



How to make flexible 'work' for your business

A guide from the New Work Network and Guardian Jobs

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How to become more flexible

Flexible working is on the rise. Often regarded as an option for new parents or carers, a more adaptable approach to office hours is increasingly being seen as a way to create a happier world of work for employees and employers alike. Schemes are being made more readily available by employers than ever - although research shows that 47% of employees are still not being offered flexibility.

This needs to change. We've teamed with The New Work network to bring you a guide to implementing a more flexible working culture. We'll look at the importance of a flexible schedule, how to promote it and the benefits for you and your employees.

The New Work network

The New Work is a network founded in 2018 by Heleana Blackwell, Helen Tupper and Michelle Keaney. It was created based on the insight that individual expectations of work were changing faster than organisations were evolving, and that there was an opportunity to close that gap.

To find out more go to thenewwork.co.uk

Our intention was to create genuinely actionable approaches to helping people to gain more flexibility within their role, team or business.

Specifically, the network set out to connect the three groups of people who have the power to change the shape of work:

- ▶ The organisations who need to embrace flexible working
- ▶ The individuals who want it
- ▶ The recruiters who fuel it.

Flexible working: why now?

The way we work needs to change. The origins of the 9 to 5 can be traced back to the American labour unions in the 19th century and became the norm for our workplaces after being adopted by the Ford Motor Company in the 1920s.

This outdated idea no longer serves our modern society and its continued adoption is leading to the false compartmentalisation of our work and personal lives, the combination of which has caused negative impacts on our individual and collective wellbeing.

People are at their best when they have the freedom to define the shape of work that fits their lives. We are too unique, and our lives change too rapidly for a one-size-fits-all, static template of work.

Evidence suggests flexibility creates happier, more committed employees and builds more effective workplaces.


Embracing flexibility

A crucial barrier to flexible working is the prevailing culture within organisations. Recent research from the University of Kent shows that one in five people feel held back in their careers as a result of requesting flexible working. At its core, flexible working is a request to work in a way that suits the needs of the individual and all employees have a legal right to request flexible working from their employer. Yet there is mixed adoption of the practice. A 2019 CIPD Megatrends report on flexible working found that there was "uneven distribution of flexible working across the economy - between public and private sectors, large and small employers, men and women."

These challenges lead to a lack of diversity and adoption of flexible working, despite reports of positive productivity returns. So to help shift workplace culture, managers of teams can take on these actions:

Accelerate the adoption of flexible working in your team

- **Focus on output over hours** - if your team is producing what it needs to on time, and key meetings are being attended, give members the freedom to shape the rest of their day. This can be as formal as creating a policy of 'core hours', through to checking in with team members' needs and commitments during the week.

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- ▶ **Democratise flexibility** - we all need flexibility sometimes, whether it's to make an important day time appointment, care for someone, or make time for the kind of lifelong learning that is becoming essential in today's working world. Making it clear that you are open to these forms as a manager is a helpful starting point, so people feel less inhibited in asking.
 - ▶ **Leave loudly** - managers can be role models by openly saying that they are heading home early after getting in at 7am for a client meeting, getting in later after the school run or nipping out to an inspirational industry event or important appointment - not just sneaking out, so people know it's OK for them too.
 - ▶ **Stop people from saying sorry** - when team members apologetically say they have an appointment at 2pm, be clear with them that it is nothing to be ashamed about; as long as work commitments are being taken care of, demonstrate to the team that it is fine to make up the time.



The best service is delivered to clients by the best people. These will be retained if mutual trust is the basis of the working relationship rather than rigid rules that seem entirely misplaced in an environment of mostly self-motivated, ambitious and competitive people. At best these rules do nothing and at worst they lead to mistrust, and ultimately the breakdown of the relationship. At TandonHildebrand we are the first law firm to not record our time or place value on the time it takes to provide outcomes, resulting in complete focus on providing advice to clients free from worrying about what unnecessary rules we may be in breach of in doing so.

Tania Tandon

Co-founder, TandonHildebrand

How individuals can drive flexibility incrementally

Big changes seem hard and insurmountable and bound to hit resistance, but planning a selection of small actions to take can cumulatively have a big impact. By being clear on what you need and when, and aligning your own objectives for flexibility with the needs of the business, you may discover that you have more freedom in your schedule than you thought. Here are some approaches that you can take into the office tomorrow:

- ▶ **Frame the Ask** - understanding the needs of the role and the context of the organisation is key because this insight will enable you to frame the ask more powerfully.

Katy Fridman, Founder at Frankly Flexible suggests that when negotiating flexibility, it has to work for both sides. "Package and frame the ask from the perspective of what the other side needs and how you can support that. Decide your non negotiables, the ones you can't or aren't prepared to budge on but be flexible on the nice to haves and commit to a solution that works both ways."

- ▶ **Present successful case studies** - if they don't exist in your company, use stats on flexibility from within your industry and utilise ones linked to tangible business metrics such as productivity increases, attracting and retaining talent, reduced absenteeism. Market Research agency The Mix recently published their reasons for changing to a four day week, together with benefits and results in their publication "We don't work Fridays."



We've implemented the four day week at The Mix now for the last 18 months and the whole process has taught us so much. We've learned a great deal about what really matters to people, and also to our clients. We've learnt how to be more human in the ways in which we show up at work and we've also learnt how to grow our business in the process. If all of that sounds a bit fluffy then the data stacks up as well. Sick days are down by 75%, and revenue is up 50% on a like for like period over the last year.

Tash Walker

Co-founder, The Mix



- ▶ **Ask to trial** - with organisations that are resistant to change, suggest a short trial period with an appraisal of the process at the end, which is harder to say 'no' to. When planning it out, be clear on outcomes and come up with ways of measuring successes that make sense to both you and your manager.
- ▶ **Get a buddy** - a buddy in your company or industry that has done this before and is willing to share their experiences is a great person to have in your corner. Work with them to plan in advance your responses to challenges.
- ▶ **Set strong boundaries** - this a core tenet to the success of those working flexibly today and yes, it can be challenging! If you find yourself giving up lots of extra time, track what you are owed and ensure your employer is aware of when you plan to cash those hours in. Also be aware of the role of technology and the importance of being able to disconnect when you're outside of work.

New work, new rules



Flexible working is on the rise, and will be one of the main workforce macro-trends of the next decade. It gives people the independence to decide when and where they work best. When bolstered by employer support and resources, it can make companies and the people in them more productive and profitable.

Ian MacRae

Workplace psychologist and author of High Potential

We have all the tools and tech to make flexible working easy, trackable and accountable - however, they are most frequently used in startups. One of the key myths about enabling agile working technologies is that you need to sacrifice security - this needn't be the case. When understood and widely adopted, they create a framework and terms of reference, setting the cultural context for cohesive collaboration.

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- ▶ **Process permits freedom** - setting a handful of core processes and procedures is a key enabler to flexible working cultures. This might be as simple as a weekly meeting where people mention their commitments both in and out of the office, using agile approaches like daily 'stand ups', using workflow management tools that enable people to demonstrate progress and accountability, or facilitating everyday conversations on workplace messaging platforms to better include those working remotely.
- ▶ **OKRs over KPIs** - changing the currency of work to outcomes through mapping objectives to key results (OKR's) has been cited as a key enabler in the adoption of flexible working practices. Communicating a new focus on OKRs explicitly helps to bring about a more results-focused working environment and reduces the need value attached to presenteeism as the predominant symbol of value.

- **Help teams work well** - flexibility works best when the whole person is considered; Setting individual wellbeing targets outside of work is a great way of ensuring that tech use is kept in check - and has productivity payoffs. Commit to regular happiness surveys or check-ins with teams, or find workplace wellness partners that assist with mindful and productive use of tools during working hours to decrease the impact of 'digital overwhelm'.

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At Bloom UK, we've made Slack our primary comms tool between the network. It's made communication easier between members and reduced the need to meet face to face as frequently - which is great as we don't have much time. Bloom is a side hustle for most of us, so it needs to fit in around our day jobs.

Stephanie Matthews

President, Bloom UK

Conclusion

The new rules of work are being written as we speak with only the most progressive of leaders and organisations reaping the benefits. To shift from the currency of the few to the benefits of the many, the democratisation of flexible working in businesses large and small hinges on accepting the new prevailing norms around the blending of work and personal lives. There is immense opportunity in bringing our whole selves to work and being courageous enough to ask for the freedom to work in a way that facilitates our whole lives, not just the work parts. As more people choose to be brave and move against the status quo, we hope that flexible working will become the rule rather than an exception.



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If you've been inspired to make flexible working part of your recruitment, there's no better place than Guardian Jobs to get your message seen.

Guardian Jobs connects employers and employees who share the same values and who believe that the world of work should enrich their lives.

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