

ROUNDTABLE REPORT: FLEXIBLE WORKING

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INTRODUCTION

Flexible working is a hot topic among today's workplaces, as many businesses evolve their policy and mindset to keep up with employee demand. In September 2019, Tiger Recruitment hosted a roundtable discussion with HR professionals from a range of industries. The purpose? To better explore the challenges, benefits and outcomes of flexible working in real time with real HR practitioners.

According to Marketing Director of Powownow, Simon Prince, "By offering flexible working options, businesses are giving themselves a competitive edge when it comes to staff onboarding and retention". And, while return-to-work parents may have initiated the need for flexi-working, many companies now realise that in order to attract, retain and engage staff, it's more important than ever to innovate with the times.

This report brings together the key discussion points and highlights from the morning with the hope of offering guidance around flexible working implementation. An appreciation of the importance of work/life blend is exceptionally important in today's workplaces; alongside this is the execution of a successful flexible working policy.

¹A Exceptional Working Life, Creating Better Workplaces eBook

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a bright yellow coat and a matching turtleneck, is smiling while talking on a blue smartphone. She is holding a grey coffee cup in her other hand. The background is a blurred city street with buildings and a traffic light.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: TYPES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

While flexible working, at one time, was considered to be mainly working from home, today it's a very different story. Flexible working styles will depend on the person, their team, management and the company itself. Attendees at our roundtable event agreed that businesses should try and think creatively when establishing their policies; specifically, a one-size-fits all approach is unlikely to work and, wherever possible, flexible working terms should be negotiated with individual employees. Some of the following flexible working types had been implemented at their represented companies:

Working from home

Perhaps unsurprisingly, working from home (WFH) was the most common flexible working type cited at the event, with all attendees (who represented companies with flexible working

policies in place) allowing their employees to WFH. Across the board, it was agreed that employees who WFH should always be contactable during working hours, with regular communication with office-based employees central to its success.

Flexi-hours

Flexible working hours allow employees to change their core business hours, updating their start and finish times to best suit them. Additionally, it can also mean that business hours are extended. At the table, two of the HR representatives allowed their employees to flex their hours, but only if they were present in the office during core business hours, and worked a standard eight-hour day.

Job share

Job sharing, where two employees share one full-time role, is particularly popular among return-to-work parents, or those who want to work part time. For two of our attendees' represented businesses, these arrangements developed organically and are working as a successful model for future hires.

Reduced hours

A reduction in work hours is also an option for those wanting to work flexibly. At the roundtable, examples included employees' shortening their lunch breaks to leave work earlier as well as employees compressing their standard working weeks into fewer days.

In addition to these examples, flexible working may also mean that employees need to demonstrate flexibility to benefit the team. If an employee is based in another time zone, for example, it could mean that they work to suit the head office's hours, or agree to change their WFH day to cover another employee.

In every case, a successful flexible working arrangement should take an individualistic approach, with management and teams working together to recognise these options as legitimate ways of working. All attendees agreed that a mindset shift among management was key.

²https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/uk-working-lives-summary-2019-v1_tcm18-58584.pdf

54%

of UK employees worked flexibly in some way in 2018²



"A MINDSET SHIFT AMONG MANAGEMENT IS KEY"

FIRST STEPS: IMPLEMENTING FLEXIBLE WORKING

The practical implementation of flexible working can prove daunting for management teams, particularly if they've not formalised these types of policies previously. At our roundtable, all attendees agreed that flexible working should be reason-neutral, meaning that an employee shouldn't need to give a reason to want to work flexibly.

Everyone also recognised that flexible working should be open to all employees; however, it could depend on employee performance. For some, it made more sense to make their



"IN ESSENCE, THERE
IS NO ONE RULE FOR
EACH BUSINESS"

flexible working policies available to employees after their probation period; for others, they were effective immediately. Whichever approach is chosen, management should negotiate to ensure that the arrangement doesn't affect business functions negatively.

Attitudes from management are critical to a successful implementation, with one attendee stating that 'old-school management believe they have to see you to believe that you're working'. The use of an external consultant or interactive workshop may help change the mindsets of more traditional management.

Clear communication and comprehensive guidelines are critical for both management and employee expectations. These guidelines would need to include definitions of exactly what will or won't work for a specific team. Examples of important guidelines at the roundtable included:

- A limit on the number of people from the same team who WFH or work outside office hours at any one time
- The logistics of setting up the technology needed to work flexibly (e.g. soft phones, remote access, computer etc.)
- How employees outside the office attend team meetings
- Management's ability to track their team's work hours

In essence, there is no one rule for each business, however it is absolutely necessary for a formalised policy or guideline document to be implemented in order to make the situation work for both employees and employer.

³https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/uk-working-lives-summary-2019-v1_tcm18-58584.pdf

68%

of UK employees would like to work flexibly in at least one form that isn't available to them³

70-80%

of EAs ask about flexible working at interview stage
- roundtable attendee

"AROUND THE TABLE, THE
CONSENSUS WAS THAT
FLEXIBLE WORKING SHOULD
BE REASON-NEUTRAL"



WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR: CHALLENGES



For many businesses, implementing flexible working will represent a major policy and attitude shift, and will produce outcomes that are specific to each company. The identifying and management of issues throughout implementation and beyond will ensure longevity and success.

The HR professionals in attendance identified a few key challenges in their company's journey to working flexibly:

Incoming employees

When a new hire has worked at another workplace, they may be expecting the same level of flexibility as their previous employer. As different organisations currently practise varying levels of flexible working, this type of problem is inevitable. Employers should make their flexible working policy clear if asked during the interview process, as it will help to manage the candidates' expectations.

30%

of UK workers would prefer the option to work flexibly over a pay rise⁵

"EMPLOYEES WORKED AN AVERAGE OF 55 HOURS/WEEK, DESPITE BEING CONTRACTUALLY OBLIGED TO WORK 40 HOURS"

1/5

of UK workers are convinced they would be refused if they asked for more flexibility⁴

Policy management

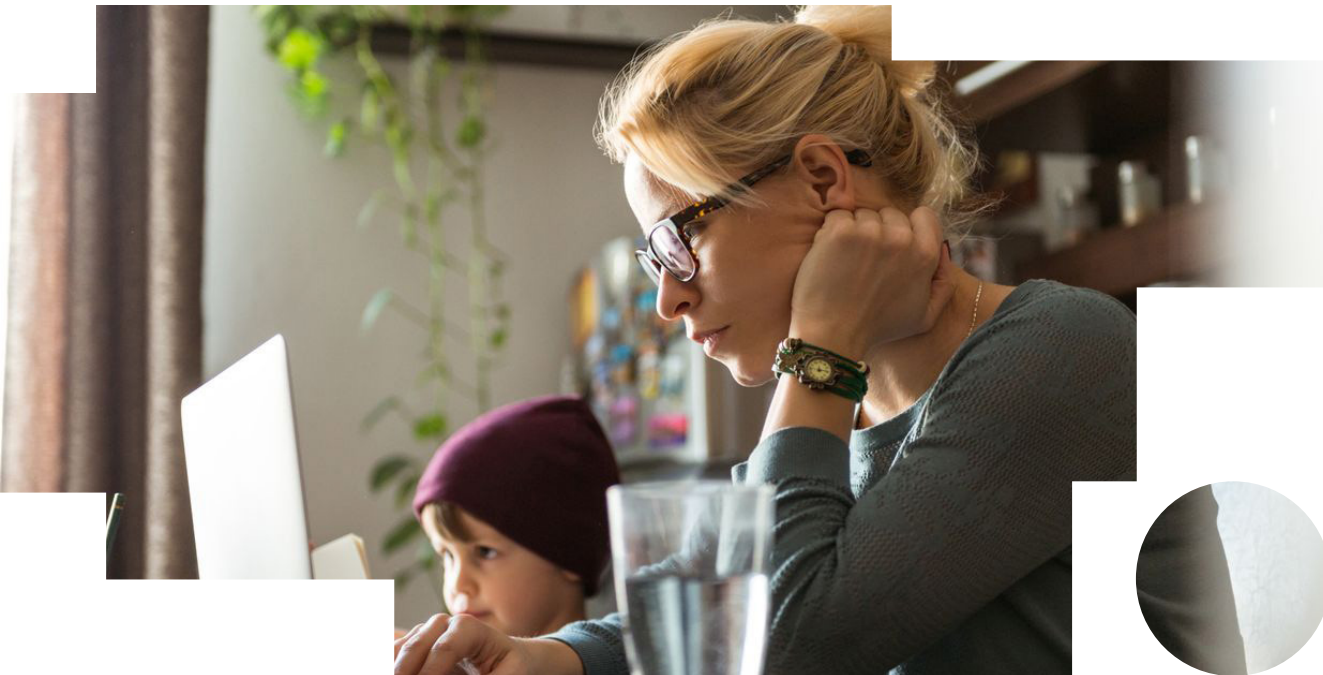
All attendees agreed that a clearly-communicated flexible working policy or guideline document was necessary for a successful implementation. Where there was no definition to specify the parameters of the policy, employers would be unlikely to maintain control over their employees' flexible working arrangements.

In one case, a company was facing the problem of too many employees working from home; this was the result of a lack of formalised guidelines. Subsequently, they found themselves in the position of finding ways to encourage employees back to the office.

Workload

On the other end of the scale, an employee may work too much if there are no defined borders between work and home life. For instance, one of our attendees (in an extremely flexible workplace) stated that their employees worked an average of 55 hours/week, despite being contractually obliged to work 40 hours. Management were looking at ways to curb this in order to prevent presenteeism, absenteeism and burnout.

⁴ <https://www.aviva.com/newsroom/news-releases/2019/03/one-in-four-uk-workers-have-quit-roles-for-greater-flexibility/>





A HAPPY WORKFORCE: ADVANTAGES

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Following the implementation of a company-wide flexible working policy, one attendee reported that EA staff turnover dramatically decreased (previously, only management was allowed to work flexibly). The same attendee stated that flexible working was also a key factor when hiring EAs, with 70-80% of candidates asking about flexible working at interview. This corroborates with research⁵ from Powownow, which revealed that a third of workers would prefer the option to work flexibly, over a pay rise.

Other positive outcomes derived from flexible working included:

Motivation

In general, flexible working policies provided a motivating force for employees. One attendee explained that a surprising number of employees in their company didn't actually take up a flexible working option; but knowing it was available gave them reassurance, just in case they ever needed to take it.

Having a flexible working policy in place demonstrates to employees that their employer trusts and is willing to invest in individuals' work/life blend. This, when communicated correctly, has the potential to be a powerful motivator for employees to perform well.

Well-being

All roundtable attendees confirmed unanimous support for the positive impact that flexible working could have on employee mental health and well-being. Specifically, transparency around policy details and encouragement of their uptake by management were identified as being key to a successful implementation.

Productivity

One attendee reported that the adoption of flexi-hours, at their business, had led to "productivity being through the roof." Allowing employees to choose their own hours meant that the business could capitalise on when employees were at their most productive and, in this case, the business directly benefited from the surge in productivity.

⁵<https://www.powwownow.co.uk/smarter-working/flexible-working-statistics-2017/>

"ALL ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES
CONFIRMED UNANIMOUS SUPPORT FOR
THE POSITIVE IMPACT THAT FLEXIBLE
WORKING COULD OFFER EMPLOYEE
MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING"

Only
9 IN 33

members of a team where
flexible working was available
have asked to take it

- roundtable attendee



SUMMARY

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As flexible working increasingly becomes more the norm than a benefit, it's imperative that employers arm themselves with both the strategies for implementation as well as the policies themselves.



The attendees at our roundtable shared varying challenges and advantages of a flexible working culture, but all agreed that flexible working represents the future of work. Where a company listens to their employees' needs and works with them to negotiate working patterns to suit their unique lifestyles, it can make for a very successful arrangement on both sides.

Tiger Recruitment produces a range of resources that shed light on the changing nature of workplaces, which you can find on our [website](#).




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