



Australian
Institute of
Management

AIM Insights

GREEN PAPER July 2012

MANAGING IN A FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

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FOREWORD

This paper has been produced by the Australian Institute of Management NSW & ACT as a contribution to leading thought on relevant management topics.

The Institute's vision is "Better Managers and Better Leaders for a Better Society", and we believe that contributions of this nature are directly relevant to the achievement of our vision. They also serve to engage both our members and the broader management community in the work of the Institute, and provide an innovative source of content for our training programs.

The "Green Paper" designation signifies that this document:

- Contains our initial thoughts and insights, developed through a process of qualitative and/ or quantitative research, on an issue that has relevance to the management community
- Identifies areas which we would like to examine in more detail before coming to our settled conclusions (which will be set out in a companion "White Paper")
- Is ready for circulation to both members of the Institute and the broader management community, for comment and input as they see fit.

The Institute therefore welcomes comments on this Green Paper.

PROVIDING COMMENTS

We ask that comments be provided to us by 31 August 2012 in order to be considered within the context of our White Paper development.

Comments can be emailed to thoughtleadership@aimcan.com.au or faxed to 02 6273 3212

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ACRONYMS

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| AIM | Australian Institute of Management |
| AIM NSW & ACT | Australian Institute of Management NSW & ACT |
| DCA | Diversity Council of Australia |
| EEO | Equal employment opportunity |
| EOWA | Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| RDO | Rostered day off |
| ROI | Return on investment |
| TOIL | Time off in lieu |

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RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Across Australia there is a growing demand for more flexible work arrangements. Working part time, staggering start and finish times, teleworking, taking extended leave, staging retirement or phasing a return from leave—all these and more are finding their way into workplaces.

Of course, these arrangements impact on how organisations function, and these impacts need to be managed. An initial scan of the literature confirms the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) NSW and ACT’s view that the challenges presented by flexible work arrangements can, in large part, be effectively managed using the suite of management skills on which we rely every day, though some of the techniques may vary. Workloads need to be monitored. Staff need to be supervised, appraised and supported. Teams and colleagues need to communicate effectively. The role of managers in facilitating workplace flexibility is crucial.

In some respects, the flexible work environment presents a more demanding context for managers. In this complex or heightened environment deficiencies in management skills development more generally are foregrounded. In effect management weaknesses—irrespective of context—are exposed, opening the opportunity to better target skills development as a consequence.

A major challenge to implementing flexible work is attitudinal. Business owners or senior executives may perceive that flexible work arrangements are associated with a lack of commitment to the organisation. Perhaps resistance comes from a busy line manager, fearful that implementation of flexible work arrangements will become yet another item on an already crowded “to do” list. Or again, colleagues may resent flexible work as a privilege extended only to the lucky few.

Research shows that underlying this attitude is a set of assumptions about the idea of the “ideal worker”: someone who is able to work full time, and to be solely committed to their job, because they are supported by someone outside the workplace who attends to their non-work needs. Such a worker may have been the norm in the past, but this is no longer the case. Work is no longer neatly contained between set hours. Workers have a multiplicity of non-work responsibilities and interests which they seek to balance against their work roles.

Nevertheless, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the “ideal worker” continues to shape expectations in the workplace. Until this assumption is challenged, flexible work may be perceived as a curiosity, privilege, nuisance or unnecessary cost.

By contrast, approaching flexible work arrangements with a positive attitude can bring great benefits to both employers and employees. Businesses find enhanced opportunities for talent management, greater productivity and cost savings from the reduced need for office space, amongst other benefits. Employees are better able to manage childcare and other family responsibilities, undertake volunteering and other community work, pursue study and recreational interests and avoid long and costly commutes. The more that flexible work arrangements are mainstreamed within an organisation, the greater the benefits.

Mainstreaming flexible work means changing the culture and practices of the organisation as a whole, not simply responding to an individual or small group of employees’ requests for flexible work arrangements.

We note, however, that our investigation of flexible work brings into sharp relief the issues surrounding the intensification of work. The widespread availability of smartphones, increasing access to high-speed broadband wireless technology, and the advent of videoconferencing enable work to be carried out effectively in ways unimaginable just a few

years ago. Yet combined with changes in social patterns and expectations, they also contribute to the risk of work intensification. The example of part time staff checking their emails or answering work calls on non-work days is common. However, work intensification is potentially an issue for all staff, not just those on flexible work arrangements. Managers and individual staff need to be aware of where and how work is being undertaken, and set new boundaries which are appropriate to individual workers and workplaces.

Within the context of work/life balance, the intensification of work may be seen as the work sphere encroaching on the life sphere. Equally, the introduction of flexible work arrangements may be viewed as the life sphere pushing back into the work sphere. While the intensification of work may yield productivity gains in the short-term, it carries with it a risk to employee health, well being, satisfaction and engagement, and a consequent negative impact on productivity. Over time, the input-to-outputs ratio may suffer.

On the other hand, research has established a positive relationship between workplace flexibility arrangements that give employees greater control over when they work, where they work and how they work, and employee health, well-being, satisfaction and engagement. These improved employee outcomes are then seen to convert to improved workplace productivity, financial performance and client outcomes.

Of interest to AIM as we undertake the next stage of this research is the relationship between innovative flexible work arrangements and organisational innovation.¹ Does an adaptive workplace environment that is responsive to its employees' needs, facilitate adaptive or innovative thinking?² What kind of management approach is required in this context?

Flexible work arrangements have the potential to boost not only productivity levels, but also employment participation levels. For example, more widespread flexible work options may lead to increased numbers of people with parenting responsibilities (the majority women) remaining in, or returning to the workforce. It may enable those with caring responsibilities to increase their hours of work if some can be undertaken at home. Flexible work options may also enable older workers to stay in the workforce for longer.

We believe that flexible work arrangements should be at the core of how Australian organisations do business. Equipping managers with the necessary skills and providing them with guidance on how to effectively apply these skills in a flexible work environment is one important step towards mainstreaming flexible work in Australian workplaces.³ In this Green Paper we identify some of these necessary skills and discuss how they might be put into practice.

As we move from Green Paper to White Paper stage we aim to augment our understanding of the challenges that a flexible work environment presents for management and, accordingly, to provide further guidance on managing well in this context.

Along with good management practice, Australian workplaces require a cultural shift before mainstreamed flexibility can be a reality. AIM is proud to be a partner in the Australian Government's *Telework Partners Program*,⁴ which has been established to encourage awareness of the benefits of teleworking—that is, working from a place other than the office.

¹ We note that in a survey recently conducted by AIM (2012), innovation was one of the areas of management capability in which Australian organisations assessed themselves as least capable.

² Proponents of activity-based workplaces, for example, argue that innovative workplace design and flatter organisational structures improves creativity, collaboration and ideas generation.

³ Refer to the Diversity Council of Australia's recent report (2012), *Get Flexible: Mainstreaming flexible work in Australian business*, for a comprehensive list of actions required to mainstream flexible work.

⁴ Information on the *Telework Partners Program* can be found at www.nbn.gov.au/nbn-benefits/telework/

Teleworking is one important form of flexible work with potential benefits for employees, employers and the Australian community. AIM is committed to working with our members to harness the potential that telework offers.

BACKGROUND

Flexible work has become a widely-discussed topic, attracting attention from academics, lobbyists, legislators, journalists and industry bodies alike. As a society we are grappling with major changes in both family structures and employment arrangements, and with the resultant concerns about work/life balance (AIM NSW & ACT, 2012: 17-20; OECD; Pocock, Skinner, & Pisaniello, 2010; Fear & Denniss, 2009).

The issues surrounding flexible work are of particular relevance to AIM's membership. Flexible work arrangements of one kind or another are already evident in many of our workplaces. Perhaps more importantly, the demand for flexibility is also already evident and building fast. If flexibility is part of our operating environment, managing flexibility has become part of our core business.

This Green Paper arose from AIM NSW & ACT's previous White Paper *Gender Diversity in Management* (2012), which analysed the underrepresentation of women in management and leadership roles in the workplace. One of the key findings was the need for increased flexibility in the workplace: as a result, AIM NSW & ACT committed to carrying out further research into workplace flexibility with a particular focus on:

- How to manage effectively as a manager on flexible work arrangements, and
- How to manage effectively staff in an organisation with flexible work arrangements in place.

Although there is a wealth of research on the topic, there is gap when it comes to a focus on the management tasks associated with making flexible work practices actually work. This is despite the fact that much of the research specifically highlights the vital role of managers: the skills, attitude and resources of managers are make-or-break factors in implementing flexible work arrangements (Diversity Council of Australia, 2010: 3; Pocock, 2010: 7; Baird, 2010; Managing Work Life Balance International, 2010; Baird, Charlesworth, & Heron, 2010: 11; Heron, 2010.)

This Green Paper has been developed through a review of the literature and insights built through AIM's training and development of management practitioners.

The business case for flexibility

Flexibility should not be viewed simply as something of interest to employees. For employers there is a business case worth considering, regarding the potential for increased productivity and sustainability which may result from the introduction of flexible work practices. Increasing flexibility in the workplace presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations, individuals and the community. For example, employers may fear that flexibility will mean:

- Added complexity
- Increased costs
- Reduced commitment to, or focus on, the job
- Radical changes to workplace culture.

These are genuine issues to be managed. However, there are also potential advantages to increased flexibility, including:

- Enhanced talent management such as retention of key staff
- Improved recruitment, especially where competitors do not offer any flexibility
- Reduced absenteeism
- Ability to create “virtual teams” of staff from different parts of the organisation
- Options to increase and decrease the workforce to match demand
- Increased sustainability for the organisation – the “flexibility dividend” and the “diversity dividend”
- Reduced need for office space
- Options to engage highly skilled workers who the organisation could not afford full time
- Opportunity for leadership within the industry.

There is now a well-established positive relationship between flexible work arrangements that give employees greater choice and greater control over how, when and where they work and human capital outcomes—that is, employee attraction, retention, satisfaction and engagement (DCA, 2012: 24, WorldatWork, 2011: 33-42, Corporate Voices, 2011: 11-12).

An evidence base is now being built that draws a positive link between these human capital outcomes and organisational performance. The WorldatWork survey on workplace flexibility conducted in 2010 returned a relatively low percentage of organisations (seven percent) actively measuring the ROI of their employee flexibility programs (2011: 8).

However, a study of how businesses measure and define flexibility undertaken in the United States (Corporate Voices, 2011), provides several examples of organisations that have taken the “intuitive logic” that “respecting employees needs”, including the desire for flexible work arrangements, makes good business sense and have collected data on the impacts of flexible work on productivity, financial performance and client service—resulting in impact-neutral or positive results (2011: 18-20).⁵

While facilitating flexibility may have direct costs, such as investment in technology, organisations that have trialled flexible work options often report a positive return on investment, improved staff performance or a significant competitive advantage.

The case studies presented in *Doing things differently*, undertaken recently by the Centre for Work + Life, provide a good illustration of a diverse range of organisations’ approach to the business case for flexibility (McMahon & Pocock, 2011).⁶

Flexibility is often perceived as a benefit or concession granted to individual workers, and it can certainly have its advantages. The research suggests that the availability of flexible work

⁵ See also, DCA, 2012: 25.

⁶ See also The GPT Group, 2012: 3, 9, 15; Macquarie University www.mq.edu.au, 2012; Telework Australia www.teleworkaustralia.net.au; Diversity Council of Australia, 2010; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009; Heron, 2010; Schumacher & Poehler, 2009: 169; Australian Institute of Management, 2012: 20; Workplace Flexibility www.workplaceflexibility.com.au.)

options is an important feature in a workplace for both employees and potential employees as it offers the opportunity to:

- Help manage non-work demands, such as child care responsibilities
- Follow non-work interests, such as sport and hobbies
- Engage with the community, for example through volunteering
- Carry out their work in ways which suit their personal work style
- Achieve a better work/life balance.

Some employees, however, are familiar with the downside of flexibility, including:

- Lower pay – either less pay overall or lower hourly rates or both
- Less predictable or anti-social hours, such as irregular shifts
- Exclusion from training, development and promotional opportunities
- Lack of support from colleagues, managers and clients.

From the perspective of society as a whole, increased flexibility in the workplace may contribute to equal opportunity and may expand the potential workforce, leading to increased national productivity. However, it can also lead to underemployment and working poverty, which are damaging for the individuals affected and for society generally.

Increased flexibility in the workplace is complex, and does not inevitably lead either to positive or negative results. Employers need to consider the advantages to be gained as well as the disadvantages to be managed in assessing the best way to address flexibility in their organisation.

Legislative framework

In considering the business case for flexibility, employers need to take into account the legislative backdrop. In particular, recent legislation makes attention to workplace flexibility a requirement in many workplaces. The *Fair Work Act 2009* prohibits discrimination in the workplace on the basis of factors such as race, sex, age, family or carer's responsibilities, sexuality or religion. It also makes provision for "individual flexibility arrangements" to vary modern awards and enterprise agreements (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

In addition, the National Employment Standards which are part of the *Fair Work Act 2009* require all employers to consider employees' requests for flexibility: an employee who has been employed for at least one year and who has parental responsibility for the care of a child under school age, may request changed working arrangements to assist them care for the child (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2011). While the legislation is framed in terms of a "right to request" rather than an absolute right to flexible work arrangements, the employer may only refuse the request on reasonable business grounds, placing the onus on the employer to give it due consideration.

These legislative initiatives come on top of existing anti-discrimination laws, both State and Commonwealth, which apply either directly to the workplace or more generally across society. For example, the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 2009* promotes equal treatment and the elimination of discrimination against women in

organisations with over 100 employees. This Act is currently under review, with the aim of assisting employers to remove barriers to equal employment opportunity for women.⁷

Further information about relevant legislation can be found online at: Fair Work Australia www.fwa.gov.au; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency www.eowa.gov.au; Diversity Council of Australia www.dcg.org.au; and Fair Work Ombudsman www.fairwork.gov.au.

⁷ The *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012* passed through the House of Representatives on 18 June 2012.

WHAT IS FLEXIBLE WORK?

Flexibility: a flexible concept

The concept of flexible work has the tendency to cause confusion. This is partly because the term is used to mean a wide variety of practices by different people. At the same time, there are many different terms used to refer to similar or overlapping concepts and practices, including:

- Workplace flexibility
- Flexible work arrangements
- Flexible work practices
- Flexible work options
- Working in a flexible environment
- Work-life balance.

Some researchers use different terms to refer to different aspects of flexibility. For example, the Diversity Council of Australia (DCA) uses “flexible work” when referring to how, when and where work is carried out, and “flexible careers” when discussing workers’ changing levels of investment in work over their life (DCA, 2012: 6).

In this paper the term “flexible work” is used to cover a diversity of practices which may include one or more of the following:

- Working part time—note that there is a strong perceived connection in the community between working flexibly and working less than a full time load
- Working compressed hours—for example, working the equivalent of a full week but over four days
- Working from home—either some or part of the time—this may be referred to as teleworking or telecommuting
- Working from an alternative worksite—again, either some or part of the time—such as a regional office
- Work arrangements which include flexi-time, formal or informal time off in lieu (TOIL) practices, or formal rostered days off (RDOs)
- Work arrangements which involve overtime
- Contract work or consulting
- Casual work of various kinds, including working either regular or irregular casual hours, or working base hours which may be “flexed up” by the employer to meet peak demand
- Job sharing—for example, two part time workers filling one full time job

-
- Working non-traditional hours—for example, starting at midday and working into the evening to respond to clients in other time zones, or working a “split shift” to cover before and after hours peak demand
 - Working different hours at different times—for example, working “term time hours” with longer work days during school terms and fewer hours or work days during school holidays
 - Working on secondment
 - Extended leave periods—for example, new graduates taking a year off before commencement
 - Purchased leave—for example, taking eight weeks leave a year for a commensurate reduction in full time pay
 - Tailoring approaches to the use of leave—for example, allowing staff to use half days of annual leave to meet personal commitments, or phased return from parental leave
 - Phased retirement—for example, reducing hours progressively over a certain time period rather than ceasing work completely.

Some of these work practices are more common than others: some have been a feature of Australian workplaces for decades while others are more recent; some pose more complex management challenges than others. What is important to note at the outset is the diversity: there are many different types of flexible work, and making the assumption that flexible work only means part time work, or only means working from home, contributes to the confusion around the issues.

Whatever flexible work means, it does not mean slacking off. Implementing flexible work practices does not entail reduced expectations about the amount of work which can be done, or an acceptance of poorer performance (McMahon & Pocock, 2011: 7). In fact, with the right attitude, flexible work can be effective at enhancing performance by focusing the organisation, team and employee more clearly on outcomes rather than inputs, on goals rather than processes.

The drivers of flexible work... and an enabler

The broad range of flexible work practices is matched by the diverse reasons why an employer or an employee may be interested in increased flexibility (Abhayaratna, Andrews, Nuch, & Podbury, 2008: xxii). There is a widespread perception that an employee’s desire for flexible work is mostly driven by childcare responsibilities. Certainly this is an important driver. The statistics are familiar: women now comprise 45 percent of the workforce and there is a (related) increase in the number of dual income households (AIM NSW & ACT, 2012: 6, 17; Baird, 2010: 2-3). These two factors alone mean that there are many workers, male and female, who have some responsibility for childcare and other household responsibilities.

The need to manage childcare responsibilities, however, represents only one of the reasons why employees value flexible work. Employees are also engaged outside the workplace in a range of family, social and personal interests, and may seek to work more flexibly in order to accommodate these interests.

Other demographic drivers for flexibility include:

- The number of younger workers mixing work with study
- The ageing population and the continued engagement of older workers
- The increasing number of workers with responsibility for caring for parents and other aged relatives
- The increasing number of “Gen Y” workers who are, research suggests, perceived to value flexibility for its own sake.

One other factor deserves particular mention: the time and cost involved in travelling to work. Especially in our large capital cities, many workers face long, frustrating and often expensive commutes at the start and end of each workday. The situation is exacerbated in many places by increasing geographic spread and congestion. Another contributing factor is the rise in dual income households, and the fact that it may be impossible to live close to both partners' places of work.

Not all of the drivers come from the employee's side. As noted above, there is a business case for flexibility which is increasingly seeing employers implementing flexible work practices. For

example, an employer may move to a more flexible workplace to enhance productivity, or to remain competitive in the recruitment market. Just as many employees are interested in working from home to avoid the cost of commuting to their workplace, employers are beginning to focus on the cost of providing that workplace. While some types of tasks inherently need to be undertaken “on site”, many others do not, and businesses are beginning to question the logic of providing large amounts of office space which may sit empty for 16 hours a day.

While it is important to appreciate that there are many different drivers of flexibility, it would be a mistake to focus too heavily on individual employees' reasons for seeking flexible work. It does not matter whether an employee wants to work flexibly to meet childcare responsibilities, take up a hobby, volunteer at the local community centre or build additional recreation time into their week. An attempt to classify valid reasons for seeking flexible work is likely to divide the workplace and make it more difficult for flexible arrangements to succeed.

Of course, as well as the various drivers of flexibility, there is also a vital enabler: recent advances in digital technologies. The widespread availability of email, laptops and smartphones; the promise of high-speed broadband through the National Broadband Network; increasing access to wireless technology; the advent of videoconferencing and online events such as webinars; all enable work to be carried out effectively in ways unimaginable just a few years ago (Telework Australia www.teleworkaustralia.net.au; AIM NSW & ACT, 2012: 18; The GPT Group, 2012a and 2012b.)

At a glance

Workplace flexibility is seen as key to attracting and retaining employees across all generations (Ranstad, 2011: 38).

However... 'Australians in the age group of 18-24 years are significantly more likely to consider resigning due to lack of flexibility (14% strongly agreed vs 7% average across all age groups)' (DCA, 2010: 21).

'Almost 80% percent of employers agree or strongly agree, ever more complex technology, at relatively inexpensive prices, will soon make the mobile workforce a reality in Australia' (Ranstad, 2011: 50).

The challenge is to harness these technologies in ways which enhance productivity, including through enabling new flexible work practices, rather than simply substituting one technology for another, for example email for fax.

Flexibility for whom?

One final issue is worth noting up front: there can be a sharp distinction between what an employer or manager thinks of as flexible work, and what employees have in mind. Indeed, flexibility from an employer's point of view may be highly inflexible from an employee's point of view, and vice versa.

For example, an employer may use a sizeable number of casual employees as a "swing" workforce, to ensure that hours can be increased and decreased easily to match demand. This represents flexibility for the employer, but is likely to result in unpredictable hours for the employees, with little or no capacity to negotiate alternatives: the very definition of inflexibility from the employee's point of view.

Equally, take the case of an employee who works 9 AM to 3 PM Monday to Thursday: this arrangement may suit the employee and allow the flexibility needed to manage their non-work interests and responsibilities; however from the point of view of managers or colleagues these arrangements may appear highly inflexible.

In addition, there may be unintended consequences workplace flexibility. For example, in responding to their employees' desire for more part time work an employer may engage numerous casual staff to backfill roles, simultaneously creating flexibility for existing employees and a new, inflexible secondary workforce.

The Diversity Council of Australia's recent report *Get Flexible!* (2012: 10), notes a distinction between having a "flexible workforce" and offering employees "flexible work options". The report argues that we need to move beyond this either/or approach to understand the types of flexibility that work both for employers and employees. This distinction echoes a view common amongst researchers that there are "bad" and "good" flexible jobs (Baird, Charlesworth, & Heron, 2010: 4; see also McDonald, Bradley, & Brown, 2009). "Bad" flexible jobs may offer an employer flexibility in their workforce, but from the employee's point of view they tend to be characterised by unpredictable hours, low rates of pay, poorer employment conditions and lack of access to opportunities. Casual work is a common example.

Mainstreaming

There is a growing consensus that the greatest advantages from flexible work, for both employers and employees, comes when flexible work is mainstreamed within the organisation (AIM NSW & ACT, 2012: 20; DCA, 2012; Telework Australia, n.d.).

Mainstreaming flexible work means changing the culture and practices of the organisation as a whole, not simply responding to an individual or small group of employees' requests for flexible work arrangements. The Diversity Council of Australia describes mainstreaming flexibility as the "next frontier" (2012: 6), indicating the qualitative as well as quantitative nature of the change.

This is not a straightforward process. It is likely to be a sizeable change management exercise, involving modification or transformation of many business practices. Further, it requires a fundamental shift in what is often considered "normal" in the workplace. Despite changes in society, the workplace operates to a large degree on the stereotype of the "ideal worker": someone who is able to work full time, and to be solely committed to their job, because they are supported by someone outside the workplace who attends to all their non-

work needs. The cliché of the full time bread-winner husband and home-maker wife is now uncommon in the real world, but in subtle—and often unconscious—ways continues to shape expectations in the workplace (DCA, 2012: 8-9; Baird, Charlesworth, & Heron, 2010: 7-8). Until this assumption is challenged, flexible work may be perceived as a curiosity, privilege, nuisance or unnecessary cost.

When flexible work is considered normal in the workplace it becomes much easier to negotiate and implement flexible work arrangements. The research shows that support for flexible work is required from the top: from the board, the CEO and the senior managers of the organisation. Success is higher where senior staff are explicit in their support for flexible work, and especially where they take up flexible work options themselves (McMahon & Pocock, 2011: 2, 10).

Mainstreaming flexible work helps minimise negative responses from colleagues. Where flexible work options are available to all or the majority of staff, rather than a select few, there is less opportunity for resentment. In addition, the management of practical issues such as achieving appropriate workloads for all staff, and establishing effective forms of communication, becomes commonplace. In particular, mainstreaming flexible work challenges the perception that flexibility is about women, or more specifically about mothers. While women with childcare responsibilities are often the first in an organisation to take up flexible work, focusing on flexibility as a “women’s issue” relegates it to the periphery rather than firmly embedding it as a permanent feature of the workplace.

KEY ISSUES FOR MANAGERS OF FLEXIBLE STAFF

The vital role of managers

Much of the research into flexible work identifies that the skills, experience, resources and attitude of managers are crucial to making flexible work practices actually work (DCA, 2010: 3; Pocock, 2010: 7; Baird, 2010; Managing Work Life Balance International, 2010; Baird, Charlesworth, & Heron, 2010: 11; Heron, 2010). A supportive, collegiate workplace culture, characterised by trust and open communication, is an important foundation for implementing flexible work. The role of managers in setting workplace culture is therefore crucial.

There are a number of challenges for managers in implementing flexible work, which will differ workplace by workplace depending on factors such as the nature of the work undertaken by the organisation, and the types of flexible options available. The good news is that the skills managers require to manage flexible work effectively are similar to the skills required to manage in a non-flexible work environment. However, managers of flexible staff may find themselves drawing on certain skills more frequently when handling the issues which arise in a flexible work environment.

Every workplace is different, so the issues that managers need to address may vary. One key variable identified in the research is between workplaces where flexibility has been mainstreamed, and workplaces where flexibility is considered an option available to, or taken up by, only a few staff members. The implications for managers are complex:

- Managing a single staff member working flexibly may pose challenges
- Managing several staff members working flexibly may increase the complexity of the task
- But managing in a thoroughly flexible work environment may, in fact, reduce the degree of difficulty by removing the idea that some people receive 'special' treatment and the tensions that can arise from this.

Getting the job done

As there is a strong perceived connection between flexible work and part time work, a good place to start is with the management challenge of ensuring that the required work is completed. Of course, it is a well-established management task to identify the resources needed for any particular project, including the number of staff or the number of hours that will be needed. The challenge is not fundamentally different in a flexible work environment, however the arrangements may be more complex. Managers may need to:

- Ensure "coverage" for client-facing tasks
- Juggle rosters
- Carry out detailed forecasting of work volumes
- Engage additional staff, possibly including casual or contract staff, to cover specific tasks or hours
- Identify or engage staff who want to job-share

- Introduce new performance pay arrangements, for example, for part time staff on bonuses
- Re-engineer existing roles to quarantine tasks that require high levels of availability or lots of travel, into specific “on call” roles
- Work with clients to manage their expectations about how their work will be undertaken, for example, with responsibility shared across a team rather than relying on the availability of a specific staff member.

A direct benefit for managers is that they may have the flexibility to bring in specific expertise for a particular project, or simply bring in additional workers to help get through a busy period, rather than relying on the permanent workforce to be able to deliver every project.

Managers may need to establish guidelines for scheduling meetings. For example, if one or more employees work short days to enable them to drop off and pick up school aged children, it may be appropriate to ensure that meetings are not called before 10 AM or after 3 PM (AIM NSW & ACT, 2012: 20). This may be relatively straightforward for regular team meetings, but can pose challenges when ad hoc, or urgent, meetings are required. Where several staff work part time on different days, it can even be a challenge to find a time for a regular staff meeting. Equally, managers may need to set core hours to ensure that staff are available when required.

In highly flexible work environments, the challenge may require new answers. For example, managers may consider alternatives to face-to-face meetings, such as teleconferences or circulating agendas and minutes for those who cannot attend. The style of meetings may need to change: even more than face-to-face meetings, teleconferences work best with a firm agenda, papers circulated in advance, clear decisions and expectations for follow up, and minimal side-discussions (DeRosa, 2011). Managers may also need to ensure that face-to-face meetings are as efficient as possible, to limit their number and length. This helps both with scheduling, and with ensuring that part time staff do not spend a disproportionate amount of their work time on regular administrative tasks and events.

Intensification of work

Managers may need to address the issue of the intensification of work (Pocock, Skinner, & Pisaniello, 2010; Fear & Denniss, 2009; Fear, Rogers, & Denniss, 2010; Fear, 2011). It is often reported by staff who move from full time to part time work that their workload is not reduced to match their new hours, or that work activities leak into their non-work time.

In addition, recent advances in digital technologies can contribute to work intensification. For example, part time staff may frequently check their emails or answer work phone calls on non-work days. This approach to flexibility can work well both for the employee and the organisation, enabling staff to conduct their work no matter where they are, and allowing quick response to urgent issues. Managed poorly, however, the use of these technologies can lead to part time workers effectively working full time, or being on call full time. This can be exacerbated if part time workers are made to feel guilty or “lucky” for working flexibly: they may feel compelled to make themselves available, to demonstrate that the arrangement is working.

Of course, work intensification is potentially an issue for all staff, and is not inherently linked to flexibility. The increase in flexible work arrangements, however, may help to reveal the scale of the issue. The introduction of flexibility may be more contentious in workplaces where “full time work” actually means “unlimited unpaid overtime” or other types of excessive work. In the past, a combination of workplace culture, specific award provisions and

technology meant that work patterns were relatively stable, and the boundary between work and leisure was relatively firm. Depending on the nature of the organisation, employees worked nine to five Monday to Friday, or clocked on and off triggering formal overtime payments where necessary. No one read emails on their smartphone over breakfast or logged on from home in the evening, and a phone call from the boss or a client over the weekend would have been unthinkable other than in an emergency.⁸

In the absence of these old boundaries we need to be more explicitly aware of the risk of time pollution, and the need to set new boundaries which are appropriate to individual workers and workplaces. This includes being aware of where and how work is being undertaken, and being prepared to take this into account in reassessing workloads. Individual staff members need to be aware of their own work patterns, and be prepared to negotiate these with managers.

How can I see what you're doing if you're not here?

Along with working part time, working from home is a relatively common form of flexible work. This may include staff negotiating the option of working from home on an occasional basis or for particular types of projects, as well as staff who regularly spend most or all of their work time either at home or at an alternative worksite; that is, teleworking. The increased availability and affordability of smart phones, laptops and internet access make teleworking a viable option for many employees (Telework Australia, www.teleworkaustralia.net.au). Telework is, of course, taken up in ways other than working from home as employees making increasing use of other places such as cafes and public spaces for meetings or individual work.

There are a range of management challenges that come with this, primarily relating to supervision and performance measurement. Some types of work require the employee to be "on site", however even in those circumstances just being at work is insufficient evidence of doing your job. Or, as a recent report from the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission puts it "Presence does not equal performance" (2009: 14). Arguably, the same approach should be taken to monitoring the performance of full time, office based workers.

Many of the case studies in the literature identify that trust is important, with some going as far as suggesting that only particularly trusted employees make candidates for teleworking (McMahon & Pocock, 2011: 30; see also Diversity Council of Australia, 2010: 3; Schumacher & Poehler, 2009: 170). While trust is important in the workplace and is a key part of the culture which helps make flexible work successful, we believe that managers need to make use of the skills and tools of management to supervise off-site staff, rather than simply relying on feelings of trust.

AIM has identified a number of issues for managers to consider when assessing whether teleworking may be appropriate.⁹ These include:

- The nature of the tasks to be performed
- The resources and support required to perform the tasks
- The employee's style of work

⁸ For a snapshot of changes in the workplace over the past fifty years see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011.

⁹ AIM NSW & ACT provides tailored training in 'remote management'.

- The availability of communications and other technology
- Legal issues such as health and safety and workers compensation.

Supervision of staff working flexibly requires managers to take an explicit focus on objectives, outcomes or outputs, rather than activities or inputs. For example, taking the stated objectives of the organisation as a whole, the manager may identify specific objectives for each staff member to achieve within agreed timeframes. The manager may set more closely defined objectives for employees on flexible work arrangements to assist with monitoring progress, or may establish more frequent formal updates, in recognition that there is less opportunity for informal supervision and appraisal.

Alternatively, a focus on objectives may also be achieved through developing a business or operational plan for the organisation or team, with sufficient level of detail to guide staff members' work. This may form the basis of weekly supervision or team meetings, against which progress is measured both at an individual and team level.

As for all staff, in determining the most effective supervision strategies, managers need to consider the personal style or work preferences of staff who telework. For example, an individual staff member who works best when uninterrupted may appreciate contact via email rather than a phone call.

Flexible work spaces

In addition to creating the opportunity for staff to work from home, or off-site, some organisations find it useful to recreate work spaces within the workplace to enhance flexibility. By analysing the type of work undertaken and the facilities employees need to carry out their work most effectively, organisations can create flexible workplaces which increase productivity and efficiency, and which may reduce the amount of office space required. For example, organisations may identify that staff need a combination of small "hotdesks", private or quiet spaces for uninterrupted work, formal and informal collaborative spaces where several colleagues can gather together to work on a project jointly, large meeting rooms equipped for face-to-face conferences and teleconferences and small meeting rooms which can be booked for interviews or similar (The GPT Group, 2012a and 2012b).

Implementing this type of flexibility requires mainstreaming, as it does not just involve all staff but also requires new types of communication, supervision, file storage and other practices.

Colleagues and teams

When one or several employees work flexibly, this affects not just the staff member and their manager but also their colleagues. A key role for the manager is to identify and resolve any issues which may arise from this. While some colleagues may be supportive, others may take a negative view of the flexible work arrangements (McDonald, Bradley, & Brown, 2009: 151). Colleagues may:

- Feel that a colleague working flexibly is not as committed to the job, or is unreliable
- Lose contact with them as they are not at the workplace as often
- Feel jealous, especially if some staff have access to flexible work arrangements while others do not

- Feel resentful and perceive that their own workload is increased as a result of a colleague working flexibly.

Some of these perceptions may be grounded in reality. For example, as noted earlier, unless managers are careful to set workloads appropriately for all staff, it may be the case that full time workers are expected to pick up additional work, or cover for their part time colleagues. Alternatively, colleagues' negative perceptions may bear no relation to the flexible worker's actual performance. For example, colleagues may think that a staff member who leaves the office at 3 PM is knocking off early, not realising that the staff member works additional hours from home each evening. Either way, colleagues' attitudes have a great deal of impact on the success or otherwise of flexible work arrangements.

Colleagues' views are particularly important where staff members work closely, such as in a small team or on a specific project. In these situations, performance may be largely measured at team level or by the success of the project as a whole. It is important for all team members to appreciate the contribution of each of their colleagues, and not to fall into the trap of measuring inputs such as hours in the office. This issue is exacerbated in workplaces where there is an expectation, spoken or otherwise, of working unpaid overtime. It is also important for all team members to understand and be comfortable with the way the team communicates, for example, using teleconferences rather than face-to-face meetings (Schumacher & Poehler, 2009: 174-6).

A workplace culture where issues can be raised openly and addressed professionally helps minimise potential negativity. In addition, colleagues' attitudes to flexible work are easier to manage when flexibility has become mainstream within the organisation. This prevents the jealousy which may arise from the perception that flexible work is a benefit only offered to a few employees, or to certain kinds of employees. Equally, it is important for flexible work to have the explicit support of senior people within the organisation, including the board and executive team.

Communication

Managers need to consider who is likely to be affected by flexible work arrangements, and may therefore need to be informed or consulted. Even in situations where the introduction of flexibility is relatively minor or limited to a small number of workers, the principles of change management may be useful: identify stakeholders and consult with them to understand their views, engage them in the change, and seek their support. For example, a manager may hold a team meeting to gauge colleagues' perceptions of a flexible work proposal, and take their views into account in finalising the new arrangement.

Engaging with stakeholders helps the outcome to be more widely accepted, and makes it clear from the start that communication is welcome. Communication may need to be ongoing, to ensure that any issues are identified as they emerge and are addressed promptly. Ongoing communication about the new arrangements may also assist with demonstrating management support, thereby minimising negative responses from colleagues. Some organisations find that active promotion of flexible work arrangements, both within the organisation and externally via industry forums, helps with implementation (McMahon & Pocock, 2011: 2, 6, 16, 23).

Another aspect of communication is the need to ensure that flexible workers stay effectively "in touch" with their colleagues and the rest of the workplace. Managers have a role to play in ensuring that the need for communication is appreciated and that the tools exist to facilitate this. For example, where many staff members work flexibly a manager may arrange for staff to use communications software which allows individual staff to signal in real time

whether they are working, the location from which they are working and how they can be contacted. Alternatively, where a staff member is on extended leave, such as maternity leave, the manager may make arrangements for them to receive updates periodically, to retain their log in rights so they still receive staff emails, and to be invited to key staff events.

Staff working flexibly also have the responsibility to ensure that communication is effective, including informal “catch ups”. For example, a staff member may identify two or three colleagues who are well placed to fill them in on anything they may have missed while away from the office, and make a point of checking in as needed. In workplaces where significant aspects of the job are conducted through informal contact amongst colleagues, a flexible worker may need to adopt a more proactive approach to “unscheduled” time while in the office, to allow them to maintain networks with colleagues.

Negotiating flexibility

Whether managing an individual staff member working flexibly, or managing in a workplace characterised by flexible work, managers need skills in negotiating and monitoring work arrangements. This may be as straightforward as coming to an agreement with a part time employee about which days he or she will work, and monitoring to ensure the arrangement works well for the employee, their colleagues and the organisation.

Where several employees work flexibly, possibly making use of different types of flexibility, the manager’s role in negotiating and monitoring the arrangements becomes more complex and more crucial. The negotiation may require balancing competing interests of several employees, and ensuring all employees are treated fairly. Transparency in decision making and clear communication are likely to assist all staff to feel fairly-treated.

Formal policies regarding the flexible work arrangements which are available in the workplace, and processes for accessing these, may assist managers in their role. The use of formal policies and procedures does not, however, reduce the need for informal flexibility from managers, for example, in responding to ad hoc or urgent requests for time off. Nor does it reduce the need for a culture of encouraging the take up of flexible work arrangements.

When negotiating flexible work arrangements with a staff member, it is worth keeping in mind that the staff member may simultaneously be negotiating the arrangement with their family or other important elements of their life. For example, where two parents share childcare responsibilities, the flexible work arrangements agreed with one parent need to be compatible with the other parent’s work practices. When implementing flexible work, some organisations consult not just with their employees but also with their employees’ families, to ensure that their views are taken into account (McMahon & Pocock, 2011: 4).

Who has time for all this?

Managers may be forgiven for thinking that all of this will add to the complexity of their role and require them to divert precious time away from other pressing management tasks. Managers need to be confident that they have the skills, tools and techniques to allow them to manage flexible work arrangements as efficiently as possible. These skills include:

- Negotiation skills
- Performance monitoring techniques
- Tools to identify the costs and benefits of flexible work

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- Communications strategies.

Where managers are assessed in part on their capacity to manage flexible work arrangements effectively, they may also require skills in demonstrating outcomes and reporting on their activities.

In addition to the ongoing tasks involved in managing in a flexible work environment, managers may find they need to dedicate time to re-thinking work practices. For example:

- What alternatives to face-to-face meetings might work for the organisation or team?
- Which tasks might suit teleworking?
- What new communication methods might help keep colleagues in touch with each other?

In addition to these issues, managers may find it helpful to spend time thinking through the outcomes which the organisation or team aims to achieve, and how these might best be achieved in a flexible work environment. Where time permits, or where the organisation is embarking on a major shift to flexible work arrangements, this may involve a significant strategic planning process. However it may also be as simple as referring to the organisation or team's existing business plan, objectives or performance indicators.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES FOR MANAGERS WORKING FLEXIBLY

Perceptions and practices

The statistics show that there are many workers on flexible work arrangements but very few managers in this position (Abhayaratna, Andrews, Nuch, & Podbury, 2008: xvi-iii, 8). The strong perception remains that management is inherently a full time “on site” role, where the manager is constantly available to supervise staff and give guidance (McDonald, Bradley, & Brown, 2009: 149). Embedded in this is the implication that management requires not just full time hours but long hours at the workplace: it is not a “nine to five” role, let alone a “ten to three” role. The “ideal worker” mentioned above, who is able to commit themselves fully to their job, finds a parallel in the “ideal manager”, whose level of workplace responsibility encroaches on external interests and commitments.

These expectations seem to apply, in general, to other senior roles even if not strictly managerial. This may include staff who have responsibility for liaising with a particular client, or who report directly to senior management on a specific project.

The effect of these perceptions is that very few managerial or senior roles are offered with flexible work options (Ernst & Young, 2011: 6). One way this can be challenged is by mainstreaming flexibility within the organisation. In fact, the Diversity Council of Australia identifies the promotion of staff on flexible work arrangements as a key indicator of mainstreamed flexibility (2012: 7; see also McMahon & Pocock, 2011). Once flexibility is understood as a normal part of the work environment, it is easier to imagine how senior roles can be effectively performed by staff working flexibly.

As with other employees on flexible work arrangements, managers working flexibly may have to combat colleagues’ perceptions that they are not as committed to the job or not as effective as a manager. In addition, the intensification of work is a significant risk, as managers working flexibly seek to remain available to the staff they manage, as well as colleagues and their own manager. Managers on flexible work arrangements may find themselves working very different hours from their staff, for example, responding to emails very late at night or over the weekend. Managers need to communicate clearly what they expect from their staff regarding availability, to avoid further intensification of workloads.

Managers on flexible work arrangements need to develop supervision and communication strategies to ensure that they can effectively manage their staff regardless of where people are located. For example, a manager working flexibly may arrange for all staff to have access to their diary, so that there can be no confusion about whether the manager is working, where they are working from, and what is the best way to contact them. Further, the manager may use their diary to schedule in blocks of time for writing reports, meetings, travel, teleconferences and so on, and ensure that all staff understand when they are available and how they can be contacted.

Access to opportunities

Employees who work flexibly often experience limited access to opportunities in the workplace (DCA, 2012: 23). This includes access to senior or management roles, even if those roles could be carried out under flexible work arrangements. Exclusion from accessing opportunities may be formal or informal. For example, promotional positions may be restricted to full time workers. Alternatively, employees who work flexibly may be considered “non career” and overlooked for promotion despite no formal exclusion policy. In other

situations, promotion may result largely from informal networking with senior management, which may be more difficult for those on flexible work arrangements.

The abilities of staff who work flexibly may be underestimated on the mistaken assumption that flexible jobs are inherently unskilled and therefore that workers on flexible work arrangements have less to offer. Based on this assumption, flexible employees may be excluded from enrolling in training courses. Alternatively, training may be offered only through face-to-face sessions, meaning that workers on flexible arrangements may simply miss out.

Much of the literature regarding workplace flexibility analyses the quality, or rather lack of quality, of jobs performed on flexible work arrangements (Abhayaratna, Andrews, Nuch, & Podbury, 2008: xxi, xxiv, xxvii-iii, xvii; McDonald, Bradley, & Brown, 2009; Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2012; Richardson, 2012; Baird, Charlesworth, & Heron, 2010: 4). Some researchers distinguish between “bad” and “good” flexible jobs, emphasising how few of the latter are available.

Restricting flexible workers’ access to opportunities has negative consequences for both employers and employees. Employers miss out on the resource represented by talented managers and would-be managers, who work flexibly or would like to work flexibly. Employees who work or want to work flexibly may be unfairly limited to poor quality jobs.

Again, mainstreaming flexibility within the workplace can be effective in overcoming both formal and informal lack of access to opportunities. Where flexible work is the norm, opportunities for training, development and promotion are open to all staff based on merit and interest, regardless of where and when they carry out their work.

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