



## Introduction

Flexible working policies work most effectively if there is a working culture that supports them which is backed up by a sound business case and strong HR policies. Many organisations find that they can reap the business benefits of flexible working if they offer it to all employees and this can also help to overcome any stigma that may be associated with working flexibly. The extent to which employees feel able to embrace flexible working depends both on how supportive the organisational culture is towards this way of working. This tool is designed to help you create a flexible working culture in your organisation but you also need a clear business rationale for offering flexible working. Download the tool 'The business case for flexible working' to help you identify yours.

If you are just starting on the flexible working journey, you may wish to target the areas identified by your business case as most likely to benefit. Taking a 'pilot' approach like this enables you to monitor how your policy and procedures work in practice, and to make adjustments before rolling the process out to the rest of the organisation. If you opt for this strategy, you should also keep in mind that legislation allows some groups of employees to ask for flexible working arrangements and to challenge your decision if they believe they have been unfairly refused. The tool 'Flexible working and the law' provides further information.

These are five key steps that all organisations should undertake in order to establish a flexible working culture. These can be adapted to fit different sizes of organisation and you will be the best judge of what will suit your organisation.

## Establishing a culture that supports flexible working

The key steps to establishing a supportive culture can be summarised as follows:

1. Identify flexible working options appropriate to your organisation.
2. Develop an appropriate policy and guidelines.
3. Communicate the policy.
4. Provide training and support to managers and staff.
5. Monitor, collect feedback and adjust your policy.

These steps are considered in turn below.

### 1. Identify flexible working options appropriate to your organisation

Not all flexible working options are possible in all organisations **so you should consider what options best suit yours**. Much depends on the nature of your business. For example, if most of your employees are in customer facing roles they may not be able to work at home. However, if their main contact with customers is by phone it becomes less relevant where staff are based, provided they have access to any technology they need to do their work - which may include

customer or specialist databases. If yours is a retail or hospitality business, peaks and troughs in demand may suggest that part-time working or a shift arrangement would be appropriate. To identify the most relevant options for your organisation, download the separate tool 'The business benefits of flexible working options'.

Having identified the most appropriate options for your business, you will also need to consider what sorts of arrangements are likely to be of most interest to your employees. Offering inappropriate options reduces the likelihood they will be taken up and you may be left with the feeling your policy failed. Take a look at the profile of your workforce and consider what is important to them. For example, a predominantly young and single workforce and some disabled employees may appreciate flexibility in start and finish times to avoid morning and evening rush hours or welcome occasional home working, while parents may prefer term time or compressed hours. You could also consider consulting your workforce on what forms of flexibility they want but you should be prepared to manage expectations. The best way to do this is to present two or three ways of working flexibly that you could feasibly offer and ask staff how likely they are to use these. Once you are clear on what would work for your organisation and your workforce you can put together an appropriate package of flexible working options.

## **2. Develop an appropriate policy and guidelines**

As with any other workplace policy, well developed HR policies should be in place to support flexible working.

It may seem overly bureaucratic and rigid to draw up formal HR policies, but there are two very good reasons for doing so:

Firstly, it makes it clear to staff what is and is not acceptable to the organisation and provides a framework within which to negotiate individual employment contracts.

Secondly, the process of drafting a policy and supporting guidelines can be very useful in helping you to clarify your thinking.

The purpose of writing a policy statement is to convey the spirit of what you are trying to achieve. For example, recent legislation has introduced a 'Right to request flexible working' for some groups of employees. You may decide that your policy is to extend this right to all employees or you may simply choose to follow the law. For more information on the law, download the tool 'Flexible Working and the Law' which sets out the different laws that could be used to support a flexible working policy.

In addition, your employees and managers will need guidelines to support them in working through the process and negotiating a flexible working arrangement that suits all concerned.

## **3. Communicate the policy**

When a new policy has been developed or an existing one revised, it is essential to communicate this to all staff. Research carried out by the charity Working Families has shown that flexible working options are more likely to be taken up when employees are periodically reminded of their existence and where there is a continuing dialogue between managers, employees and the organisation. Some employers support this by hosting events around employee wellbeing – a

series of seminars around work-life balance or a work-life balance day for example. Such events could help staff voice any concerns or grievances they have with the proposed or actual policies and they may also help in the longer term strategy of changing cultural norms around what are acceptable ways of working in your organisation.

When thinking about how to communicate your policies, you should consider the following:

- What your normal channels are for communicating with staff. For example, using an employee newsletter, HR pages on an intranet or notifications via payslips
- How will you ensure that new joiners are made aware of the policy. For example, it may help to include it in a staff handbook or inform people about it during the induction process.
- What the available tools are for reminding people that the policy exists. For example using noticeboards to advertise it or putting a paragraph in the company newsletter. Perhaps your organisation could host a special event around employee wellbeing.
- Where employees or managers can find more information about the policy if they need to.

Having a senior staff 'champion' visibly support flexible working arrangements is a powerful way of changing the culture. There may already be someone at board level in your organisation who is convinced of the benefits of offering flexible working arrangements. This needs to be through deeds as well as words i.e. that staff at senior levels are seen to access flexible working policies. Where employees regularly see senior people 'walking the talk' they will believe the organisation truly supports flexibility and will be more likely to adopt the same behaviours themselves. It also supports the message that flexible working can apply to a range of employees with diverse needs at various levels and at various stages of career without causing a negative detriment.

#### **4. Provide training and support to managers and staff**

Line managers are key to making policies work successfully. Faced with a request to change an individual's working arrangements, a busy manager may be tempted to refuse since agreeing to the request is likely to place an additional burden on them and their team. A wise employer will understand the need to train managers in how to manage flexible working arrangements. This can be offered as a stand alone module or part of a broader management training programme. Easily accessible written guidance should also be available as a backup and to remind the manager of key issues when actually faced with a request.

Employees also need to understand that moving to flexible arrangements is, in part, a negotiation between them and their manager and team colleagues (assuming they work in a team). They will need support in thinking through the implications for themselves and their work as a result of the change in their work arrangements.

The tool 'A flexible working framework for recruitment, development and training' considers these issues in more detail. In addition, having 'ground rules' such as the ones provided at the end of this tool, can make things easier for all concerned.

#### **5. Monitor, collect feedback, and adjust your policy**

No matter how well written or detailed a policy is, there is no way of predicting how it will operate in practice until it is made available to all staff, so building feedback into the process is essential as it will enable you to make adjustments to ensure the continuing success of your initiative. Where employees make requests under legislation they are required to complete certain documents and having these collected at a central point provides a simple feedback mechanism. Alternatively,

working patterns can sometimes be tracked through payroll records or on specific forms which staff can be asked to complete.

Problems with flexible working can arise when arrangements are informal – a common situation in many organisations. In these circumstances it can be more difficult to get a clear picture of how well your flexible working policy is operating. A lack of transparency may also cause resentment towards those who do have access to this way of working. Your organisation could collect feedback through, for example, posing questions about flexible working in an employee survey, running focus groups specifically around the topic, and including questions in appraisal/performance management documentation. Hosting events such as work/life balance days or weeks can also allow staff the chance to raise concerns they may have about how the policies are being implemented.

## HR policies vs a culture of flexible working

Changing organisational culture requires changes in the way flexible working is viewed by employees. Often it is viewed as a policy for women with children – and this can be despite extensive attempts to promote flexible working as a benefit to the whole workforce. Such a perception can be held by both sexes, across age groups and at all levels in organisations. Furthermore, the assumption is that having a work-life balance and a high flying career are mutually exclusive: employees expressing a desire to work flexibly or have a better work-life balance are seen as less committed and less professional. Unfortunately, simply shifting the focus to men will not overcome this: where fathers make use of flexible working policies charges of unfairness become transferred from women to parents, and this is likely to be a deterrent to both sexes from accessing the policy.

Flexible working can succeed if the policy is communicated across the organisation and offered to a range of your employees. Offer a range of flexible options that suit your organisation and therefore a range of needs (child or elder care, reduced hours to facilitate access to medical care or assist planning for retirement etc).

For the policy to succeed cultural expectations in your organisation must change. Leaders have a crucial role to play in this. They need to be role models and to communicate why new behaviour is needed, supporting others and changing the criteria by which people are recruited, promoted and judged. If the change is to be successful there must be an 'inner' shift in people's values, aspirations and behaviours and an 'outer' shift in processes, strategy, practices and systems. This will take time and it is important to recognise that people in an organisation do not simply do something new; they build their ability to do things in new ways.

### Ground rules

A set of underlying principles must be accepted by senior management, line managers and all employees if flexible working arrangements are to be implemented successfully. These are:

- It is a partnership. Making flexible working work for the organisation, team and individual requires co-operation. While there will be benefits in more flexibility for life outside work, there must be give and take to meet business or service needs.
- It is about results and outputs, not about long hours in the office. The focus is on goal setting, targets and objectives; and on managing by results.

- It is about good communication. Every employee working flexibly must ensure everyone who might be affected knows and agrees to the changes. This means talking regularly with managers, colleagues and clients.
- It is about staying flexible. Where flexible arrangements are a new way of working they may need fine tuning. Part of working in and managing a flexible team is an ongoing commitment to reviewing the situation to ensure goals and targets are being met.
- It is something for everyone. Regardless of age, culture or gender, all employees can benefit from flexibility. Resentment from employees excluded from flexible working options can contribute to poor morale and relationships; and to lowered commitment and retention.
- It is not an automatic entitlement. Apart from statutory leave, other flexible working arrangements should be based on a sound business rationale.
- It is at the discretion of the manager and governed by the needs of the business (except where there is a statutory legal entitlement). However, individuals should be given the right to use the organisation's standard grievance and appeals procedure where they feel their request for changed working patterns has been unfairly assessed.