

Flexible Working - a Marriage Made in Heaven?

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Flexible working has become one of the hottest topics in business today. Just a cursory search of the phrase on the Institute of Directors website yields well over 30 articles. Often the argument is polarised between those who are trying to sell the concept and those who feel threatened by change. Here are the “warts and all” observations of an organisation fully committed to making flexible working work.

The term “flexible working” used in relation to working carers is a bit of a misnomer really. Often the situation for the carer is anything but flexible.

A child may have to be dropped off and picked up from school at fixed times. If a child is sick it usually without an appointment and duration. Just as the carer employee is getting settled school holidays come along providing another cover dilemma.

More often than not a working couple will elect roles as primary and secondary carer so it isn't an evenly shared burden.

Layer on top of this situation the increasing international demands on modern businesses, which stretches the day and roles with reporting deadlines and you are pushing an inflexible peg into a flexible hole.

However in spite of these issues, organisations are starting to recognise the benefits of targeting the ‘working carer’ pool.

At Isosceles Finance we actively target working carers and have done right from the formation of the company. We regularly recruit through the NCT (National Childbirth Trust) magazine and 40% of our workforce are part-time.

We found a source of extremely high quality people looking for interesting work and to maintain a career. We have been able to attract people with upper quartile business experience

who would not normally consider a role with a smaller company employer.

However it hasn't been easy and even after five years we are challenged to be innovative.

We facilitate a degree of working from home, all of our employee's have laptops and most mobile phones. We have a number of web-based applications and we try to be sensitive in the location of the clients we ask our working carers to look after. We also understand that emergencies happen and try to be as flexible as we can with hours, holidays and making up time.



Some staff work set days of the week, some work school hours and some work as and when required.

Travel can be a real problem. There are few situations more stressful than being caught in a jam on the M25 or stationary on a train knowing you child is crying at the school or nursery door.

The Government's intervention into this arena is very unhelpful and while they have stopped short of making flexible working a right the momentum is moving this way.

Progressive organisations like Isosceles understand the benefits of attracting working “carers”. They understand that to retain and motivate these employees they need to find new and flexible ways of working. If an organisation doesn’t recognise this opportunity they will miss out on the best talent and will ultimately fail, let them find out the hard way, don’t use legislation to stop them!

Employers must be allowed to come up with individual solutions for individuals. If this means recognising when flexible arrangements are inappropriate then so be it.

The minute flexible working becomes a right, flexibility starts ebbing away. Rules and compulsion are the antithesis of flexibility.

Some individuals work well from home, some can’t concentrate at home and productivity is reduced. Some individuals are well organised, time managers, some can only operate up against a deadline and can find working in an unstructured environment stressful. Some employees are happy to take calls outside of contracted days and hours some are not or can’t.

The best way for the Government to promote flexible working is to facilitate and promote flexible childcare arrangements such as they did with the Childcare Voucher Scheme, but this was a limited benefit.

Extended schools is one answer, but it is wrong to ask schools to organise and co-ordinate this, it only serves to promote the concept that schools are glorified crèches. Education and care are not one and the same principle and it is grossly unfair to ask teachers to do this.

Staggering school holidays across the country so that half the organisation isn’t fighting over the same two weeks as holiday would be immensely helpful.

The government is much more likely to promote flexible working with greater tax and NI breaks for employers employing part time workers. There is an administrative overhead to employing any individual (interviewing, setting up payroll and HR files, induction and training) which is the same whether the employee works two or five days per week. The Government could help even this up especially for smaller employers.

Why not make it easier for employees to work from home with no P11D threat for provision for home broadband by the employer? Why not make the childcare tax voucher scheme more attractive?

Employers should be allowed to easily revoke flexible arrangements when they don’t work, then an employer can invest time to see what works and what doesn’t work. It is always easier for an employer say “no” than to say “yes” to something that they are stuck with if it doesn’t work out.

Employers also need to be careful not to breed resentment among the full-time non-carer workers who may feel that work and responsibility is disproportionately shared.

At Isosceles over the last five years we have found solutions that work, but these are tailored for each individual. Successful flexible working results in a highly motivated individual who is more productive and organised than a full-time equivalent. Unsuccessful flexible working results in a constantly stressed individual (becoming acutely stressful thirty minutes before the end of each day), together with frustrated customers and co-workers. We have seen the same mixture of results from exactly the same policy within the same organisation.

Flexible working is not unlike a marriage, no two relationships (employer/employee) are the same, both parties have to keep working on the relationship and success is founded on trust. Just like a marriage flexible working can be brilliant, but should not be undertaken lightly by either party.

Mike O’Connell is CEO of Isosceles Finance Limited, has three children, has a part time working wife and is a local School Governor.