

Flexible Work Arrangements – An essential Attraction and Retention Tool

Flexible Work Arrangements

A great deal has been written and spoken about flexible working as a retention and attraction tool, having recently been involved in researching and writing case studies for a new book on attraction and retention it was evident that employers who are unable or unwilling to offer flexible work arrangement to staff are missing an essential element in their 'employee value proposition'. Furthermore employers need to demonstrate a commitment to making flexibility accessible to employees once they have joined the organisation, its actually being able to work flexibly that contributes to employee retention.

HR Practitioners and researchers report that employees leave leaders rather than organisations. It is the leaders who will contribute to the success (or otherwise) of the introduction and implementation of flexible work arrangements. In many cases it is the leaders who need the help to understand why all staff should have equal access to a flexible work arrangement (although some jobs may not be possible to be undertaken) and training to ,make flexibility work in their teams.

WHO NEEDS A FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENT

One of the challenges when we talk about flexibility at work is to understand just who really needs it. Much publicity has been given to the needs of working families; we would argue that this dissection of the workforce inhibits cooperation and teamwork within the workplace given that most employees at some time in their life cycle are going to need and value a more flexible approach to where and when they undertake work.

In reality there is most likely to be a broad range of employees with different issues and concerns, which include:

- Carers but are not in a traditional relationship;
- Singles who need flexibility to study;
- People in a long distance relationship and need flexible arrangements to travel;
- Staff who are a non custodial parent and need certain shifts so that they can travel for access visits;

- Mature aged employee's who wants greater flexibility for other personal reasons.
- Employees who want to participate in community activities such as SES or Fire Services etc.

The report released by Beaton Consulting¹ which covered over eleven and a half thousand men and women - knowledge workers, in professional firms, who clearly identified that flexibility is a key issue for a high % of respondents, many of whom would not be in a 'traditional family'.

Dr Linda Duxbury's research found that:

- Staff are working longer hours and this is causing stress and high levels of disaffection with their employer.
- Only 54% of the knowledge workers were satisfied with their jobs
- Almost on in four of the knowledge workers in the study were seriously thinking of leaving their jobs
- Only 40% in the survey have high levels of flexibility in terms of work hours and work location

¹ ¹ Work/Life Balance in Australia in the New Millennium - Rhetoric v Reality- Professor Linda Duxbury for Beaton Consulting April 2008

Additional research on this issue was published by CCH Australia² in May 2008 which examines how organisations focus on the generational needs of staff.

UK Research³ shows that the past two generations of flexible working have been in response to

- the challenges of carer responsibilities,
- time spent at work,
- relaxing the boundaries of the traditional 9-5 working hours,
- changing working space as technology has improved.

It shows that the new career-focused generation of employee's wants greater autonomy and control inside and outside of work, so that the third generation of thinking on flexibility is multi-dimensional, taking into consideration not just the usual consideration to time and space, but also across employee's lifetimes. This would suggest that employers and employees need to stop thinking that flexibility is a personal issue to be negotiated on an individual basis, and begin considering it as a whole approach to the way work is undertaken in their organisation.

BUSINESS BENEFITS FROM FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Whilst it is not always easy to respond positively to requests for flexibility and there are challenges in terms of service delivery, and performance management there are considerable benefits to be accrued from investing the time and effort in making flexibility work.

Data from the 2007 national Work/Life Benchmarking Study⁴ shows that:-

- 75% of Best Practice organisations indicated that the availability of flexible work arrangements has an impact on their ability to attract and retain talent
- 2% of Best Practice organisations & 19% overall have observed an increase in turnover due to the *lack of flexibility* in the workplace
- 39% of all respondents, and 88% of Best Practice organisations, believe that work objectives can be achieved in an environment where workers plan and manage their own schedules to fit in with their life demands. This is an overall increase of 11% from 2006.
- 57% report that flexible work options have helped them to more effectively manage their people.

² Making Flexibility Work - Barbara Holmes Managing Work|Life Balance published by CCH Australia May 2008

³ Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007, *Enter the Timelords - Transforming Work to Meet the Future*, Final report of the EOC's investigation into the Transformation of Work, www.equalityhumanrights.com

⁴ Managing Work|Life Balance 2007 National Work/Life Benchmarking Study Report -Barbara Holmes

- 35% have observed an increase in requests for flexible work arrangements from mature aged employees

In addition a new study just released in the UK, of seven major blue-chip companies, including Microsoft, KPMG and Centrica, found that flexible working had a positive impact on both the quantity and quality of work produced by employees, and that flexible workers have higher levels of commitment and job satisfaction than other employees. Flexible working also contributed to reducing and managing stress levels, according to the report,⁵.

For some workers, however, flexible working in itself could become a source of stress. Clare Kelliher, co-author of the report and said the findings were important in highlighting both performance and longer-term benefits of flexible working. She also said that *"Flexible working should not be seen as an add-on activity. Other HR policies may need to be adjusted in order to ensure they support flexible working."* The two-year research project involved questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The respondents included employees that worked flexibly, those that did not and managers of flexible workers.

LEGISLATIVE DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

Legislation giving employees who are carers the right to request a flexible work arrangement has been in place in the UK for some years and its successes are currently being reviewed. Similar legislation was enacted in New Zealand and it grants employees who care for others the statutory right to request flexible working hours if they have 'the care of any person'. (NZ) (UK care for a dependant under the age of 18) It provides a framework for employees to negotiate with their employers about working arrangements.

The responsibility is placed on employers to try to accommodate requests for flexible working hours or to have a good business reason for why a request from an eligible employee cannot be accommodated.

Most recently, in Victoria, amendments were made to the Equal Opportunity Act 1995. The Equal Opportunity Amendment (Family Responsibilities) Bill 2007 this was passed by the Victorian Parliament on 5 February 2008. The legislative amendments introduce new obligations on

⁵ *Measuring Up - the Impact of Flexible Working Practices on Performance*, by Cranfield School of Management and Working Families - Clare Kelliher,

employers not to unreasonably refuse to accommodate the family responsibilities of a prospective or existing employee, in respect of the person's work arrangements. It is expected that Federal legislation will be introduced within the next two years, which has similar provisions. It is therefore important that employers prepare for these changes by upgrading their policies and supporting materials such as Guides for Managers and Employees on making flexibility work within their work groups.

Making Flexibility Work

Managing Work|Life Balance consultants have been working with a broad range of public and private sector employers for over 15 years, and have assisted them to implement their work/life strategies that include flexible working. Barbara Holmes has published numerous articles on flexibility and authored the Employee Guide, Manager Guide and Implementation Guides to making flexibility work. They are practical, tried and tested resources that are used by many best practice organisations. The following 'hints and tips' have been extracted from those guides.

HINTS AND TIPS - MAKING FLEXIBILITY WORK

- Understand the needs of the business, the managers and the employees.
- Gain commitment and buy in from Senior Executives.
- Develop and introduce flexible work arrangement policies and communicate these to all staff.
- Promote the philosophy of mutual responsibility between the employee and the manager to make a flexible work arrangement work.
- Ensure that a variety of communication processes are used. Case studies and 'employee stories' help.
- Focus on culture and behaviour change as well as processes.
- Educate and skill managers to manage flexibility within their teams
- Provide supporting materials such as guides for employees and managers.
- Emphasise the importance of monitoring performance rather than presence in the workplace.
- Communicate the decision making criteria that will be used when applications for a flexible work arrangement is being assessed
- Ensure that the infrastructure and systems within the organisation will support flexible working.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate the flexible work strategy.

Flexible Employer Accreditation

Employer branding as a flexible employer has been identified as a critical tool in attracting staff particularly in this time of skills shortage. Managing Work|Life Balance International and Part Time Online, have combined their experience, expertise and research to launch a national Accreditation process that recognises excellence and effort in the implementation of Flexible Work Practices.

Once accredited, organisations will be issued with a Flexible Employer Accreditation Logo which can be displayed on all of their marketing and promotional material, in recognition of their level of achievement in the area of flexible employment. This sends a clear message to the marketplace that they are serious about winning in the 'the war for talent and retention'.

The Accreditation aims to:

- recognise those employers who are looking to achieve excellence in the area of workplace flexibility
- showcase organisations with mature and outstanding flexible working practices and outcomes
- demonstrate and promote the business benefits of flexible working arrangements to other employers and employees
- provide organisations with a platform for benchmarking performance and driving continuous improvement in workplace flexibility practices
- equip businesses (who have demonstrated their commitment to workplace flexibility) with a tangible Employer Branding Tool in the form of a logo/banner that can be displayed on their promotional material at all times.

Additional information about the accreditation can be found on the websites.



Barbara Holmes -
Director
Managing Work|Life Balance International
info@worklifebalance.com.au
www.worklifebalance.com.au
Phone 02 9411 2434

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