

Flexible working: Know your rights

Flexible working is now a common practice in many firms and is being adopted increasingly quickly as workplaces shift to a working culture that suits the needs of their employees.

Offering a more flexible way of working can help keep staff committed and motivated as well as improving levels of productivity, so it's refreshing to see the government recognise how important flexibility is to the future of workplaces.

When the government brought in legislation last year to give workers the right to ask for flexible working arrangements from their first day in a new job, they laid down a precedent in showing how work culture has changed in the last decade, coming a long way from the days when overworking and long hours in the office was considered normal and rewarded.

Previously, new starters had to wait 26 weeks in a job before they could ask for flexible working and could only make one request every 12 months, with no right to appeal. But as more workers begin to see flexible working as important or non-negotiable in their careers, employers are having to look at and adapt their HR practices if they want to recruit and retain the right staff.

Flexible working is not just about hybrid or remote working, but also includes working compressed or flexi hours to help with childcare or care responsibilities, working part-time, job sharing or even phased retirement. And employees should never feel guilty about asking for working hours that fit around their personal lives, especially if they are still getting all their tasks done.

Whereas previously workers might not have felt comfortable or confident to ask for these arrangements even after being in a role for many years, for fear of how managers might receive it, they now have a legal right to have their request considered from day one.

So this new ruling gives them greater power in asking for that flexibility and asking for an arrangement that makes their life away from the workplace easier. And there is nothing wrong with that. I firmly believe that happier workers are more productive and efficient, which is a great argument for anyone who is speaking to their employers about flexible working.

As recent research from Sage shows, flexible working can “revolutionise employee experience that truly makes work, work”. The study found 60% of HR teams surveyed are spending more time on flexible working policies and 63% said that flexible working had become more of a priority showing that employers are increasingly working with their teams to find solutions that work for them.

At Vestd we have been an advocate for flexible working from day one. For a short time we used a WeWork space as a hub for staff meetings and coworking, which gave us a great amount of flexibility without an office building. However, we soon decided that a remote setup had greater advantages for a company like ours and so, long before it became the norm during the pandemic, our teams began working from home.

Our processes are now about adopting the right mindset and behaviours, and flexible working is a part of that. We encourage the startups and SMEs that we work with to stop clock-watching their staff as it shouldn't matter when or where people choose to work. Don't assume that people are only contributing to your business because they turn up to work between 9am and 5pm. Workers can do the same quality of work if they log on later in the morning or if they condense all their hours into three or four days, and what they contribute to your business is much more important. We should trust our teams to take responsibility for their performance against agreed targets, outputs and outcomes whatever time they choose to work.

There are of course challenges to flexible working. There can be a lack of office interactions and those 'watercooler moments' with colleagues when you're working remotely or part-time. It's important to ensure that employees don't feel an element of disconnect through missed meetings or social events.

For startups, in order to encourage growth and success, flexibility is the key, and I would say it's important to have it across all teams to be the most effective. But it's not the only option in enticing people to work for you. Share schemes and equity can encourage productivity and can change the relationship people have with their employer. It gives them a feeling of

increased loyalty and they see longer term benefits being part of a company's vision and goals.

And for employees, it's important to know that they can ask for working hours that fit around their home life, their commitments outside of work, or even their hobbies. Because if you don't have to constantly worry about getting into work for a 9am meeting after the school run, then you're going to be less stressed and in turn more productive when you are working.

This way of working is the future of modern workplaces and it just makes sense to me. After all, we spend so much of our week working, it would be a shame to have resentment towards your job or your managers if they are against any kind of flexibility.

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