The Ultimate Guide to Flexible Working

for employers

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Introduction to flexible working

Flexible working rights have changed since June 2014. Previously, legislation only gave the right to request flexible working (and have employers seriously consider it) to parents with children under 18 years of age, and carers.

Now, every full-time worker who has been with their organisation for 26 weeks or more can file an official request. Employers must, by law, consider these requests seriously, and give a valid, lawful reason if they choose to reject them.

Employees can make an official request using a flexible working application form, or can choose to make an informal enquiry. In the case of the official application, employees can only apply once every 12 months, and employers must follow strict legal procedures in processing the request.

Informal applications are not covered by flexible working legislation. However, it is generally considered best practice to give serious consideration to all requests. Once a flexible working request has been approved, the new arrangement should be set out in writing for both the employer and employee, to ensure there is no confusion. If both parties are happy with the details, the employee’s contract should be updated to reflect the change.
‘Flexible working’ has almost become a buzzword; everyone in business knows the phrase, but many may not fully understand what it means. Here we highlight for employers about the most common types of flexible working, and the benefits they offer for both employees and businesses:

Remote working

Whether it’s completing job-related tasks from home or in a coffee shop, remote working involves employees undertaking all or some duties of their employment away from the office. The potential benefits to employees include being able to avoid the daily commute and enjoying a better work–life balance. Some employees find it difficult to work in a busy office with all the noise and distractions, so remote working can help improve employees productivity. As an employer, you may reap the benefits of this improved focus in the form of higher quality work. You may also enjoy lower office expenses and reduced carbon emissions. In addition to this, remote working can widen the pool of employee talent available to your business, as it means you can hire individuals who don’t live within commuting distance of the office.
Job sharing

Job sharing typically involves splitting one role between two people. The percentage split can be anything that works well for both you and the employees in question, whether that be 50/50 or where one person takes on a larger proportion of hours than their job-sharing colleague. This type of arrangement allows both members of staff to enjoy the various advantages of part-time working.

Meanwhile, employers effectively benefit from the expertise of two professionals for the price of one. This type of flexible working can be trickier than others to implement, but the benefits often outweigh the drawbacks. This is also an option for employers who want to hire two members of staff, but can only justify one wage, as long as both prospective employees are happy with the arrangement.

Compressed hours

Full-time employees with compressed hours clock up the same amount of time in their working week as any other full-time member of staff, but over fewer days. They generally achieve this by starting earlier in the morning and finishing later at night, usually allowing them an extra day off work each week.

This is hugely beneficial to employees who have other commitments on a certain working day but can't afford, or don't want, to go part-time. And it can prove particularly helpful in allowing parents and carers to maintain a full-time career. The benefits for employers in this situation includes the ability to extend business hours of service. In addition to this, organisations that demonstrate a willingness to be this accommodating towards their employees tend to inspire a strong sense of loyalty in their workforce.
Annualised hours

This means an employee's hours are set for the year, but there is a level of flexibility regarding when those hours are worked. Under this type of arrangement, employees can work over weekends with time off mid-week, or do overtime and claim it back as annual leave. This is beneficial to employees who want additional days of annual leave without making a salary sacrifice.

Such an arrangement can be useful to businesses that experience peaks and troughs in demand for their products or services, as employees can put in longer hours and more days per week to meet a deadline, and then enjoy time away from their job without having to use any of their holiday allowance. To make this work, time 'claimed back' needs to be closely monitored by a manager, and scheduled in a similar manner to holiday leave.

Staggered hours

Under this type of arrangement, an employee works the same days and number of hours as other members of staff, but with either different start and end times, or slightly different working times. This allows an employee to start and finish either earlier or later than their colleagues to fit around personal commitments. Employees don’t have to commit to core hours and can work the hours to suit their needs.

This is one of the most straightforward forms of flexible working. However, it is crucial that employers implementing staggered hours for their staff make every effort to ensure important meetings are scheduled at times when all employees are working, in order to ensure individuals are not excluded, and maintain a united workforce.
Flexitime

Flexitime is a very common form of flexible working; employees work ‘core hours’, but can choose their own start and finish times. The benefits for employees are that on occasions they require a later start or earlier finish for appointments, this can be accommodated without them having to take time off.

The ‘core hours’ are essential for ensuring employees are working together at set times and available for important meetings. Allowing your staff flexible start and finish times can help to promote a better work–life balance and reduce stress in the workplace. In turn, this can result in employees producing a higher standard of work. If you are considering introducing flexitime, it may be advisable to roll it out company-wide in order to avoid accusations of unfair treatment.

These are the most common forms of flexible working you’re likely to come across, and should be considered during the creation of a flexible working policy. Some are harder to implement than others, but with so many benefits for both employees and employers, they are all worth considering.
The state of flexible working

A total of 61% of employers told us they offer flexible working to their employees, with a similar number saying they felt that it is key to staying competitive, and attracting the best staff. With this mindset, it's understandable that 53% of employers said they felt all industries should accommodate flexible working.

The respondents were not unanimous, however, with 41% of employers stating that their business did not have the resources necessary to accommodate all employees' desires to work flexibly. Meanwhile, 22% of employers said they wouldn’t implement flexible working because they didn’t trust staff not to abuse the system.

Flexible working in 2016

We surveyed 1,000 employers across the country operating in various industries to find out how they view their business’ flexible working practices, what they think the benefits are for both the organisation and the employees, and how they actually implement their policy.

Businesses in every industry must ensure their flexible working policy complies with government legislation. Factors likely to affect an organisation’s flexible working policy include the size of the business, the product or service offered, and the range of employee roles.

61% of employers offer flexible working to their employees
By law, the reason an employee applies for flexible working should not influence an employer’s decision on whether to grant the request or not, unless it conflicts with the business’ interests. However, our survey suggested there may be some confusion surrounding this aspect of the legislation, as the majority of respondents (60%) said they would allow employees to have a flexible schedule to accommodate childcare, whilst only 31% would be willing to allow it for other personal reasons.

Not every employer was so traditional in their approach, though. When asked if they would allow their employees a flexible schedule for the Olympics or Euro 2016, 35% said yes, highlighting the fact that ad hoc requests for very specific events are something businesses may want to consider when putting together their flexible working policy.

**Sector-by-sector**

The type of work employees undertake can be a major influencing factor in whether businesses are prepared to offer flexible working. Everyone may have the right to apply, but sometimes it just isn't possible to grant requests. Some 74% of respondents from the engineering and manufacturing sector said flexible working is incompatible with the work they do.

However, there are plenty of industries in which a flexible working policy is commonplace. The insurance and pensions sector topped our survey for offering flexible working, with 80% of employers allowing it. The charity and voluntary sector followed closely behind with 75% of organisations making the working practice possible, and 71% of business, consulting and management firms revealed they have such arrangements in place.

80% of employers in the insurance and pensions sector offer flexible working
The benefits of flexible working

Flexible working has to benefit you as an employer as much as your employees. It can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that such arrangements only offer advantages to the staff members using them, but there are plenty of positives for employers too.

The employers we surveyed believe the biggest benefit of a flexible working policy is a better work-life balance for staff (77%). This was followed by improved morale (70%) and increased productivity (58%). The benefits of flexible working for staff are clear, but savvy employers will also see the advantages for their business. A workforce with high morale and a decent work-life balance is much more likely to go the extra mile for an organisation, and to stay loyal to the company long-term. Blossoming Gifts’ Online Marketing Manager, Sam Quinn, spoke to us about how flexible working offers advantages to his employees:

“...the benefits of flexible working hours are, we find are a very relaxed atmosphere in the office, a social group with lots of activities before, during and after work, and a stress-free workforce...Our staff can manage their own time, and fulfil out-of-work duties such as doctor’s and dentist’s appointments in the morning, before they come to work.”
The example of HireSquare.com demonstrates that allowing employees to work remotely can offer extensive benefits to a business, from increased productivity to cutting costs—something every employer can get behind.

“I believe employees work more efficiently at home, sometimes. It doesn’t work for everyone, but most employees are quite independent. Having flexi-desks in the office also has the benefit of saving office space, which in turn saves costs for the business.”

Blossoming Gifts allows employees two hours of flexibility to be taken in the morning or afternoon during a work day. This is just one way a flexible working policy can be rolled out across an entire workforce, permitting members of staff the independence to set their own hours. Co-founder of HireSquare.com, Rick Vugts, has also seen the benefits of a company-wide flexible working policy:
Every type of flexible working requires careful planning to ensure that it runs smoothly. It may be advisable to trial new forms of flexible working before introducing them permanently.

Trial periods offer members of staff the opportunity to show that they can be trusted to work flexibly, and they can demonstrate whether such policies offer sufficient benefits to both the employer and employees to make them worthwhile. Marc Defosse, Managing Director of Ribbonfish, gave us some helpful tips for managing both remote working and flexi-hours:

“If teams are working from home or working irregular hours, we require them to be logged on to our instant messaging app at all times. This ensures easy communication when needed, and full accountability for their tasks.

Furthermore, we set a latest arrival time in the office for 10am, unless there are extenuating circumstances, of course. This ensures that there’s a core of people in the office at the same period, and keeps flexibility within some constraints.”
Core hours are becoming increasingly common, allowing employees to enjoy certain amounts of flexibility whilst making sure that important meetings and deadlines are still adhered to. Meanwhile, remote and home working can give employees the opportunity to undertake tasks without distraction but, as Mr Defosse points out, communication is absolutely key to managing a team successfully. Therefore, you should ensure that your employees have the right tools (such as conference calling and instant messaging software), and that they know what’s expected of them in terms of regular feedback.

Other types of flexible working can be harder to implement, but it doesn’t mean they should be avoided. Job sharing may require double the effort when it comes to recruiting, but having the expertise of two people within one role can mean double the success. Compressed hours can have a positive impact on an employee’s work–life balance, and could offer your business greater flexibility in meeting deadlines.

Checking that your teams are recording the work they have done, knowing when and how they are available, and facilitating regular updates and reviews will help to ensure flexible working runs smoothly, that your employees feel part of the working culture, and show that you, as an employer, take their work seriously...whether they're in the office, at home or working from a coffee shop.