

Flexible working and sleep patterns have been getting a lot of air time, particularly in the UK, where sleep expert and University of Oxford professor Dr Paul Kelley has claimed that working nine to five is a form of modern torture.

He argues, for instance, that older children should start school at 11am to help them improve grades. Some quarters of the press have been enjoying themselves with his ideas, linking an 11am start to a reduction in drug or alcohol abuse, which may be a bit of a stretch.

While the headlines and stories might appear to be complete balderdash, there may be something useful that the world of work can gain from his musings.

Flexible working is a buzz term that gets mentioned around thousands of offices the world over, and is fast becoming a key attribute for many employees when looking for a role. But what does it really mean? And how can staff encourage management to sit up, take note and introduce some practices that will help improve their work-life balance? The reality is, whether you leave early and log in again in the evenings, or work fewer hours spread out over the week, people can, and do, work more flexibly.

I'm the father of 10-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, and I've learned a lot watching

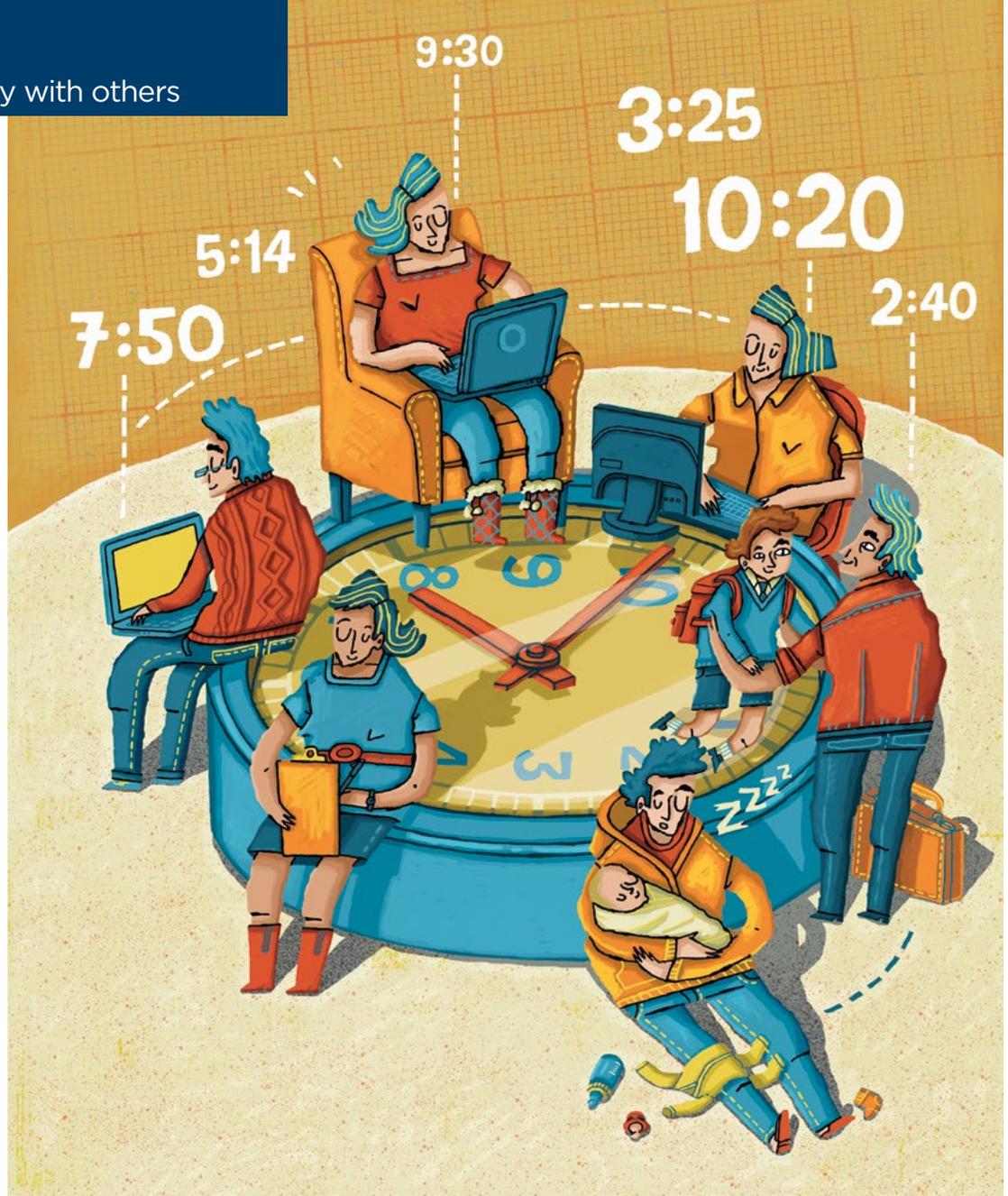
them grow up. My daughter is the early bird: she gets up early, full of beans, and gradually starts getting grumpy and tired as the day goes on. My son is the opposite. He's a night owl

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who can party with the best of them, but getting him out of bed for school requires the powers of a small army.

If I was their boss rather than their dad, I would use this knowledge to both of

our advantages. Letting them work at opposite ends of the day would not only allow them to be more productive, it would also allow them to fall into a more natural rhythm.



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

Nowadays, employers want to be seen as family-friendly. They've finally figured out that in these days of more flexible working, you don't have to do too much to get more out of your working parents. Be a bit nicer to any mothers or fathers in the business who happen to have children and you'll end up with happier and harder-working employees.

Being able to work more flexibly and actually doing it are two different things, however, but the more switched-on employers – IBM and Deloitte, for example – genuinely understand that allowing people to work in more agile ways can be a win-win situation. Employers

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

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. 📌

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

need a bit less office space and they end up with a much happier, more engaged and productive workforce. Getting flexible working right, however, is complicated.

Research carried out by Lancaster University, UK, and campaigning charity Working Families summarises the challenge nicely. When you start to look below the surface, you'll see that men in a big, successful private-sector organisation who found ways to work flexibly were the least likely to lose their jobs when the credit crisis hit. They were seen as the hardest working and most valued employees. Conversely, dads working flexibly for large civil-service departments were the most likely to lose their jobs when the credit crisis hit. No surprise really.

If flexible working simply means working less, then it doesn't work for anyone – especially the employer.

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 happy state of affairs – engaged people work longer and better. Everyone's lives are different; whether you are managing work around your family or training for a marathon, the important part is productivity. Flexible working works because people are happier. They are



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