

Managing flexible teams: Managers Guide

The purpose of this document is to help you to support individuals and your team as a whole to make flexibility work well for them and the organisation.

How to support a flexible worker

As with any employee, managing a flexible worker is easier when you have regular honest discussions in place and built a relationship based on mutual trust. Here are some top tips on how to get the best out of flexible employees.

- **Work together to design a flexible role that suits all parties**

Flexibility works best when it works both ways, so make sure your employee contributes to the process of designing the role and understands what your expectations are.

- **Consider a trial period**

If you do have concerns over how well a working pattern will meet the needs of the business, consider trialling it first. Usually 6 weeks to 3 months would allow enough time to assess whether the pattern is working before agreeing to it for the long term.

- **Set clear performance targets**

It's always better to base performance management on outputs rather than inputs, but it's critical in the case of flexible workers. Identify any targets or goals carefully and make sure they're achievable in the agreed job spec. You'll need to think extra carefully about performance targets for job sharers.

- **Check in regularly**

If the flexible role you've agreed means you'll see your employee less frequently than before, build in specific opportunities to catch up, both with you and with the wider team. And make sure you factor in regular review sessions to assess how the new role is working – from both sides.

Managing flexible teams: top tips

- **Take a team approach**

Consultation within a team to manage shared flexibility across tasks can work well. A discussion as a team as to how the work can be delivered but also consideration of how individuals would like to work within that, is empowering and can help create an understanding of each other's needs and role.

- **Acknowledge there is no 'one size fits all' solution**

One of the criticisms of some flexible work arrangements is that they are not 'fair' because they are not the same for everyone. However this is because every job role is likely to have its own requirements based on the nature of the work and the needs and wants of customer/service function, and because the rest of the team does need to be taken into consideration. You can help create a sense of fairness by giving everyone the opportunity to talk about the way they like to work and considering all requests seriously. Its ok to have a 'two tier' system particularly in local government which operates as many businesses in one

- **Think about how communication will flow across the team**

If you do have a team with varied work patterns, consciously identify how communication will flow so that everyone is kept up to date. How often do you need to get together as a whole team face to face and what can be done via phone / email? Involve the team in thinking this through, including how often they want to get together informally. Social contact is a really important part of work, particularly for people who work from home a lot.

- **Work out how technology can support you (or acknowledge if it's a restriction)**

There are many great sharing platforms now so people can keep in touch, or share documents, virtually. Try out a team meeting via Skype. Keep all team communications in a shared folder. And if the technology isn't there yet to allow people to work in the way they want to, help them navigate IT to see if there is a way.

Case Study 1: Creating a successful 'agile' team

The finance team in one Council decided to trial a more proactive approach to flexible working as part of an agile project. The trial was to run for three months, which was considered long enough to test out new approaches and see if they were successful.

Before the trial started the team got together to agree what they would like to get out of the trial and how they would judge its success. They used a quick pulse survey to assess how people felt about their access to flexible working and how supported they felt to work that way.

The specific changes the team decided to try were:

- To encourage everyone to work from home one or two days a week
- To trial team meetings via Skype and to increase the use of Slack as a team chat tool
- To move away from core hours, letting people work more or less according to their workload and other priorities
- To agree key deliverables on a weekly basis, but allow freedom between times to choose how and where to work.

The trial was a big success. Over the first couple of weeks, the team adjusted to their new working approach, and struggled with the technology, but once a couple of team meetings had taken place via Skype, they felt more confident to use laptops for communication with each other and with stakeholders. Staff reported that working from home a day or two a week enabled them to work more productively for many tasks and cut down the stress of long commutes.

At the end of the pilot period, the team voted overwhelmingly to adopt the new practices on a permanent basis. The team manager is now sharing their story with other Directorates to encourage them to work more flexibly too.

Case Study 2: Team based rostering

'Caring by Design'¹ was an action research project to enable domiciliary carers to deliver a high quality of care, whilst also balancing their worklife. Timewise worked with community support provider Rathbone.

The research uncovered five constraints which make providing flexibility for carers particularly challenging in domiciliary care:

- The unpredictability of rotas
- The absence of slack in the system
- The requirement to work unsociable hours
- The amount of downtime in the middle of the working day
- The need to travel long distances between clients.

¹*Caring by Design*, Timewise, 2017. <https://timewise.co.uk/what-we-do/research/caring-design/>

We identified that a geographical team-based approach to scheduling could help to overcome these constraints, and worked with a team at Rathbone to pilot this way of working. By clustering support workers with a particular group of service users in a geographical area, travel times were reduced. This created time in the schedule for a weekly team meeting, where support workers' work-life needs and preferences could be discussed alongside service users' needs.

Outcomes

This pilot showed that the team-based approach:

- gave carers greater input into their schedules, which was reflected in higher work-life balance scores.
- improved the perceived fairness of the scheduling process.
- reduced carers' intention to leave, and improved commitment to working at Rathbone.
- improved quality and continuity of care, because better teamwork and peer support increased knowledge about service users' needs.