen, Law Administrator

For Ellen she felt that this decision was not seriously considered:

“The firm claims to have a flexible policy that works for families. I would have considered reducing my hours so that it would be more workable for another employee, but my manager simply wanted to the consistency of having the same person doing the job.

It was written into my final letter that I could either work full time hours or hand my notice in. So those were the choices I was left with. They didn’t come up with any other solutions at all.

I don’t think it was considered fairly. Flexible working is meant to open other avenues to make it workable.”

Ellen, Law Administrator

Inadequate managerial training on flexible working

Organisations that do not combine flexible working policies with full line manager training will find that many of their managers will feel that flexible working places insurmountable burdens to working practice. For line managers, flexible working requires a different management style and hence they may be worried about monitoring performance and client service levels with these workers. Securing line manager ‘buy in’ to flexible working and providing adequate training is a key challenge of an organisations’ human resources team. A survey of managers by the Institute of Leadership and Management found that nearly half (44%) stated that they were unprepared for the management of flexible workers and only 23% had received any training on how to handle flexible staff. Adequate training and support for managers is urgently required to break down line manager perceptions about flexible working as a burden.

“We had a flexible working request from an employee to move shift hours so that they could plan their childcare around it. The Manager wasn’t keen and we had to have lengthy discussions with the manager to say that there is no reason why you can’t do that for the employee. If there is a business reason for not doing it fine let’s talk about it but most of the time there aren’t business reasons, but it is a case of the manager thinking differently about it. It is the role of HR to bring our policies to life and make managers really understand flexible working and work with it.

Michelle, HR Advisor, Company X

For some staff, such as Karen who works in a council run Sure Start Children’s Centre, there is clearly a great deal more work to be done to train managers to adapt to a flexible working scheme:

“I need to be working 33 hours a week to make ends meet. When the managers rejected my request to have one morning off I appealed. They came up with two options: reducing my hours even further which financially we can’t do or demoting me – which I won’t do as I worked hard to get where I am.

I think that the problem we have is that the managers we have just aren’t flexible. They are saying in a meeting how important it is that every person gets a good family life as well as the ability to choose good quality childcare. Yet it was suggested that I choose alternative childcare that fits in better with work, but that means compromising on quality and I won’t do that.

I work for the council and you would think that they would be one of the better people to do this. It is almost like saying, in the council, if you want this position you can have it but it won’t fit in with your family”

Karen, Children’s Centre worker

A lack of communication and consultation with staff

Evidence from our case studies showed that flexible working requests are not being communicated to the team in which the employee requesting works. In instances described here, a conversation with the team may have led to a request being accepted. As Caroline, a team leader in customer services in the manufacturing industry who wanted to move from full time hours to part-time (one day off per week) found:

“I received a letter to say my request had been rejected. I appealed and agreed to a compromise to work three days part time and three days six hours. I think it is more confusing for customers to say I work certain hours across the week. For my team, they will have to pick up extra work across the week. Chatting to another colleague and asking her how she feels – which I believe should have happened – she said that it would have been much better to go with my original proposal rather than jumbled up hours. Both of us who do the job believe it will cause them more work having a couple of hours off, rather than the whole day”

Caroline, Team Leader

The most successful organisations are the ones that talk openly about flexible working requests so that the whole team knows exactly what’s going to happen, how tasks are going to be shared out and who does what and when. It may involve having quite regular meetings, evaluating how it’s going and making changes if necessary – but it will likely make the team bond together.

Underuse of flexible working trials

Similarly, we found evidence in our case studies that managers were either reluctant to use flexible working trials or misleading employees as to their use during or before the formal process. In part this is due to the perception on behalf of employers and employees that the restriction of one request per year means that once a formal process has started a decision on flexible working must be made quickly and within statutory limits. It is clear that some employers are unclear about the use of

informal trials or misleading employees over their use in the statutory process.

For two of our case studies, they felt that this contributed to the decision to move to a refusal of the request.

“I asked if I could trial my new hours and I was told that I couldn’t really trial it as that would be changing it in the year and I thought fair enough. I came away from the meeting feeling positive but then I got a really cold letter saying I’d been refused and I was devastated. Another colleague works four days and manages and I know I can do my job in four days, but the fact that they wouldn’t trial it – they refused to trial it for me - makes me really angry”

Caroline, Team Leader

“I thought the request was going to be taken seriously. But to me it wasn’t convenient for them and they didn’t try or use a probation period – i.e. we will give it a try for three months and see if it will work- there was nothing. As far as I knew they were going to advertise the role and see what interest that would garner, but I don’t think that they did.”

Ellen, Law Administrator

A trial of flexible working hours can be an effective approach to test whether a new flexible working pattern will work. As our case study demonstrates, there is some confusion over flexible working trials. It is not the case that a trial will automatically lead to a change in contractual terms nor affect the process of one statutory request per year. As outlined in the preceding section, a flexible working trial can be arranged informally if you know your employee is thinking of changing their hours or both parties can agree to an extension of the time in which a formal decision is made.

It is also clear that the current restriction of one flexible working application per year will restrict the numbers of successful flexible working requests – particularly in cases where employees have a change in circumstances (such as the need to care for an elderly relative) within that time.

The costs of flexible working refusals

The impact on work, wellbeing and family life

For all of our case studies, a flexible working refusal has had a significant negative effect on their family life and led to a diminution in feelings of goodwill and commitment towards the workplace. For some parents, it has even meant that they have been forced to leave their job.

“I’m devastated that I’ve got to work the five days, I only see my son for short afternoons in the week, after nursery when he’s tired so it’s not going to be the best quality time with him. I’m a bit resentful of my partner as he gets a day off and can spend a whole day with him and strangers get to be with him, but I can’t.

It has means financially we are struggling. We have to have nursery three days instead of two and we are keeping two cars going because we can’t share even though we only work a mile apart”

Caroline, Team Leader

“I did find it difficult returning to work. They had made their decision and that was final. I bit my tongue and thought well there’s no point in arguing it – it has happened and I don’t want to create any more drama at work – do you know what I mean? I thought I would be fine, but it hasn’t been fine. I had to hand in my notice. The shame was that it was a lovely place to work for and I honestly wish that I could have been there for years. It had great prospects and a really friendly environment but after all that happened I felt quite half-hearted about it”

Ellen, Law Administrator

“At the moment I just don’t want to go back to work. I am absolutely dreading having to go back. I had a meeting with my manager on Monday and things got a bit heated because they were saying things that just weren’t true and it’s not resolved. It puts me in a really difficult position, having to go back with it unresolved.

It’s not personal about anyone at work – it is just about me trying to get the best of being at home and at work. Because of the hours I work I would have to have a before and after school club for my son and I would have to have that for the whole week – it’s £50 a week which adds up. We are lucky because we have parents who will help with the baby but we will be still paying for three days a week for him and it is a long day for them. If you have had a full day at school- getting dropped off at half past seven and not get picked up until 5 o’clock. It is a long day for them. ”

Karen, Children’ Centre Worker

Our case studies reflect national research that shows that an absence of work life balance creates significant stress for employees which is unambiguously related to poorer work productivity, staff morale and absence rates²⁵. An absence of work-life balance policies also greatly increases the likelihood of employees exiting the labour market all-together which has associated costs for business in terms of retraining existing staff, recruitment and training for replacement employees²⁶.

The overarching goal of flexible working must be that more children grow up in happy families without the stress of poverty. The key factor in determining if families are happy is the quality of the relationships between people, rather than the structure of those relationships. Families need options to allow them to make choices that work for their families emotionally and financially²⁷.

Family Friendly: the case for flexible working for all

Flexible working should be seen a dynamic policy for all employees (for men, women, old and young) which supports staff to combine work, care and family life in the broadest sense. Family Friendly policies facilitate choices about work and care, ensuring that families have adequate time and material resources and thereby enhance child development. They also promote diversity, work wellbeing and contribute towards better gender equality in employment opportunities. In this way, family friendly policies should be viewed as integral to a progressive workplace culture that supports high quality, highly productive working.

The business case for family-friendly policies

There is a clear business case for having family friendly workplaces. As the case study from Ford shows, flexible working should be seen as an integral strategy to meeting the demands of a globalised economy and doing business internationally. For Ford, flexible working is mutually supportive of new business practices and is

seen as a method of creating high quality employment for all members of staff – elevating a family-centred approach to the heart of working practice.

There are a number of distinct business benefits that are associated with family friending flexible working.

Long term retention of the workforce

As was shown in the preceding section, the availability of flexible working is a key driver of parental decisions to return to the workplace. Mothers in particular will be much more likely to return to work if there is flexible working available. As UK business, BT found when implementing full flexible working practices, 98% of women on maternity leave returned to work²⁸. Keeping these key skills within an organisation will pay dividends in terms of reduced costs, better institutional memory (by retaining experienced workers) and contributes to ensuring greater diversity in senior management positions in the future.

While the link between flexible working and retaining employees with children is clear, many other workers now

“There are significant business benefits of flexible working, particularly in a global company like Ford Motor Company whereby employees may be working across different time zones in different continents. Additionally, technological advancements such as the ability to access work emails on smart phones, have supported employees being able to work effectively from any location and at any time with minimal additional cost to the business.

A range of flexible working options (part time working, working from home, changes to start/finish times, job sharing) have enabled us to provide meaningful roles for employees wishing to balance careers with home commitments. Our experiences has shown that this is of particular importance to working parents and has also enhanced our ability to retain employees following periods of maternity leave”

Mitra Janes, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Ford of Britain

need to have more control over where and when they work. People are working longer, either through choice or due to financial commitments. Many older workers are highly skilled and experienced. Retaining these older experienced workers with flexible working policies – such as allowing remote working to avoid long commutes or gradually scaling back hours can allow an organisation to phase in new (younger) employees and transfer such skills²⁹.

While dealing with the economic downturn, a growing number of employers have begun to recognise that the use of flexible working can increase retention of their top performers and hold onto their particular skills and knowledge.

“If I couldn’t do the hours that I am doing now, I just wouldn’t be able to be here – basically- work needs to fit in with school hours. I have a young daughter who is at school and a toddler I have no family living locally to help with childcare. We are in a catch 22 position- just like most of the British public as we have mortgages and car loans to pay and all our money goes on food and things- the cost of living and childcare is extortionate.

Having work life balance and being happy at home means that working is much more enjoyable. I am one of those people who I know that if my child was upset if they had to go off to the childminder, I couldn’t do my job the way I do it. And we are quite flexible around here – if there is a meeting that comes up in the afternoon then nine times out of ten someone can cover it and if we have a meeting coming up then I will cover theirs. We tend to email each other and we have such a strong team – we have worked together for a number of years and we have all got kids”

A Family Lives ‘term time working’ Family Support Worker

Reducing stress and increasing work productivity

Workplace stress is a leading contributor to diminished workplace productivity and employee absence. A recent study of 24,000 IBM staff worldwide who were able to work flexibly were able to work 19 hours per week before

they experienced the same levels of stress as those who did not work flexibly³⁰.

For employees who have more control over managing their workloads around other outside life commitments (whether caring for a child, participating in after work study, professional development or volunteering as a school governor or trustee), research finds that employees feel a sense of empowerment and job satisfaction which in turn increases work productivity during working hours³¹. Research also finds that using flexible working to increase personal productivity is a particular motivation for men who report much higher levels of performance when working in this way³².

The work environment may be full of disruptions, such as social encounters with other employees, co-workers’ nearby conversations or electronic media, making it difficult to complete work in the office or while the office is at its most busy. Allowing remote working or non-standard hours can allow employers to complete work related tasks in a more efficient manner and decrease stress by reducing the amount of time spent commuting. In a major study of work life balance both genders reported that remote working increased the quantity of work achieved and those on reduced hours reported working more intensely during the time they were at work.

“I would struggle to work full time hours. I have two young boys and a husband who works away and long hours. I also have a voluntary job which I really, really love. It would take a lot to make me go full time.

It is much less stressful for me to work flexibility. When I need to be in the office, I can miss the traffic which helps. It saves me and the business time. It means I am not caught in a rush hour. My time is more productive”

A Family Lives ‘flexible working’ Family Support Worker

Reducing business costs

Remote and flexible working practice can significantly reduce an organisation’s fixed office costs as has been the experience of Family Lives. A growing number of

organisations now provide mobile working devices such as laptops and smart phones and have implemented hot desking policies for pools of workers to share office space. According to a survey of 1001 CEOs in 11 countries, by 2013 there will be a 249% increase in the number of personal devices used to support remote and flexible working. 83% of these CEOs thought that flexible and remote working increases productivity³³. However, Microsoft estimate that currently only 34% of businesses in the UK have the basic technologies required for flexible working such as laptops, remote connection to the company network that enable a variety of working styles³⁴. Clearly there is some way to go in creating truly modern workplaces but for those that do, exploring cost effective IT options or investing can pay dividends.

Family Lives has embraced flexible working to support our workforce and given that it has delivered a 52% year-on-year reduction in fixed office costs it has also delivered us essential savings. Similarly, Wakefield council expects to save £1 million per year in property costs and a further £100,000 per year in fixed telephone expenditure through deploying technology to promote flexible working. In addition, BT estimates that remote working has saved £500 million in 2011 alone³⁵.

With the ongoing focus on reducing carbon emissions, flexible working can be a key way to improve an organisation's environmental credentials. Over a fifth of UK domestic carbon emissions are from traffic and as such remote working can reduce these levels and also save costs on parking³⁶. An additional benefit is also to reduce costs to employees. Significant rises in season tickets and petrol in recent years have put more pressure on parents and workers to make work pay, especially when pay has been in decline or static. Flexible working can go some distance in making the family income go further.

Key Tips for implementing Flexible Working

The practical objections often raised by managers are not insurmountable – it just calls for a bit of thought, careful planning, clear communication and appropriate training for everyone involved.

- Investing in clear forward planning can pay dividends later when a flexible working request arrives. Flexible working training for all line managers should look at the process of the statutory working request and analyse the sequence of events, from communication to implementation, performance management and review. Job performance should take into account a line manager's ability to manage workers remotely.
- Investing or investigating new technology. Technology is the enabler of remote and flexible working, allowing employees to maintain personal relationships. Mobile devices, remote network access and/or cloud services, desktop visualisation, video conferencing, and social media can allow colleagues to work together despite being physically separated and many of these systems can be implemented at low or no cost.
- Reassess work roles. Take an open, objective look at job design in terms of the roles' real objectives and deliverables and the critical factors affecting the job. For example are there things that need doing every day? Is the role customer facing? Is it a task or project-based? Does it need to be carried out in the office? Job designs should be periodically reassessed to assess their compatibility with a flexible working model.
- Communication with the broader team – team members may have a perspective on helping make a flexible working option work (i.e. another worker may prefer to cover later/earlier hours). Flexible working requests should be seen in context of a broader team and the potential to work together in ways that make sense for each of the team.

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