

## The Business Case For Flexible Working Arrangements

By Lyndsay Swinton

Not everyone can work the 9 to 5 and flexible working arrangements are increasingly more common. Successful UK businesses pioneering flexible working arrangements report improved business results.

British Telecom Group report;

- £500 million off real estate costs since 2000
- 99% return after maternity leave compared with UK average of 40%, saving between £4-5 million in recruitment costs
- Staff turnover of 3% compared with industry norm of 17-18%
- In one year, saving £10 million by using 12 million litres less fuel, saving 54,000 CO2 emissions.

Impressive stuff.

### **But what exactly is flexible working?**

In UK companies such as DSGI, BT, Lloyds TSB and First Direct, flexible working arrangements for front-line staff and management levels are managed quite differently. The firms provide an array of different flexible working options, including term-time or school hours working, evening or night working, compressed hours, home working and rolling shifts. The needs of front-line staff are accommodated as far as possible by scheduling them in against the requirements of the business on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis. Other flexible working arrangements include annualized hours or job sharing.

### **Flexible Working Role Models**

These UK companies role model their flexible working arrangements, even in senior positions;

- First Direct Chief Executive Chris Pilling comes in late if he's been away from his family during the week, even if he misses a meeting.
- Globetrotting Head of Lloyds TSB Expatriate Banking works compressed fortnights so he can spend sensible chunks of time with his family in the UK.
- Caroline Waters, Director People and Policy at BT Group, works from home one or two days a week.

## **Flexible Working As a Strategic Weapon**

Many employers resist flexible working, fearing shirking, customer frustration and resentment from employees working traditional patterns. Bengougam, group HR director for DSGI says “We use flexible working as part of our employee engagement strategy, but we couldn’t man the operation full time without flexible workers, so the interests of staff, customers and the business coincide.”

However, when it comes to back office and central support functions, where people work in smaller teams, flexibility is managed more informally.

“One of my team wanted to work compressed hours over the summer holidays, which is OK so long as everyone doesn’t want to do it. You get over such hurdles by ensuring that you discuss requests as a team,” says Jane Hanson, head of Human Resources at First Direct.

## **Flexible Working Does Not Mean Weak Performance**

“Where people work is less of a concern to me provided we have staff in the office, meetings are covered and so on. But teams tend to work it out between themselves, and it all boils down to trust. If I ever have a concern about someone’s performance, I will take a more focused approach to what they have achieved and sit down with them to look at what might be going wrong, and that becomes a normal performance management issue. But in my seven years here I’ve encountered no more problems than I used to when everyone worked in the office all the time” says Hanson.

## **Flexible Working Does Not Drive Customers Away**

Bengougam believes that the notion that customers and clients want people on call all hours is “a bit of a myth”, except, perhaps, in some very senior financial and legal roles, particularly where people work in global time zones. “Most people have reasonable expectations of the suppliers and service providers they deal with, and most jobs can be done on a flexible basis,” he says.

## **Flexible Working Enables Staff Development**

“Indeed, one of the benefits of managers working flexibly is that it gives others the scope to cope and learn to be accountable when they are not around, which is very good development experience” says Bengougam.

## **Flexible Working Requires Co-operation**

“But managing flexible working successfully, particularly at management level and above, is also a matter of give and take”, points out Melissa Godfray, Senior Manager equality and diversity, Lloyds TSB. “Staff might need to switch their day off from a Friday to a Monday, for example, to accommodate an important meeting, or be prepared to take an urgent call when they are at home.”

“They might also need to be flexible if, for some reason, their request for a given pattern of working is turned down. But we encourage line managers not just to turn down a request outright, but to explore more workable alternatives. Giving individuals time to mull over a compromise solution is also important, because these things can be very emotive,” says Godfray.

## **Flexible Working Benefits All Staff**

In these leading companies, flexible working is communicated as a benefit for all staff, not just working mothers, and take-up is the same among both men and women. “Communicating successful flexible working is enormously important too, and we take every opportunity to showcase the people – men and women at all levels – who do it,” says Godfray.

Bengougam says that in the six years he has worked at DSGI he has never encountered any resentment at any level from people who don’t work flexibly about their colleagues who do. “We have a hard work ethic here, so people generally don’t shirk. Everyone knows that if someone leaves early they are likely to compensate in other ways – by dealing with emails at 9 o’clock at night, for example,” he says.

## **Flexible Working Increases Productivity**

Indeed, working more flexibly doesn’t mean working less hard; it often means just the opposite. BT’s research shows that the average productivity of an individual working from home is 20% higher than when they are in the office. The growth of homeworking at BT delivers an additional £8m onto the bottom line every year.

Flexible working arrangements are good for business, but for most organisations it requires a shift in mindset and culture. As Hanson concludes: “You can have the best processes and policies and technologies in the world, but it will never happen without the right kind of leadership.”

Further Resources; UK government guidance on [flexible working arrangements](#). Includes interactive tool for building your case for flexible working.

This article has been adapted with permission from an article by Clive Sexton that was previously published in the Business Review.

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