

Thinking about role design and workload

A flexible approach to work enables effective work, high engagement and diversity as well as reduced absenteeism and presenteeism. In some organisations this approach is already embedded for all – others may find it a significant cultural change.

Success in flexibility means that you and your team respect each other's need for work-life fit, trust each other to deliver and take accountability for shared goals and managing expectations. Job design and objective-setting are key skills to ensure this happens.

Job design

Managing a flexible team requires understanding of the impact on different team members and the ability to allocate work effectively across the whole team, taking into account different working patterns.

Resource planning can be more complex when managing a flexible team instead of a team that all work the same set hours. Wherever possible the whole team should be involved in discussions to ensure any difficulties are ironed out. Employees are likely to have an instinctive feel for the aspects of their roles that are flexible or can be grouped together to create flexibility.

It is useful to invest time up-front in analysing the workflow more closely, looking at volumes, patterns of work, and productivity levels. Consider what factors drive the way in which work is organised (for example service level agreements or times when certain clients are available).

Managers who think creatively about how the workload of the team can be effectively organised can use flexible working to create significant advantage for the organisation (for example in providing customer service over a longer period, or managing peaks and troughs in workflow).

Consider the type of role and activity:

Team roles: does the job involve working as part of a team with demanding short-term service delivery constraints? If so, some flexibility will be possible but it will need to take account of service cover requirements and be negotiated as a team so that there is always cover and everyone's needs are met.

Project-based: if the work is more project based, with long-term deadlines and less reliance on other team members, a relatively autonomous form of flexibility will be suitable. This could be occasional or regular homeworking – but watch out for the person becoming isolated and losing visibility in your team.

Supervisory role: a supervisory role may require day-to-day guidance and troubleshooting by the employee. If full-time cover is needed, then consider job-sharing or use it as an opportunity for someone else to deputise. Much supervisory work at senior level is already done remotely – especially if the role is a global one or covers more than one site.

Client-facing/public relations: is this an outward-facing role, with a lot of time devoted to external contacts? Day-to-day flexibility could be a distinct advantage in this role, with report writing completed in transit or catching up from home.

Process driven work: is a lot of processing and analysis required? Are there peak times that require extra cover? Annual hours or flexibility tailored to the business cycle could work well. Would quiet space, free from interruptions make these tasks suited to occasional homeworking? Might there be any confidentiality issues to overcome?

In analysing which elements of a role could be done flexibly, you can use a method such as the Working Families Flex-fit™ Toolkit to aid job analysis and find a flexible solution.

The toolkit starts from the assumption that every role is made up of three basic types of activity: collaboration, concentration and transaction processing (routine, repetitive tasks). Each activity will be constrained by time and location in different ways and may require different tools.

- **Use a data capture sheet** for team members to keep a diary of what they do at work, when they do it, how long for, which stakeholder the task is for and the tools used. Depending on the role it may be appropriate to do this for a week or a month. This is ideal to do before your employee takes maternity leave, for example, as it will also help you plan the cover you need.
- Once the diary is completed, **categorise the tasks** into the type of work (collaborative, concentration or transaction processing), time dependency and location dependency.
- Take some time to sort tasks into their different categories – type of task/time dependency/location dependency. **What patterns emerge?** Are there logical chunks where you can split the role for part-time/job sharing? Where could you flex start and finish times, split the working day or compress hours? What could be done from home?

Top Tips

Involve your team in discussions about what kind of flexibility will work for different roles – there may be several options and they will know what can work and what won't. Ask them to consider the needs of stakeholders as well as the work-life fit required by the team.

Focus on outcomes, not time in the office. Set specific and measurable objectives and evaluate how these have been achieved through good performance management. It is important that managers are in a position to judge on achievement rather than hours worked. Once this is in place, the need to see the employee at a desk working is removed.

Tailor objectives to working patterns: where employees working on longer-term projects spend a substantial amount of their time off-site, it may be useful to think about adjusting the types of goals set to reflect this, and including a higher proportion of short-term, concrete objectives which work towards the long term goals. This may be helpful in improving communication as the manager and employee will need to meet on a regular basis to discuss progress towards the short term goals.

Measure performance fairly Evidence suggests that employees who work flexibly are often even more effective in their roles than their full-time colleagues¹, but their performance appraisal scores may not reflect this. Make additional checks to ensure flexible workers are treated fairly and without bias. For example, you could measure the relative scores of full-time and part-time employees, and follow this up with appropriate challenges where discrepancies appear.

What if it's not working? Have a clear process for raising and resolving issues – if agreeing to a new work pattern it is sensible to put in place a trial period (for the benefit of both sides) and a review process to discuss how it is going and if changes are needed. Maternity returners often report that they have wanted to tweak the days or hours they work and being open to these changes will ensure the flexibility works for all.

Train line managers: To support the effective management of flexible teams and individuals, managers may need to receive coaching or training. For some this may mean acquiring a very different mindset – changing the emphasis from controlling the work that is done, to trusting their team members to effectively carry out their tasks unsupervised. Although flexible working doesn't always require managers to acquire a new skillset, it does place a greatly increased emphasis on particular existing areas of management competence.

¹ <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/working-papers/does-working-home-work-evidence-chinese-experiment>