



working families

TOP EMPLOYERS

changing the way we live and work

TOP 10

SMALL AND MEDIUM EMPLOYERS

FOR WORKING FAMILIES 2015



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Introduction



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The Top 10 Small and Medium Employers for Working Families 2015 offers a great view of the innovative and creative work that smaller organisations bring to flexible and family friendly working. Some of the ideas on show in these case studies are at the forefront of work-life practice, and demonstrate that implementing flexible working isn't just for big business: it works equally well in SMEs too.

What is particularly compelling is that the SMEs featured here really understand *why* it is good for their business and for their employees –they are able to clearly see the positive impact that taking a family friendly approach is making. This is important, and something that larger organisations can struggle with. By keeping in sight the business benefits, these SMEs are able to align flexibility very closely to delivering the linked goals of better business performance, and happier employees. Flexibility is strategically important, and it is central to future plans.

Understanding flexibility within the context of the business means that these SMEs can see it as a two-way street. Employees know that their work-life needs will be met, but they also understand that the business has requirements of them too. What these organisations are doing is creating a culture where you have an adult:adult conversation. Employers work with the grain of employees' lives, but if compromises have to be made employees know *why*. What is evident from these case studies is that employers are fostering a culture of trust that supports flexible working and work-life balance. Employees have more freedom about how and when they work, and they are trusted to deliver.

What are some of the business benefits that these employers are reaping from flexible and family friendly working?

There are some recurring themes. Flexible working allows them to attract a higher calibre of employee, which in turn allows them to deliver better services and products. More than one small employer talks about how their flexible offering allows them to attract people from bigger, but less family friendly, businesses. Retention is also improved, particularly women, meaning these SMEs are able to keep and develop their valuable female talent and avoid costly recruitment and associated training costs. Employee wellbeing is also boosted, with positive results on performance and productivity.

Any of these benefits would be welcome in any business, whatever the size. SMEs can learn from these case studies, and for any that are equivocal about the benefits of flexibility, they may be encouraged to look more closely at what benefits taking a family-friendly and flexible approach might bring. These case studies don't just showcase different flexible working ideas and schemes: taken together, they demonstrate across a range of organisations, how it can really work to make business better.

Sackers



At Sacker and Partners about 30 per cent of staff work flexibly at all levels. Not just secretaries and business services staff but lawyers, including 38% of the partners. Flexible working arrangements include job shares, part time working, shortened working days and working from home, where technology has enabled seamless telephone and computing access. The firm also considers temporary flexible working arrangements. This might be to deal with particular issues or responsibilities outside work (eg bereavement or to care for a sick dependant, or childcare during school holidays).

With more women now working in the legal profession there has been a particular impetus to challenge the traditional working patterns, which have often involved long hours. Sackers does not have a long hours culture, and the different flexible working arrangements in place show that it is possible for flexibility to work within a law firm environment, which creates a virtuous circle. Julia Perrin says “once an arrangement has worked it provides a positive template and people see what can be possible”. This has been supported at Sackers by the communications piece, ensuring everyone is aware of flexible working and the benefits.

Like all organisations that make flexible working successful, Sackers expects flexibility in return from its staff who work flexibly. Getting the job done well has to remain the priority. If a flexible working pattern is not working there needs to be a willingness to consider alternative patterns and approaches. There needs to be trust and commitment on either side to ensure the arrangements fit both the individual’s personal needs and the business needs.

Although employees making formal requests are still mostly women there have also been requests from men wanting flexibility. This is likely to increase with the new shared parental leave arrangements. The benefits of flexibility are reflected in low rates of attrition and good rates of return from maternity leave at Sackers.

Sackers’ approach to flexibility is part of a wider piece to ensure well-being amongst staff and to ensure women’s careers are developed. Last year the firm rolled out internal maternity mentoring. While an external company has provided maternity coaching for lawyers for a number of years, the new scheme enables those preparing for maternity leave, or newly returned to the workplace, to be mentored by a colleague. The mentor can give more personalised advice and tips from experience, covering all topics from childcare considerations to workplace challenges.

The firm has run sessions during Work Life week covering topics such as balancing work and being a parent. The firm recently joined the Citymothers & Cityfathers networks which are inclusive networks for working parents in the City who have a shared interest in balancing work and family life. They provide peer support and opportunities to attend speaker events, given by some high profile speakers. Members also have access to benefits such as ‘Emergency Childcare’ and ‘Nannyshare’.

The message from Sacker and Partners is clear: flexible working can be compatible with a career in a law firm and with business success.

Brand Learning

Brand Learning is a global consultancy with unique expertise in lifting the capabilities of people and organisations to drive growth by creating better value for their customers. Founded in 2000, by Mhairi McEwan and Andy Bird with hubs in London, Singapore and New York, the team of 120 employees have worked with over 100 leading multinational organisations (including Unilever, Shell, PepsiCo and AstraZeneca) in more than 60 countries to create sustained performance change in their commercial teams.

Cathy explains “we have a mature culture, based on trust and positive intent, allowing people in the organisation to work flexibly to meet their work commitments but also balance family life’. This desire to treat employees as responsible adults underpins Brand Learning’s attitude to flexible working. Flexible working can be agreed from day one of employment, there is “no closed door agenda” and every flexible working request is approached from the same point of view: “is it possible to meet the individual needs and also the needs of the business”. It is recognised that employees work hard in a high performance, competitive environment, servicing worldclass clients, and a lot is expected of people, but with performance management focused on outcomes and achievements, rather than on time spent in the office, employees have freedom in how and where they work. “Our clients and our people tell us that working with us feels different: we pride ourselves on being engaging, supportive partners, driven by our strongly-rooted values: Expert, Engaging, Inclusive and Inspiring Change” says Cathy.

Brand Learning underpins its approach with policy but the main strength of their flexible working provision is the culture of the organisation. Cathy feels that having a straightforward form for applying for changes in working hours and days enables employees and their supporters (line manager) to really think through how the pattern of flexibility might work for them and what the impact on colleagues and the business might be so that the optimum approach can be agreed. As Cathy says “people need to be mindful that this is a two-way commitment and we need to be mindful of both the individual and business”.

Much of Brand Learning’s flexibility supports working parents. The company has an impressive track record in both encouraging parents to return to work after maternity leave, but also in retaining them through the second child and beyond. It is important to the company that flexible workers progress and employees will be promoted on merit.

Brand Learning’s directors lead the way with their own flexible working patterns and “flexibility, fairness and maturity” are important guidelines to follow, recognising that work and life, demands ebb and flow and there has to be give and take.

Brand Learning is keen that all employees have some sort of work flexibility to help meet home commitments and following the annual “happiness survey” realised that their Operations Team, due to the nature of their roles did not have opportunities for working from home. On reviewing this the Operations Team were given 4 days per year in addition to holiday to work from home and meet home commitments such as deliveries or to get the boiler serviced for example. As Cathy says “we know that flexible working is key for retention and engagement so we will continue to consider how we can be even smarter around flexibility in the future”.

Bristol SU

Bristol SU is a democratically led membership organisation which supports University of Bristol students throughout their time at University, providing support to students regarding their health and wellbeing as well as their education and a range of social activities and events.

With such an emphasis on supporting student wellbeing, of course Bristol SU has also considered what it can do to improve and support the wellbeing of its employees.

Flexible working is seen as key to the successful operation of Bristol SU, particularly as students don't keep 9 – 5 hours! They have core hours of 10am – 4pm and operate a 'flexi-time' system allowing staff ownership of their working pattern to best fit the needs of the role and the needs of their life outside work. Occasional working during the evenings or at weekends is always claimed back through TOIL and Bristol SU also provides the option of home-working which many staff take up, particularly when they need a 'head down' day.

Bristol SU has a 'wellbeing forum' and will soon be accredited with the Workplace Wellbeing Charter which provides a framework for supporting staff wellbeing at work. The forum is working to ensure all staff are happy and well at work and supports staff to have a good work-life balance.

CiC Employee Assistance

CiC Employee Assistance is an employee assistance provider, specialising in trauma and critical incident management, which delivers programmes to organisations covering 450,000 employees across the globe. Their support lines are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and provide a service to all sectors from the NHS to corporate banks.

CiC's focus on flexibility has been crafted both from their need to operate round the clock but also from their base as a clinical service. Just as they operate to support organisations and their staff, CiC want to support and listen to their own employees. For Kate Nowlan, chief executive of CiC Employee Assistance, it's always been important to offer flexible working to employees, giving them the opportunity to make changes to the way they work in order to respond to short or long term events and issues in their roles and responsibilities outside of the workplace: "From CiC's perspective we've always been open to flexible working requests from employees and consider each individual request against the same criteria, considering how it will impact on the business and how we can work with an employee to make a change in working hours or days, or incorporating more time working from home".

Kate says her job is "to support employees to be as creative as they like" when it comes to flexible working. While recognising that the organisation has to function and that not all types of flexibility suit all roles, with discussion, employees and their managers work out what is best for them, the team and the organisation. Team work has been key to their flexibility success.

Enabling and supporting people with childcare and eldercare responsibilities are central features of CiC's flexibility. There are 30 staff but at least half are part time. As Kate says, "as 74% of the workforce is female it's been natural that some flexible working requests have been related to motherhood and childcare. But at CiC we also readily acknowledge that flexible working goes much further than helping an employee to balance childcare and other caring needs".

As Kate says "In my experience, if as an employer, you can actively show you're prepared to be flexible with your employees, they're much more likely to give back to you in return and be much more engaged with their work."

This sentiment is very much echoed by one CiC employee who said: "Not only has CiC's open approach to flexible working allowed me to extend my own clinical practice (which also ultimately benefits the company), it has enabled me to be more supportive to my mother who has an increasing number of medical needs and relies on me to be there to support her. It's an approach that works for me and my employer and without it, I would struggle, I think, in both my personal and professional life."

Edison Investment Research

Edison is an international equity advisory firm which enables its client companies to achieve their capital market objectives. The company provides unrivalled insight into the behaviour of the global investment community and supports portfolio managers with their investment decisions. Established 13 years ago, Edison's clients include both large and smaller capitalised companies, blue chip institutional investors, wealth managers, private equity and corporate finance houses.

110 people work for Edison out of offices in London, New York, Frankfurt, Sydney and Wellington. The team is made up of over 80 analysts, investment and logistics professionals with many decades of experience in capital markets, investor roadshows and investor communications across a broad range of industry verticals.

Edison is dedicated to helping individuals back into work. The company makes a concerted effort to attract returning mothers and others who have taken time out of the workplace, having found that these employees are usually, not only very well qualified, but dedicated and loyal. To attract these employees Edison offers a range of flexible working options including remote working and reduced hours, which makes coming back to work not only a viable but attractive option for many individuals. As a result of this approach, Edison's employee profile is rather unusual for a financial services company with 46% of the workforce being female.

Edison recognises the added value that family friendly and flexible working brings to the organisation, including increased levels of productivity, staff retention, greater diversity and more noticeable staff engagement and loyalty. The team works hard to ensure new staff, especially those who have been out of the workplace for some time, quickly get up to speed and have their working confidence restored. The company ensures new employees feel welcome and reassured with a comprehensive induction process and a mentor programme to guide people during their first few critical months back in the workplace.

Effective HRM

EffectiveHRM is a small but growing HR consultancy company, entering into its fourth year of trading. EffectiveHRM's main objective is to become the recognised and preferred HR outsourcing provider for small to medium businesses within South Wales & the South West, with clients UK-wide. The company currently comprises six employees, many of whom are working mothers, who recognise and appreciate the importance of work-life balance and are true advocates of flexible working. With a portfolio of over 60 clients who between them employ 2500 employees, EffectiveHRM recognises that they have the potential to make a huge impact on many people's working lives.

EffectiveHRM was established by Emma del Torto, who was herself looking for a different way of working, having been an employment lawyer. Emma had found during her working life that even when employers asked how people wanted to work, ultimately employees were still shoehorned into working in ways dictated by the employer. EffectiveHRM is attempting to change this both within their own company and through their influence with clients and the services they provide.

EffectiveHRM's employees are asked at interview how they would like to work and this is accommodated with a bit of give and take. As Emma says "our employees work hours that fit around childcare and have the flexibility to take time off work, move their hours or work from home when the need arises. We know how important it is to be there for our children when they are ill, watch them on sports day or in their Christmas concerts and we encourage our employees to make sure they don't miss out on these wonderful memories".

No-one comes into the office on a Friday and technology is used to ensure clients receive a prompt response and seamless service. Emails are centralised, cloud based CRM logs all calls and keeps everyone up to date and clients are used to the EffectiveHRM team working as a team, reassured that all are capable, up to speed and able to respond to their queries. Clients pay a retainer rather than an hourly rate to emphasise the team approach at EffectiveHRM and to encourage early involvement.

Emma does not believe that, for her own staff, there should be a trade off between earning a good salary and working flexibly. The company is keen to pay a competitive salary and to continue to expand through attracting the best quality staff. This is also aided by EffectiveHRM's approach to staff benefits. The company has recently reviewed all its benefits with staff to understand what would really be appreciated. As a consequence some benefits have gone but new ones have been introduced like a wills service. On finding that few employees had a will, the company now pays for and gives staff time to consult on, drawing up a will. In this way benefits offered are relevant and, like working hours, support the family.

iCrossing

iCrossing is a digital marketing agency with a strong heritage in search that builds Connected Brands. Established in 1997 in Brighton (as Spannerworks), the company was acquired by digital agency iCrossing in 2007 and renamed iCrossing UK. A further acquisition was again made in 2010 by the Hearst Corporation. iCrossing UK currently employs 150 staff in both their London and Brighton offices.

iCrossing attributes its business success to company culture which it believes is friendly, sociable, diverse, welcoming and caring. The remit of the HR department is to create a happy workplace; a workplace that is accommodating and supportive of each and every employee, regardless of gender, age, race, disability or circumstance. Facing the future, the HR team have identified the need for the business to support employees at every life stage; having family friendly policies and accommodating flexible working is critical to business success.

This year iCrossing has introduced a new initiative called 'Together Time', which aims to promote a culture of flexible working for everyone with caring duties, regardless of whether they work part- or full-time. Together Time allows staff to take two hours out of their day for caring duties without having to use their annual leave. Examples where this might apply include going to see their child's nativity play, going to a school assembly in the middle of the day or taking an elderly relative to the doctor's. By launching Together Time, iCrossing hopes to engender a culture where staff openly balance home with work life and celebrate family life at work. Staff know that they are trusted to get their work done and manage their own time, which enhances their loyalty to iCrossing as an employer.

All iCrossing's line managers are trained in approving and managing flexible working and the company is firmly of the belief that it cannot simply be offered as a policy hidden away in a lengthy company handbook: it needs to be lived, breathed and implemented across the business. iCrossing has made excellent use of technology to enable this to happen.

iCrossing is achieving its business aims of attracting and retaining women. In 2009, the workforce was 35% female; this figure has increased to 44% in 2014.

In 2015 iCrossing hope to enhance current policies not only assist staff as they juggle working lives with home life, but also to distinguish the company from its competitors and make iCrossing an outstanding place to work.

Parental Choice

Parental Choice has been established for over four years. It has nine staff and is growing rapidly. The founder was a city based lawyer who, on becoming pregnant with her second child, found it impossible to balance work commitments with a reasonable family life. Parental Choice was born to support working parents either individually or through their employer. Parental Choice provides a range of offerings such as childcare search options including nannies, child-minders, nursery and school places, as well as payroll, pension and contract services for those employing nannies.

As the founder set up the company to “practice what you preach”, the company’s ethos is to be as flexible as possible, with staff able to request their own working pattern, as long as it fits comfortably within other staff work patterns and the demands of clients. Employees can work completely from home, work a compressed week, part time, or term time; every option is open to discussion. No employee works a full time, traditional pattern. As well as being the work style employees want, flexibility enables the company to control its costs whilst it is growing and gives the company greater flexibility to meet the needs of its clients. The company has attracted mothers who are looking for open return to work options. Parental Choice asks its staff for flexibility in return and staff happily respond, making calls to clients in the evenings if necessary. As well as staff well-being, the focus is very much on the business case and the benefits of flexible working for the business. There is a performance culture and those who do not meet expectations are quickly identified within the peer group in this open and trusting environment.

Well qualified and skilled employees are attracted by the working environment and the flexibility offered. It is a recognised trade off that, where Parental Choice may not be able to match employees’ previous salaries, it certainly offers greater flexibility than any of its employees have experienced before. Flexibility is a day one option and all staff have a real commitment to it, keeping positive even where flexibility might be a juggling act. Staff are trusted and relied on to get the work done, and within that take whatever flexibility they need with the support of colleagues.

Parental Choice plans to keep growing but retain its flexible ethos. The company would also like to develop a more diverse employee base and looks forward to employing its first flexible dad.

Solve

Solve was set up 4 years ago by its founding Director Stephanie Robinson to offer tailored HR and recruitment advice and support to SMEs. At the time Stephanie had just returned from maternity leave and realised how difficult and expensive it can be to juggle childcare around rigid working hours, so when setting up Solve she ensured that flexible working was at the heart of the company's values and ways of working. Solve employs eight people.

Flexibility at Solve is a day one right and a candidate's preferred work pattern forms part of the discussion around their employment offer. As a result Solve has been very attractive to working mothers and employees all support one another in this trusting work environment. Everyone manages their own diary and talks openly of their commitments. If employees need to take time off to deal with a family or other issue, they can take it. Staff are however, expected to perform and to keep their clients happy with the service offered.

Solve have one male employee who also enjoys the commitment to flexibility as he is juggling working for Solve around completing his degree.

Solve are continuing to expand and make much of their flexible working pattern in their job advertisements. While they recognise that they cannot compete with larger companies in terms of salaries, they are extremely attractive to people who want flexibility and a mature, trusting work environment. As Tracey states "people want work life balance and autonomy."

The benefits for Solve have been great. The company has engaged staff, high levels of retention and is much more attractive to good quality job seekers. Staff are also reported as being highly productive and the company continues to expand, reflecting its commercial success and client satisfaction.

WorkPond

Amanda founded Workpond in 2011 while on a career break from her job as an investment analyst. With a young family, Amanda felt it would be hard to continue in her role and began to look around for flexible opportunities. Amanda was struck by how few opportunities seemed to be out there and also by how many people were looking, not just the mothers of small children but also fathers and older workers, both men and women. She noticed a growing trend in the use of consultancy and a lot of people working as interims who were under-employed. In response, Amanda set up Workpond to promote flexible working, especially to the SME sector. At first Workpond was a marketplace to promote flexible jobs but now operates more as a recruitment consultancy, analysing recruitment needs and then supplying flexible workers to a range of high growth companies.

Workpond works closely with its client companies articulating what the company wants to achieve, exploring the work patterns that might suit them and then working to find the skills that the company needs in a flexible worker. Workpond has strived to show organisations that the work they are looking for might be supplied in many different ways and in doing so has continued to educate their client companies about flexibility.

Workpond currently employs nine people who have their own varied work patterns, from one employee who has another full time role and slots in a few hours for Workpond, to others who work a variety of part time roles, to others who work more traditional patterns just for Workpond. Workpond has no fixed offices and everyone works remotely. IT supports people to keep in touch and ensures clients receive a seamless service. If someone is not available, a client contact will be escalated and the client will be responded to. The service for the client is designed to be “seamless” and not impacted by Workpond employees’ own flexible working. Any work pattern is open to discussion and most can be accommodated. More important for Workpond is that employees all share the same values, work to provide a great service and support one another. Within this, as Amanda says “no one misses the school play or even the school run”.

Workpond’s strapline is “We believe best outcomes are achieved where people’s lives and business goals are shared”. Workpond recognises that people want to be the same person at home and at work, that give and take are needed by both the employee and their employer and that flexible working is the way to achieve balance, both at home and work.

‘Workpond ‘practice what they preach’. Like most of the team, I am juggling a career with raising my children, and Workpond has enabled me to do both due to the fantastic flexibility they offer. I work mainly during school hours but if I need to attend an appointment or a school event, I can and I just make up the hours another time. Working in this way is very satisfying as I feel that I have achieved a real balance and as such am far more motivated and hopefully a more productive employee!’ Amanda Bixby, Marketing Manager, Workpond.