

Managing flexible working practices

Level of difficulty: ●●○

Before you read

Why do companies adopt flexible working practices? Who benefits the most from these – the company or the employees? Why?

Reading

Read the article below by Philip Manchester from the *Financial Times* and do the exercises that follow.

More about results than time

Philip Manchester

On the surface, flexible working might seem to be about people being able to choose their working hours and, perhaps, spend some time working away from the office. But it is also a fundamental change in the way people work – and, more importantly, the way they are managed. Flexible working is a shift from “time-based” to “results-based” working practices and could herald the biggest change in the workplace since the start of the industrial revolution.

New employee legislation is one of the main motivations for employers to introduce flexible working practices – but not the only one. In Europe, for example, employers are obliged to offer parents with young or disabled children the right to request flexible working. While legislation is a major catalyst to introducing flexible working, there are other reasons. In the US, for example, the fall in the price of mass market computer and communications technologies is encouraging organisations to allow more home working.

Flexible working is also likely to appeal to a wider skill pool and help with staff retention. Mary Sue Rogers, human capital management leader at IBM Global Services, says that IBM has embraced flexible working to help

with recruitment. “In Europe, companies have to provide flexible working because of legislation – but it is also a way to recruit from a broader skill pool, including women and older people. With an ageing workforce we have to find ways to retain older staff. It also gives greater scope to male employees who increasingly want flexible working to create a better work/life balance. A recent survey of UK graduates found that work/life balance was third on their list of career priorities.” She adds that 55 per cent of IBM’s employees work flexibly and 90 per cent are “enabled” to do so. “To us, it is foremost a business imperative. It is about staff retention, increased productivity and cost reduction,” she notes.

A survey of 300 UK human resource professionals in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), commissioned by Arizona-based telecommunications company Inter-Tel, found that 40 per cent found it difficult to attract the right skills from their local market and 30 per cent thought they could attract staff if they were offered flexible working. But they also had significant reservations – with 93 per cent concerned that staff were more likely to bend the rules if they work from home. Doug Neal, research fellow at the US Computer Sciences Corporation, identifies this atti-

tude as being at the heart of the cultural shift prompted by flexible working: “The problem is not all with the worker – it is also with the boss. Management has to find a way to measure ‘results’ rather than time. We have to find new ways to evaluate workers – and their bosses.”

He adds that organisations must find ways to build trust between employer and employee: “How do I evaluate people when I can’t see them? In formal terms, trust is the outcome of a series of beneficial transactions. You have to build a culture of trust from working together.”

Although new legislation is forcing organisations to adopt flexible working practices, there are sound business reasons to give employees more flexibility. Organisations which have embraced flexible working have found that it can cut costs and improve productivity. More importantly, it enables them to recruit staff from a much broader skill pool and retain staff. But it does mean a fundamental change in the relationship between staff and management. Both must learn to trust each other and focus on results rather than time spent in the office.

From the *Financial Times*