Time for everyone to flex

FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUIRES EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES TO THINK ABOUT HOW OUR WORKING LIVES CAN BE TWEAKED TO SUIT PEOPLE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR LIVES AND CAREERS. BEN BLACK EXPLAINS WHY ‘FAMILY-FRIENDLY’ IS MORE THAN JUST CODE FOR FEWER HOURS
Managing flexible working policies is down to the employer, but building trust and proving it’s a good plan means everyone working together. Dr Kelley’s findings are not just important to the employee, but to the employer as well.

As an employer, you can facilitate flexible working by making sure that anyone who might need a work phone has one and knows how to use FaceTime or Skype to encourage remote meetings. Flexible working isn’t about work patterns; does the job really need someone full time? Break down a role to 30 hours a week on flexible working and it could suffice. There are, of course, very many practical ways that employers can help working parents. The most stressful time for families is when childcare breaks down. There are some fantastic emergency childcare schemes out there that provide bespoke services for employers and individuals. In practice, most forward-thinking directors and managers are happy for the business to pick up the cost if there is an important work deadline that gets hit as a result.

If career and life are not mutually exclusive, then individuals will be far more engaged with an employer that has allowed them to reach that state of affairs. Happier because typically they have found a way to balance work and family, and pursue their interests both in and out of the office.

Flexible working is about looking at what’s best for the employee – and the employer – and finding the angle that benefits the business (more work, higher engagement, better results). Here are three examples of what family-friendly might mean for different employers:

- **Example 1 – Corporate law firm.** Senior lawyers are paid very well, they work incredibly hard and client needs will always come top of the priority list. Family-friendly here might mean making sure working parents have fantastic childcare support so that they really can attend that completion meeting at 2am. Not that friendly, you might think, but definitely useful.

- **Example 2 – Large, performance-driven multinational.** Imagine you’re an ambitious and well-regarded young parent. Family-friendly here might simply be a case of recognising that for a few years you prefer getting your head down and not constantly fighting for promotion. The employer that can allow people to take a rest from the daily competition for promotion and jump back on the career ladder a few years later is brilliant for working parents.

- **Example 3 – Call centre.** Here, family-friendly might simply be a case of making sure shift patterns are flexed around the needs of the working community, rather than set in stone irrespective of family commitments.

When it comes to family-friendly, culture is fundamental and there are a few ways to start shifting the needle. Organise a lunchtime seminar from a work-life balance expert, organise some sandwiches and convince some senior employees to attend and talk about the issues raised afterwards. Make sure there is a proper process in place to keep in touch with anyone who happens to be on maternity or paternity leave. And if you really want to be forward thinking, ask who in the business combines work with responsibility for an older relative.

Experts like Paul Kelley have brought a new line of thinking to a debate that has mainly focused on logistics. The flexible working debate is usually about finding balance in the complicated lives we lead. It’s about being able to pick up the kids from school and make the occasional visit to grandparents and dependants. There is a lot more to the argument. Very little has been written yet about why working from home and at different times will have physiological benefits to individuals. This is an intriguing angle to a discussion we’ve been having for a few years now.

As an employer, I’m willing to consider it. Some people work better in the evenings, some want and need the visual and social stimulation of an office and others will do their best work sitting at home in their pyjamas with the television gently murmuring away in the background. If you’re going to embrace agile working, then understanding these different preferences seems obvious and essential. Our much-maligned sleep expert might just be on to something. 😃