

Ten steps to creating a successful flexible team

1. Talk up the importance of flexible working for everyone

Flexible working makes business sense, increasing productivity, profitability and employee engagement, and allowing teams to cover periods of peak demand more easily.

Communicating this to all members of the team helps reduce any worries about working flexibly – something that may disproportionately affect the parents and carers in your team. Teams where everyone is trusted and confident to work flexibly, are teams where all colleagues will be able to give of their best.

2. Share advice and resources on flexible working

With a clear staff handbook, guides and sources of information to refer to, you can more easily apply policies on flexible working consistently across the team. Familiarise yourself with the contents of this toolkit and share it with your team. Communicate the qualities and attributes of successful flexible workers including:

- ♥ good communication skills;
- ♥ rapport and trust with you, their manager, and other team members;
- ♥ motivation and independence to work unsupervised;
- ♥ understanding of their role and objectives;
- ♥ time management and organisation skills;
- ♥ the ability to work alone without feeling isolated; and

- confidence with new technology and social networking to stay connected with others and to work collaboratively.

3. Ask what works

Most roles can accommodate some degree of flexibility. Ask your employees to identify the flexibility that fits their role, whether that is adjustments to working times, the length of the working week, work location – or no change at all. They are best placed to understand the constraints on their roles and should recognise what is and isn't possible. Employees value highly knowing that they might be able to work flexibly, should they need to, even if they do not wish to right now.

4. Get on the front foot – design jobs as flexible

Managing flexible workers successfully means paying close attention to job design. Analysing job roles and activities, including times, locations, and any factors that influence the way in which work is organised – for example, client availability – allows flexibility to be built in from the start. Make flexible working part of your recruitment process, so that it's available to new as well as current employees. This sends a clear message that you're an employee-friendly employer both to candidates and existing team members, opens your team to a wider pool of talent, and means that you have already done the thinking, should an existing team member wish to change their working arrangements.

5. Invest in your own training and development

Managing flexible workers requires trust, good planning and communication, clear objective setting and the ability to measure performance by output. This may mean changing your own mindset – shifting the emphasis from controlling tasks to trusting individuals to carry out their work unsupervised. Seek out any coaching/training you feel you need to perform effectively and to develop new skills in managing your people.

If you are new to managing flexible workers, seek out support from more experienced peers. Finding out how flexibility works in other parts of the business will increase your confidence and give you useful insights. Sharing in-house knowledge and experience can help spread best practice and ensure consistency.

6. Seek out opportunities to multi-skill your team

Training and coaching in order to create a more multi-skilled team can be helpful in

improving ability to manage workload across the team, and may also have advantages for your team in terms of giving them more varied work and improving their career development potential.

7. Set SMART objectives for your team

To help you monitor output effectively, your performance management system should be underpinned by SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). With tasks and expectations clearly defined, flexible employees have the freedom to manage their time and workload within those objectives. Consider setting multiple short-term goals for employees who spend a substantial amount of their time off-site working on longer-term projects. This will encourage closer and more regular communication, keeping the employee involved with the team. Meanwhile you can concentrate on objectives and outcomes, rather than on when or how your people are working.

8. Monitor the progress of your flexible workers

Tracking the performance of your flexible workers not only helps you demonstrate the business case. It also allows you to check that flexible workers are progressing in their careers in line with their colleagues who work in traditional ways. Evidence suggests that employees who work flexibly are often more productive than their traditionally-working colleagues, but their performance appraisal scores may not reflect this. To avoid bias, especially for team members on reduced hours arrangements, compare their relative scores with full-time colleagues, and follow up any discrepancies.

9. Agree communications protocols

Agree protocols with your team about how everyone will communicate, and encourage the use of different media according to individual circumstances. Phone, email, video calls, instant messaging, social media and collaborative software can all be used to keep workers in touch and avoid isolation.

10. Set trial periods for new arrangements and encourage feedback

New flexible working arrangements often need small adjustments to get them right. Trialing arrangements can be useful in terms of:

- allowing individuals to see if their proposed arrangement really works for them (for example, whether they feel isolated working from home or whether they can manage the longer working days associated with a compressed working week);
- assessing any communication problems and whether the intended solutions are adequate;
- building managers' and colleagues' confidence to try something new; and
- identifying issues with overall resourcing of the team, for example, specific peaks in workflow.

Trial periods are not a sign that the arrangement is failing, or that you lack confidence in it. Rather it is a chance for you to encourage dialogue about what is and isn't working, part of a process of fine-tuning to normalise and support your successful flexibly working team.

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