



Diversity Works for London

A flexible working framework for recruitment, development and training



Approaching the recruitment, development and training of staff within a flexible working framework need be no more complicated than recruiting and developing traditional workers, although it does require some creative thinking and good management. This tool identifies the action necessary to build a skilled workforce willing and able to work flexibly.

Flexible working can be highly productive and managers are encouraged to recognise the benefits that this can bring to the working environment as well as to team and organisational outcomes. Research carried out by the charity Working Families has shown that people who work flexibly and those who manage them feel more productive than their colleagues with no flexibility; with part-time workers feeling themselves to be the most productive of all. Flexible workers also appeared to be more motivated than those without flexibility and were much less likely to throw a 'sickie'. Both flexible and non-flexible workers alike identified the ability to work flexibly as the most important factor in achieving high productivity levels.

Recruitment

Offering flexible working arrangements to new employees from the outset can attract a wider pool of talented candidates. Filling a vacancy with a flexible worker is no more complicated than recruiting someone for traditional working hours, it simply requires a little more analysis as you progress through the steps in the recruitment process.

Review the job description for flexible working possibilities

It is good practice to review the content of a job description as soon as a vacancy arises. Where a postholder has been employed for some time, the nature of the job and the importance of the tasks may have changed. Ideally, the input of the current postholder and his or her manager should be sought. At the same time, an analysis of the key tasks will identify which are time critical and which are location critical (i.e. must be carried out on the employer's premises). Tasks which can be carried out anywhere provide an opportunity for home or remote working, either part or full-time. Identifying when tasks must be done provides an opportunity for structuring working hours differently (for example, annual hours, compressed hours or flexitime). The tool 'Flexible working – the options' provides more information on the range of ways working time can be structured.

Work with relevant staff

Having identified the possibilities for flexible working, it is important to identify and work with relevant staff who may need persuading of the benefits of allowing greater flexibility. In particular, you should ensure the line manager for whom you are recruiting is convinced of the benefits. Where flexible working is a new arrangement for your organisation, it may be necessary to offer the manager support (perhaps through training or coaching) to equip him/her with the necessary confidence and trust to agree to the notion of recruiting a flexible worker.

Develop a person specification based on competencies

A person specification should be reviewed each time the vacancy recurs. In addition to changes in the tasks which comprise a job, there may have been changes to legislation or some other requirement may have altered. Wording used to stipulate essential requirements should be reviewed to ensure specific groups are not inadvertently being discriminated against. Essential skills and qualities must be capable of being measured objectively – and adopting a competency framework will enable this.

Draft and place an appropriate advertisement

The choice of words and phrases used in the advertisement is likely to influence who responds. For example, including a phrase such as ‘all jobs are open to flexible working arrangements from the outset’ will signal the employer’s willingness to consider candidates unable to work traditional hours and who might otherwise decide not to apply. In the UK the phrase ‘part-time’ is still typically associated with lower skilled jobs offering little in the way of career progression which may be unattractive to jobseekers, thus reducing the number of applicants. To attract qualified or professional staff, using phrases such as ‘job-share’ or ‘reduced hours’ is likely to be more successful.

Conduct competency based interviews

A proportion of potential employees looking to work flexibly will either not be in work at present, or will have had periods out of the workforce in the past (for example, those who have taken time off for caring responsibilities). Conducting competency based interviews allows these candidates to demonstrate their capability without necessarily relying on workplace experience. For example, they may have gained skills in a voluntary capacity or simply as part of their daily lives. Provided they are able to give sufficient evidence that they meet a competency, how they have gained that skill becomes irrelevant.

It is also important at this stage to consider what additional skills or knowledge a candidate may require to ensure the success of a flexible working arrangement. For example, an employee on flexible hours may need to be better organised than his or her colleagues, to ensure deadlines are met and colleagues know when he or she can and cannot be contacted. An employee working entirely from home may need higher level skills with IT packages since he or she will not be able to call on workplace support so readily. It is important to have a range of flexible working opportunities and provide relevant training programmes dependant on the flexible working option chosen.

Training and Development

All employees are likely to require a minimum level of training during the course of employment – to keep up with legislative developments and ensure their work is carried out in accordance with organisational policies and procedures. Providing wider opportunities for development will ensure the workforce is also equipped to meet future challenges. A flexible working framework to support training and development will allow an organisation to focus on outputs rather than hours worked and be flexible in accommodating the work-life balance needs of staff. Furthermore, supporting employees who work flexibly or on reduced hours to increase their access to developmental opportunities is the sign of a visionary employer who is likely to reap the benefits of working above and beyond their obligations set out in equality legislation.

Adopt a competency based approach to development

Competencies are the means by which an organisation defines for employees what is expected of them in terms of scope and level of performance. They give the employee a 'map' of the behaviours that will be valued, recognised and in some organisations rewarded. Competencies describe both the expected outcome of individual efforts and the manner in which these should be carried out. A survey carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2007 revealed 60% of respondents had a competency framework in place for their organisation and almost half of those who did not intended to introduce one. CIPD have also found the most commonly found competencies are: communication skills, people management, team skills, customer service skills, results-orientation and problem-solving.

The main benefits of adopting a competency framework are:

- Employees have a set of objectives to work towards and are clear about how they are expected to perform their jobs;
- Appraisal and recruitment systems are fairer and more open;
- There is a clear link between organisational and personal objectives;
- Processes are measurable and standardised across the organisation.

For an example of a competency framework, download the tool 'A guide to developing competencies that support diversity'.

Do not assume flexible workers are less committed to their careers

There is a lot of evidence to show that employees wishing to reduce their working hours often pay a penalty by having to take work below their skill level - representing an under-utilisation of resources by employers. Where someone wants to change their hours from full to part time they will often have to change both employers and occupations to do so; and there is a tendency for the change to be associated with downward occupational mobility. Higher level occupations are rarely available on a part-time basis so individuals qualified to do these jobs but who would like to work reduced hours are faced with the choice of either working full time or opting for a lower level occupation.

A two year research project undertaken by Cranfield School of Management in collaboration with Working Families found that across 7 major blue chip companies from a range of sectors, flexible working can be a win-win option for employees and employers and is most successful where it is available to *all* employees.

This report highlighted a number of key findings including that flexible workers had higher levels of organisational commitment and in some cases had higher levels of job satisfaction. The report also found that flexible working had a positive effect in reducing stress levels and that flexible workers, co-workers and their managers reported either a positive or no impact on an individual's performance both in terms of quantity and quality of work produced.

Shift the emphasis from training to learning

Activities such as coaching, mentoring and peer-group learning, as well as individual e-learning and other forms of self-study can all form part of the learning and development process. Traditional forms of training and development where staff are expected to attend training sessions for a set period of time, often off-site, may prevent people working flexibly from participating. Where developmental needs are identified and learning evaluated through a formal appraisal system,

employees can take charge of their own development, structuring activities to suit both their learning style and their working pattern. This in turn allows more developmental opportunities for employees who may be unable to attend traditional instructor-led, content-based training activities.

Provide support for managing flexible working arrangements.

Where employees are working flexibly for the first time, or managers are managing it for the first time, training and support may need to be provided to ensure the success of the arrangements. Research by Henley Management College has shown there is no significant difference in the management processes needed for flexible working, but managing these employees is more challenging and requires a higher level of competence. Relatively few managers have ever received management training specifically for this type of working. Henley identified the top three practices critical for managing flexible workers as being 'communication', 'trust' and 'objective setting'. In addition, flexible workers themselves felt that motivation and team building were equally important skills for their managers, together with giving feedback.

Having clear ground rules, such as those found in the tool 'Creating a flexible working culture' will help to clarify responsibilities.