

Getting it Right

Improving work-life balance in your business



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This guide can be downloaded for free from:

www.fsb.org.uk

www.chamberonline.co.uk

www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

Introduction

On 6 April 2003, the UK Government introduced a series of new employment rights to help support parents in the workplace. See below right for details.

There have been great changes both in family life and in the nature of work. More women now work and more families are reliant on two incomes. These new rights are one way to help balance work and family life.

For some small businesses these new rights will be a challenge. For others they will simply reflect what they are already doing.

Over the past 20 years the introduction of family friendly working arrangements or work-life balance schemes have largely been voluntary and initiated by employers. Many thousands of UK employers have introduced flexible working arrangements to help employees, particularly those with family commitments. Many employers have done this in response to requests from employees.

Why more family friendly working is important

All parents need a range of options to enable them to balance their working lives and their children's needs. If parents are given the opportunity to spend more time with their children when they are very young and are given more choices about flexible working as their children grow and develop, this reduces the stress of balancing work and home life. This will benefit children and families.

It makes sense to business, as it will mean their employees are more productive, less stressed and happier at work. The case studies included in this guide confirm this view. Employers have seen that family friendly working can benefit the business by improving recruitment and retention of staff and reducing recruitment costs.

Background to this publication

Much of the material that has been produced on work-life balance over recent years has focused on large and complex organisations. These often have substantial human resource departments and work nationally or even internationally.

There has been much less focus on small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) with fewer than 250 employees. Yet these employ the majority of the UK population and these new employment rights apply to all employers.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is working with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and British Chamber of Commerce (BCC) to publish *Getting it Right* because:

- Employers' policies and practices have an impact on family life and the capacity of parents to look after their children. We want to encourage all employers to adopt child and family friendly employment policies and practices.

- Such policies and practices will help remove some of the stress that comes from balancing the demands of home and work. By working together, we hope to create a society in which children are safe from harm, and parents receive the help they need to care for and understand their children.

Through the FULL STOP Campaign, the NSPCC wants to end cruelty to children and establish a society in which children are loved, valued and able to achieve their potential. Employers and employees have a role to play in achieving this. The NSPCC would welcome comments on this publication. Please email Charlie Monkcom at cmonkcom@nspcc.org.uk

For more information on the three organisations see page 31

The new rights:

Improved maternity leave and benefits

- Ordinary maternity leave has increased to 26 weeks.
- The statutory maternity pay period has also increased to 26 weeks. Additional unpaid maternity leave is now available for a further 26 weeks – giving most mothers up to one year off in total if they wish.
- Statutory maternity pay (SMP) has increased to £100 per week.

New right to paid paternity leave

A new statutory right to paternity leave and pay has been introduced for fathers of babies due, or born, on or after 6 April 2003. Two weeks paid leave is available to help care for the new baby and offer support to the mother. This will be paid at the same rate as SMP.

New right to paid adoption leave

A new right to paid adoption leave has been introduced for eligible parents to take leave when a child is newly placed for adoption. This is paid at SMP rates.

New right to request flexible working

Help is now available to working parents with the introduction of the new rights for parents of children aged under six, or of disabled children aged under 18, to request flexible working. Employers have a statutory duty to consider such requests seriously.

Free information is available via www.dti.gov.uk/workingparents

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The case studies

This publication contains a series of SME case studies gathered during the last two months of 2002. They focus on the 'business case' for introducing work-life balance policies. These businesses have all adopted employment policies that are similar to the new rights contained in the Employment Act 2002.

The case studies reflect diversity in terms of size and workforce, ownership, sector and geographical area in the UK. The 11 examples have workforces ranging from seven to 216 employees. Most were privately owned, either as partnerships or companies. Two not-for-profit organisations are included.

What can this publication offer you?

We hope you will find this guide helpful in developing your own approach to work-life balance. Case studies are particularly useful because they can:

- Give examples of how a flexible approach to working arrangements works in practice – addressing both business and employee needs.
- Provide examples of how others have introduced innovative ideas with tips for other organisations.
- Encourage others to see that there are real benefits for the business, the employee and the customer.
- Demonstrate that creative solutions can be found without a huge amount of work.

You could first look at those businesses that are most like yours first, referring to size, sector and so on. See page 5 for our easy-reference list of case studies. Simply double click on your chosen case study.

Conclusions

All employers must introduce these new employment rights. These case studies provide illustrations of the clear business benefits that follow imagination and planning.

- ✓ Only a few of the businesses had a written work-life balance policy and these tended to be the ones with more employees. The others prefer to rely on a flexible and open culture and to respond to individual needs when these arise.
- ✓ Each of the businesses had developed their own approach on how to balance the business needs with the needs of individual staff members.
- ✓ There were clear business benefits to the employer of having work-life balance policies in place, in particular, the ability to retain experienced and valuable members of staff. The benefits were considered to be long lasting.
- ✓ In every case the importance of people to the business was cited. Valuing staff and staff loyalty were seen as key to their success of the business.
- ✓ Working culture was seen as very important. Having a policy for work-life balance on its own is not enough. A flexible and open approach is crucial in finding workable solutions for business and employee needs.
- ✓ Work-life balance is not an optional extra but an essential part of the business. Once these SMEs had experienced the benefits of running their companies in this way, they couldn't really understand why others didn't do it.
- ✓ These are all successful businesses. Several have achieved awards in recognition of their success in many different fields.

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The case studies

Name of Employer	Place of Business	Status	Type of Business	Number of Employees
Castle Green Hotel	Kendal, Lake District	Private company	Hotel and conference centre	108
ConocoPhillips	Warwick	Part of multi-national company	Oil and gas producer	216
DOT	Lewes, West Sussex	Private company	Media design	7
Farrelly Facilities	Sutton Coalfield, West Midlands	Private company	Heating, ventilation and air-conditioning engineers	50
Flare Software Systems	Bath, Somerset	Private company	Computer software	56
Opportunity Links	Cambridge	Voluntary organisation	Childcare information and consultancy services	40
Soha Housing	Didcot, Oxfordshire	Not-for-profit company	Housing management	118
Southfields Office Supplies	Wandsworth, London	Private partnership supplies	Stationery and office	8
Springbank Industries	Stone, Staffordshire	Private company	Vending machine operator	60
The Training Exchange	Dinnington, Sheffield	Private company	Training and development	30
Wind in the Willow Nurseries	St Helen's, Merseyside	Private partnership	Nursery day care	35

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Castle Green Hotel, Kendal

Business profile

Castle Green Hotel is set in attractive and extensive grounds just outside Kendal in the Lake District. It was opened in December 1997 and expanded in 2000 to have a total of 100 bedrooms. It is owned by Castle Green Kendal Ltd and has a current annual turnover of £4 million. The two major shareholders, James and Catherine Alexander are actively involved in the management of the business as managing director and finance director. A major focus of the business is the corporate market with a flourishing Conference and Training Centre offering residential facilities keeping the hotel busy during the week. In addition the hotel has function rooms for weddings and dinner dances, a fitness and leisure club, restaurant and its own pub and is a popular place for weekend breaks.

There are 55 full-time and 35 part-time employees. The hotel also employs 18 casual staff, mainly students, who help at functions and special events.

The business case

“The image of working in a hotel over the years has not been brilliant – low pay, long hours and unsociable working times. It is a real challenge to get through that barrier and say that working in a hotel does not have to be that way.” Julie Chapman, Personnel Manager.

According to General Manager, Tim Rumney, recruitment and retention of staff were the most important drivers for introducing work-life balance practices. It is also clear to the management that individuals who are valued, appreciated and happy in their work create a productive working environment and this is of particular benefit in such a customer service focused industry.

“We are in a labour market that is very tough, with less than 1 per cent unemployment in our area, and we have a business that is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In order for us to have good people working here and to hang on to those people, we needed to have more flexibility in our expectations of the hours people could work, and organise our shift pattern accordingly. We also have to offer benefits that are as good as if not better than the best employers in the area. In a nutshell we were making these decisions for commercial reasons.”

Turnover of staff is around 40 per cent, having been around 64 per cent a few years ago. This is much lower than the 100 per cent average for the hotel and catering industry where unsociable hours and shift work tend to result in people seeing it as a short-term working option. There is, however, more stability in the managerial and administrative posts.

Managing requests to work flexibly

“We might not always say yes as a business but we would not say no without looking at it first.”

Being a 24/7 business has meant that managers are used to managing people working different hours and times. A lot of the managers have work-life balance issues of their own and have not had any problems about the introduction of a work-life balance approach.

The disadvantage of 24/7 is the unsociable hours of work which tend to be unpopular. It is not always feasible for people to work the hours they choose in a hotel where evenings and weekends are so busy. This is made clear to all applicants and it can be a barrier to recruitment.

The management is aware of the importance of making sure morale is not affected by creating a situation where some people are getting, or are perceived as getting, a better deal. They are careful to monitor the different departments and listen to what people say to ensure consistency and fairness. There has been only one incident when employees have voiced their concerns. In the housekeeping department a cleaner was finding it difficult to get a babysitter on Sundays, the busiest checkout day of the week. Because she was a single mother with no family in the area, Julie Chapman felt it was reasonable to make an exception and agreed she could work one in three Sundays, which she could manage. This did cause resentment at first with some of the other cleaners but it is the only case where other staff have been unhappy.

Individuals who are valued, appreciated and happy in their work create a productive working environment and this is of particular benefit in such a customer service focused industry

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Taking a flexible view

The fact that a lot of people working at the hotel have families with both very young and older children has partly been a conscious recruitment decision by Personnel Manager, Julie Chapman, who feels that employees with families are usually hard working and reliable due to their financial commitments and parental responsibilities.

“I have two children and I have worked here from the beginning. I have always felt strongly about work fitting in with people’s home life. I have always promoted that as a policy. We try and fit the job around our people rather than the other way round.”

There are many examples of the flexible approach taken by management:

- ✓ In the housekeeping department the fact that hours can be fitted around school hours is promoted as a way of attracting people. The official starting time is 9am and finishing when the work is done. This varies according to the occupancy of rooms. But it is guaranteed that parents can take and pick up children to and from school even if the work is not all done and someone else will finish for them.

We try and fit the job around our people rather than the other way round

- ✓ Special arrangements are made where a couple both work at the hotel. The second chef always does the 3pm till 11pm shift. His wife who works in the housekeeping department three days each week, finishes at 3pm so that she can take over looking after their children whom he brings with him to the hotel.
- ✓ In reception it had been difficult to both recruit and keep staff. They started looking at the shift rota to see how to be more flexible instead of sticking rigidly to the expected shift pattern for hotel receptionists. This is traditionally a late shift finishing at 11pm followed by an early shift starting at 7am. Rotas are now planned five weeks in advance and aim to ensure people have quality time off. Also each receptionist now does only one back to back shift each week.

- ✓ One person applied for an evening cleaner’s job but was over qualified. She was working at a local supermarket as a head cashier but her new manager did not agree with her working part-time. Julie thought she would be good in reception and the fact that she wanted to work three late shifts which are the least popular, was an added bonus. Julie Chapman comments: “We have gained a fabulous member of staff who only left her previous job after 15 years service due to the rigid attitude of her new line manager. Their loss is definitely our gain.”

It is not only parents of young children who benefit. Any requests to work flexibly would be considered.

- ✓ In the Sales Office, two women job-share their position looking after the banqueting administration. They each work three days with one day spent together. For these two women in their fifties it was a life choice not to work full time.

Maternity and paternity leave

In 2002, three key female members of staff became pregnant and three key male members of staff were due to become new fathers. The hotel felt it was appropriate to introduce Company Maternity Pay and Paternity Leave Schemes. Maternity pay is supplemented to 80 per cent of average earnings for weeks seven to 18 of the maternity pay period and the fathers get two weeks paid paternity leave at full pay, following the arrival of their babies.

Employee perspective

Jane Allan has been the Sales Office Manager at Castle Green for two years. When her first child Abbie was born, Jane took 18 weeks maternity leave. She has been back at work since September but instead of working full-time she now works two days a week. Because the work of the Sales Office has expanded it was possible to create a further full-time position as well. A new job description was drawn up to reflect Jane’s changed working hours and she is delighted with the arrangement. “I am just so happy to be able to continue to work in a job that I very much enjoy, but also to spend time with my baby.”

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The culture is what really matters

One of the main developments in order for Castle Green to achieve the Work-Life Balance Standard was to draw up policies and guidelines as part of the staff handbook to ensure clarity and continuity in practice. It formalised policy and helped to ensure staff were aware of what was on offer. But Tim Rumney stresses that having people taking advantage of these policies and benefits is what really matters. “It is what makes it a real live thing and not just a piece of paper. This is why the culture is so important, otherwise people do not feel able to make use of these benefits.”

The benefits for the business

“It is a ‘Win! Win!’ situation – both the business and the employee benefit,” says Tim Rumney.

- ✓ There are now more applicants for jobs from other industries and many of them comment on Castle Green’s reputation as a good employer and best hotelier in the area.
- ✓ The retention rate for the three women returners following maternity leave in 2002 is 100 per cent. All three are very effective and highly valued members of staff. Julie Chapman estimates replacing them would have cost around £4,500.
- ✓ Generally turnover of staff has improved, saving not only recruitment but also training costs.
- ✓ Low absenteeism, with sickness accounting for 0.5 per cent of payroll.
- ✓ For the individual, work and family life can fit in well together.
- ✓ An extra benefit is that when customers come back to Castle Green they like to see the same faces and so having policies that help to retain staff has been beneficial in that way too.

Castle Green is the first hotel to have attained the Work-life Balance Standard in recognition of good working practices that help its staff to balance their work with the other responsibilities and aspirations in their lives.

Having the right approach

“For any organisation that is thinking of going down this route I think it is so important that that they already have a culture or approach that encourages a certain amount of flexibility and imagination,” says Tim Rumney, General Manager.

Staff at the hotel have always had an understanding and a confidence that the management would take a flexible view on their personal circumstances. This very strong culture in relation to addressing work-life balance issues was recognised in the initial assessment for the Work-life Balance Standard.

Julie Chapman knows that underlying the business case is the fact that the owners of the business do genuinely care about the people who work for them and want the best for them. As the business becomes more successful they want to give something back to the people who work for them. They recognise that the business would not be as successful if they did not have the right people in place. In their view a price cannot be put on that.

Tim Rumney is very aware that the right culture has to be there to enable people to make use of the benefits. Having written policies is not enough.

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Conoco Centre, Warwick

Business profile

Conoco Limited, based at the Conoco Centre in Warwick Technology Park is now part of ConocoPhillips, the result of a recent merger between Conoco and Phillips Petroleum. ConocoPhillips is one of the country's leading oil and gas producers, as well as a major refiner and marketer of petroleum products. The main business at Conoco Centre, where 216 employees have been based since 1992, is marketing.

Introduction of flexible working

Flexible working was introduced at Conoco three years ago as part of a major strategic objective to maximise people's contribution, but also as part of a wider diversity strategy to have an inclusive environment. It was a business led initiative looking at the benefits from the business point of view, such as better recruitment and retention of staff.

Nina Chislett, the Human Resources Adviser who was responsible for setting up the flexible working practices, describes the policy set out in the written guidelines as relatively structured and bureaucratic. She explains:

“Our view was that to some extent we already had an informal policy on flexible working but that it was ad hoc and potentially not consistent. By making it formal we are more likely to make the practice more universal, reaching all the people we might not have done before, and consistent, applying the same guidelines in each case.”

As an incentive to encourage women to continue working for them following maternity leave, the company pays bonuses when they return to work

There was discussion with and feedback from the diversity focus group of about 12 employees from all parts of the business but no formal consultation with staff. The policy covers all staff at all levels at the Conoco Centre offices and also the refinery in Lincolnshire. Relatively few people, fewer than 20, have taken advantage of the policy. Most staff continue to want to work full time. There was already a policy in place that permitted flexible start and finish times subject to business needs, and about 40 per cent had already been able to agree a non-standard pattern within their groups. There are currently six staff who have chosen to work part-time.

The main options

Most flexible working patterns will be considered, including flexitime, part-time, term-time working, job sharing and working from home. Broadly they will consider any workable idea fitting in with the overall guidelines.

The policy also includes the option of taking a short or longer absence from work. This could range from an unpaid travel break of three months to an unpaid career break or sabbatical of up to 12 months. This has been a popular option and there are currently two employees taking breaks.

One working arrangement the policy has specifically excluded is compressed working hours. This was considered to be a step too far, partly in case too many people wanted to take it up but also because of concern that lengthening working days to compensate for the day off work might affect performance and productivity.

As an incentive to encourage women to continue working for them following maternity leave, the company pays bonuses when they return to work.

Some women have opted to add unpaid leave of absence breaks to their maternity leave to give them a longer time at home with their new child.

The company also provides paid adoption leave to an employee “who is the designated primary carer of an adopted child under the age of 5 weeks for 18 weeks, the first six at full pay and the remaining weeks at half pay. In addition, as with their maternity pay provision, the company pays a Returners Allowance to staff when they return to work.

Employee perspective

Loretta Corbishley is a contracts administrator who has worked for the company for 23 years. She has two young children and continued to work full time while they were both at nursery during the day. However, two years ago when her daughter started going to school, Loretta realised she would really like to be able to collect her every day and spend more time with both her children. Under the company's new flexible working policy she was able to negotiate different working hours to make this possible. She now works from 9am till 3.15pm each day enabling her to pick up both children from school. The benefit for her is that it gives her regular contact with the school. Her children, who are aged seven and four, really like her to be there at the end of school and she thinks it is much better for them. In the holidays she manages by taking as much leave as she can but otherwise they both go to the nursery when she is at work. Loretta feels that it has helped her enormously and has given her the best of both worlds, she wants to work but also to be there for her children after school.

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The application process

When an employee makes a request to change their working arrangement they must complete an application form. This includes questions asking for details of their choice of option, how they will ensure their work commitments are met, what effect a change will have on the business, customers and colleagues and how their salary and benefits will be affected. Guidelines, in the form of more detailed questions, are set out for employees to help them with the process and to ensure they think through all the implications of changing their working pattern. For example, the guidelines suggest the employee thinks about whether they would require additional resources such as a computer at home or how they will liaise with colleagues.

The supervisors have responsibility for explaining the availability and required procedure for changing working arrangements to staff. They will make the final decision based on business needs and the effect on the rest of the group. There is a set of guidelines to facilitate this decision making process. The guidelines ensure supervisors look at the current business climate, describe the key job responsibilities, match the employee's suggested option with their situation, identify potential issues, analyse the consequences and establish checkpoints for communication, monitoring and review. In addition, supervisors must consider the employee's performance in relation to delivering on commitments, time management and their need for supervision.

Meanwhile, HR Advisors are responsible for providing information on the effect of flexible work arrangements on the employee's salary and benefits and also for monitoring requests to ensure that decisions are consistent and in line with business need. If required they can assist individual staff to complete their application forms. They also have responsibility for ensuring that employees on flexible work arrangements are not discriminated against in any way.

Business goals must be met

“A request will be evaluated on its potential effect on the business and business needs of customers and on colleagues.” Supervisors Guide to Flexible Work Practices.

The guidance to supervisors states that in reaching their decision they must make a sound business based decision. One outcome of this approach is that individuals will not be expected to explain the reason for requesting flexible work arrangements as this is not relevant to the decision process. It is recognised that not all roles across the organisation will be equally suitable but that the same decision making process is available to all staff.

HR Advisors are responsible for providing information on the effect of flexible work arrangements on the employee's salary and benefits

Managers have relaxed

“I was firmly crossing my fingers that the information that we had been given, that there wouldn't be a huge flood of requests. That was absolutely the case.”

Nina Chislett reports that there were some managers who were really against it but because there has not been a flood of requests they have relaxed. When they do get a request from an employee who is valuable they see it as a way to keep them and start seeing the advantages. She does not think there would be nearly the same level of suspicion now.

People asked if they really had to fill in all the form but have then come back and said that it really made them think about all the implications and how to manage certain issues. Some of those managers who were against flexible work from the start found that when they actually stopped and read about it, and thought about how to do it, they realised that it was possible.

“My fear was that we would get people asking for work during evenings or at weekends and we would be battling with how we could sustain the business. We have had no unreasonable requests.”

How have staff reacted?

“I think having a formal policy and an entitlement for anyone to ask for it, male or female, irrespective of their reason, has gone a long way to address any discomfort.”
Martyn Brawn, HR Manager.

The people who have chosen to change their work pattern feel they have benefited personally and, because the decision is business driven, Martyn Brawn thinks that it takes away any sense of guilt that an individual might feel.

Otherwise there have been no problems. There have been no complaints from work colleagues or issues raised about how flexible working has affected them.

There was a need at the start for some education for managers about treating people's working patterns with respect, so that for example, meetings were not arranged at times when part-time staff were not in the office. Most issues, for example, ensuring good communication or dealing with telephone calls in a person's absence will all have been highlighted by the Guidelines.

Tips for other organisations

Martyn Brawn, HR Manager, gives the following tips:

- ✓ Focus on the business case.
- ✓ Keep breathing life into flexible working – it is difficult to keep staff aware of the policy on a continuing basis.
- ✓ An application form is a useful way of ensuring people think through the issues before making a decision.

DOT, Lewes, East Sussex

Business profile

DOT is a new media design agency based in Lewes, East Sussex. It is a limited company owned by Peter and Gaynor Warren, the company directors. With a turnover of about £500,000 a year, it currently employs seven people. It is mainly involved in web site and graphic design.

Background

In 1985, Peter and Gaynor set up a design company in London and moved to Lewes in 1995 for quality of life reasons. Since then, DOT has grown gradually and once they join, employees have tended to stay with the company. Gaynor Warren is on long-term maternity leave and Jane Zara, their studio manager is currently the only woman working in the company. She says:

“The flexibility we offer comes out of the demands of the type of work we do, which often means working to tight deadlines. Being flexible about people’s individual needs for work-life balance started as a way of compensating them for sometimes working long hours into the night.” Jane Zara, Studio Manager

A flexible work culture

“The important thing is that no-one views anyone as slacking. They know that everyone compensates for flexible times.”

DOT has a very flexible culture. Most out of work commitments can be catered for. Occasionally, people do not arrive until 10.30am, but they may stay until 7pm or later. Two employees have partners working in travel agents and regularly go away for long weekends. No one thinks ‘oh he’s not working on Friday afternoon’. They know that everyone is committed to working for the company and will make up flexible time. However, it is more often the case that people have done more hours than required – so it’s usually taking a Friday afternoon off when they have worked the hours anyway.

“Being flexible about people’s individual needs for work-life balance started as a way of compensating them for sometimes working long hours into the night”

If employees do have to work long hours to complete a job the company is happy to give them time off instead of overtime pay. It does not cost them extra money and it makes people happy. Jane Zara comments that many companies are still very inflexible. For example, they do not allow employees to take just one day off on its own, or at the other extreme, take off more than two weeks in one go. DOT’s approach is different. One employee took six weeks to go off to New Zealand. Another, a programmer, is on holiday in South Africa for nearly three weeks.

All employees have work contracts that are slightly different. With a general flexible approach they find that it is hard to write down every option. The Managing Director, Peter Warren, goes out of his way to be as considerate as he can. He considers every request and the decision usually goes the way the individual wants it to, as he knows that people are committed to the company.

Jane Zara explains: “We all work in one large studio. Everyone says their piece. It’s a very open environment. It’s known that Pete is a very accessible person and employees feel free to raise issues. That has always been the flavour of the company.”

Peter Warren thinks that work-life balance practices need not be difficult to set up – he feels the key is to be attuned to what people need.

Putting the flexible ethos into practice

“We have a programmer, Paul Tero, who works four days out of five. That’s a personal choice for him – he wanted a balance between home life and work life.”

Some other employees work from home from time to time, for example to wait in for the gas man or to attend to other personal business. “The nature of what we do helps. You wouldn’t want to be at home all the time. We do have a good balance.”

One of the programmers is about to go on paternity leave. DOT will give him full pay for two weeks.

DOT benefited from the ability of employees to work at home during severe flooding in Lewes a couple of years ago when staff could not get into the centre of town. People worked at home using their computers and mobile phones. Jane Zara comments that “if we were cut off by a terrible storm in the future we could continue running the business”.

Jane concludes: “It is very important to have a happy, motivated workforce, especially when you are sometimes requiring them to work long hours, to deadlines which can be stressful. There’s no reason to add to that stress by not letting employees have some choice and flexibility. People do get very stressed and they realise that the company gains by people being happy and able to make choices in their lives, without being too restricted”.

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Employee perspective

Jane Zara, who has been with DOT for 2 years, works mainly within school hours during term times. She adjusts her working hours during the school holidays, and pays for some childcare. Her job role does not need to be carried out full time. This works well for the company because it can be hard to find a suitable employee who wants to work part time.

“I get paid for half a week averaged over the year. I keep a record of my hours and tend to work longer hours just before the school holidays. I don't have a big block of six weeks off. It's flexible in that I'm not tied to particular hours.”

Because a lot of work is computer based, DOT have an online management system. Jane can access that on her computer at home and do updating or invoicing. She also redirects her emails to home and checks these, even if it is 8pm in the evening. Because they deal with clients in the Caribbean and America who are five hours behind, this is a bonus for the company and the flexibility works both ways – sometimes Jane may make a telephone call to America at 8pm. Even during the daytime, if she is not in the office, she can get back to people very quickly if there are queries. Jane thinks “ it is very important to listen to your workforce. It's about letting people have choices without feeling stressed and unable to talk to you.”

Jane Zara concludes that: “It is fantastic to have an employer who lets me work within school hours – otherwise I would have to organise childcare. This would be an extra complication and cost me money. I am well paid, but I have friends for whom it is borderline as to whether it's worth working because of childcare costs. I get to do adult things and continue to work as well as caring for my children. I'm learning all the time in the job and have a sense of achievement.”

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ Do not stick to the old rules just because they are there and that is easy. It is important to examine the reasons why there cannot be more flexibility. Just because it's a rule of the company is not a good reason. It may be that some ideas about how work is organised are just traditional working practices. They may come from a time when people were more rigid about how they worked and most people did work 9-5.
- ✓ Acknowledge the fact that work and the way life is organised has changed a great deal and organisations do want to have a motivated workforce. Having more women in the workplace has made a big difference to working arrangements.
- ✓ Communication is key. In their sector of business the brief can change quickly, and sometimes you have to hit the ground running. If you have people working at different times, or flexibly you need to have people who get on or communicate very well.
- ✓ Access to information is vital. Your workforce needs to be well informed. DOT covers this by having a computer based management system which can be accessed remotely from the office base.

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Farrelly Facilities & Engineering Ltd

Business profile

Farrelly Facilities & Engineering Ltd is an engineering company based in Sutton Coldfield in the West Midlands. Brothers John and Gerry Farrelly own it. Current turnover is £5-6 million. There are 50 employees and 90 per cent are male. Eighteen are based in the office and the remainder work on site. The company installs heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems.

Background

John and Gerry Farrelly, both engineers, set up Farrelly Facilities as a partnership in 1987 and in 1993 it became a limited company. Business had always been good, and in 1997 they started to prepare for the Investors in People (IIP) Standard. As part of this process, Gerry Farrelly, Director of Training, realised that they were accepting the fact that their employees saw their jobs as a grim dogged struggle and were only turning up for work because they had to. He explains: "Construction is a very stressful industry, with long hours and little appreciation of people as individuals."

The Farrellys were aware that they were losing a lot of people and that they accepted that as an industry norm. When Gerry Farrelly further scrutinised the workings of the company in preparation for IIP accreditation, he became increasingly aware that although they were training their staff, they were not training them properly and they were not appreciating them. He also realised that if the company was to change, the people at the top had to change first. At that time, work-life balance was not a particular focus.

"Although we were paying our people good money and good benefits, we were not focusing on them as individuals, with individual requirements. For example one might have two young children and another might have older children, creating different demands on their home life."

Long hours

"The first thing we did was to challenge the norm. We decided to close the offices at 5.30pm every night and say that no one could take work home with them."

To begin with everyone said: "what about the customers - we need to be here for them". They explained to their customers what they were doing and how they wanted to improve their service and enable their employees to achieve a better work-life balance. Gerry Farrelly started to research the long hours culture and also to think exactly what a change in approach would mean for him at home, as well as for other employees. He talked to others in the industry. Everyone agreed that they were bringing work home with them at 7pm and sitting watching the TV and working while eating their dinner.

He thought "this can't continue". He decided that their philosophy had to be that they would do more in less time. Preparation and planning became a must for everyone. Team building, encouragement and commitment from both sides were essential to achieve a better work-life balance for all. It was the encouragement from IIP that started the process, but key was the fact that they began to look at everyone as an individual.

"Although we were paying our people good money and good benefits, we were not focusing on them as individuals, with individual requirements"

Now the offices close at 5pm and no one can enter them before 8.30am. On Fridays they finish at 4pm. Overall the standard working week is now 37 hours. In general in construction there is nothing unusual about working about 50-60 hours. Gerry Farrelly now cycles for an hour after work every day. "I've now got a good work life balance. Before 1998 I would be doing a minimum of 6 days a week, working until 7-8pm every night."

Changing the philosophy, culture and working practices

The working philosophy

"Farrelly Facilities & Engineering Ltd are committed to developing, improving and maintaining a work-life balance for all its people and clients. Our clients and our people place a premium on their leisure time, so we respect that. To achieve this we must all work as a team and not in isolation. Your wants and needs are important to us, let us help you fulfil them. Enhance the effectiveness of others through learning. Create more time for yourself through focus and delegation."

Farrelly Facilities Tao te Ching: philosophy and values.

The Farrellys realised that if they were to focus on people as individuals they needed to talk with them on a regular basis. Since 1998 they have held appraisals every three weeks. They discuss work, any training and personal needs. We want to know if there's anything at home that we can support them with. For example, do they need to collect children from school, do they need to go to hospital appointment with a child or have they got a sick parent.

Two years ago the wife of one of the senior project managers, who had worked for the company for eight years, developed cancer. He did not want to leave his job, so he was told to take as much time off as he needed and

not to worry. Gerry Farrelly feels that before 1998 the employee would have left. “We weren’t tolerant or forgiving about anything. We were in construction, working long hours with a lot of stress. It’s different now as we all help each other. Our company has benefited more by understanding him and retaining him.”

Farrelly Facilities make exceptions or allowances if anything happens in people’s personal lives. To help people achieve or maintain a good work-life balance they will reshape a job to suit the individual. One of the things Gerry feels they have learnt over the last four years is that if you trust people from day one they give a lot more. “We don’t have a blame culture, we look for a solution.”

Employee perspective

Padma Mistry, an administrator, has worked for the company for 6.5 years. She works five days a week from 9am to 2.45 pm, a total of 26.5 hours a week. She is also able to take time off when there are events at her daughter’s school. “As they’re flexible with me, I will be flexible with them – it works both ways. Since the changes we all understand each other’s role better. It is a totally different atmosphere. We muck in to help each other and you know you’re not on your own. We rotate jobs such as filing around the office. The changes have done a lot of good, particularly the shorter hours. People appreciate having more time outside the office. I come in fresher in the morning to take on the challenges of the day.

The flexibility is very important to me – I’ve got a job where I work the hours I need and I’m giving my best to the company. I also like the fact that I’ve got friends at work – it feels like an extension to my family. It’s not just coming in ‘9-5’ – people are much happier now at work.”

Office staff will swap jobs with people out on site. For example, a project manager may work in accounts or reception for a day. They have a lot of multi-skilling and this is an important part of how the flexibility works. Everyone has a contract negotiated individually around the hours they want to work. When someone was involved in a marriage break up they were able to take time off to make arrangements for their children. They did not have to make time up – other people could cover the work.

If people want to work at home during the normal working week they can. Regular homeworking is not encouraged because of potential isolation, but they do not have a problem with it where appropriate.

Anyone can take time off – there are no restrictions. Staff are actively encouraged to take their holidays. If they need to bring their children in they can or they can take the time off. Paid paternity leave is already available.

Improving business performance

“We have created a happier workplace where people want to be and know they are appreciated. Over a two year period after we made the culture change, our turnover doubled and profits tripled.”

Farrelly Facilities now allow employees to have a say in how the company is run. Gerry realised that people do not want to be managed or told what to do. “We give people ownership of their work – my belief is that if you give people ownership of their work they not only create a great experience for themselves at work, they also create a great experience for their client because they want to.”

“The flexibility is very important to me – I’ve got a job where I work the hours I need and I’m giving my best to the company”

Gerry Farrelly believes that business performance is all about creating a positive environment. They have one hour training every week on customer relationship management and discuss their clients. He thinks that as a company they have two clients. One group is internal – they are the employees who know that they come first. In his view if they don’t come first they will not get the most out of them. In turn the employees will give the external clients – the customer – a great experience. There is a weekly staff meeting. Supervisors represent the site engineers, but once a quarter each of the site engineers attends a meeting.

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“We get fantastic reviews from our clients. It’s rare to get a complaint – only about one a week now. Back in 1998 we were getting dozens and dozens – so we’re saving money from this as well. We have a programme so everyone gets to know the customers. It’s all about the customer being valued. Our customers also place a premium on their own work life balance. They want to know that they are dealing with suppliers who really value them and accept that they need to go home with less stress.”

“We don’t have a blame culture, we look for a solution”

Gerry Farrelly acknowledges that taking on board the challenges people have at home can be a bit onerous on the business. “My response is that I don’t want my staff to leave because they weren’t given the time off to look after their mother or their aunt or to go to a funeral in India. I’d rather let them have the time off and for them to know that the company cares for them. By achieving that I’ve achieved stability in the company. It’s not only that if they leave I’ve got to replace them and the cost is enormous. If they leave, they will probably work for the competition taking with them all our expertise, our knowledge and our training.”

Employee perspective

Mick Morris is a project supervisor on site. He started working for Farrelly through an agency about three years ago. He has three children aged between three and 14. His eight year old has diabetes. He explains: “When my son first became ill he collapsed at school. I had to drop tools and leave work. Gerry phoned me and said “take time off and get it sorted”. I’ve got a lot of friends in construction. In many companies if you dared to say “I need a half day off” for something like that they would reply “don’t bother coming back then”. It’s not like that here and it does make a difference. To me having that little bit of flexibility is essential.”

If you treat people fairly and well they respond well and treat you the same. It’s good to work with others who share that philosophy. In our industry there can be out of hours problems, e.g. when heating fails. It is essential to keep the client informed about what’s happening, it’s no good just leaving it – I’ve noticed a real difference myself with our new approach.”

Gerry Farrelly’s tips for other organisations

- ✓ People in construction have said to me “How can you introduce these values into construction. How can you make construction innovative and creative?” I reply: “It’s easy, the people are already innovative and creative – you’ve got to tap into that.”
- ✓ It’s all about leading from the bottom, doing something different you get noticed, Nothing comes short term. You reap what you’ve sown. If our people are happy they will do a great job. If they’re unhappy – they shouldn’t even be here.
- ✓ Planning and communication is essential for everybody. Four years ago we worked long hours and we were constantly stressed, because we weren’t planning properly. Now I plan today what I need to sort out tomorrow. Also with better communication we have fewer problems anyway.

Farrelly Facilities & Engineering were awarded the Work-Life Balance Standard in October 2002.

[See page 31 for details on the Work-Life Balance Standard](#)

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Flare Software Systems

Business profile

Flare Software Systems plc is a software company based in Bath, Somerset, with a turnover for 2001 of just under £3 million. It is a private company owned by its chairman. Their specialism is in developing management information software, for local government including, Environment Health, Trading Standards and Housing departments.

Background

Flare was founded in 1986 by the chairman and now employs 56 staff with a split of 30 male/26 female. Seven employees have worked for the company for more than 10 years and 13 for between five and 10 years. Staff turnover is low and during 2002 only two people left. There are five Directors, 15 staff in the development department, five in sales/marketing, six in technical, eight in customer services, five in training and 12 in admin/accounts/HR etc.

Sally Cox is the HR Adviser, responsible for personnel and health and safety issues. She explains: "In most departments we need people to cover the hours between 8.30am and 5.30pm. The working week is 35 hours and everyone does slightly different hours."

A long hours culture is discouraged at Flare. When in the office, the Directors set an example by working a seven hour day, but, if necessary, they will work late. Occasionally, when staff do have to work late, they are allowed time off in lieu as overtime is not paid. Sally comments: "That is the way we've approached working hours since the company began. I'm now very conscious of the Working Time Regulations and the 48 hour week. Also people become tired and sick if they work long hours."

Flare encourages people to use up their annual leave entitlement. This is because some years ago, staff were taking sick leave but not using all their annual leave entitlement. As a result of this policy, sick leave has reduced and staff are much happier and healthier.

Flexible working arrangements

Currently four people work part time – this situation is reviewed annually. Also recently, some staff have temporarily adjusted their working hours for personal reasons, which was previously agreed with their supervisors. Sally Cox maintains that: "as it takes a year to two years to learn the job it makes sense to retain people on reduced hours when their needs change."

A trainer works a three day week, although she is flexible about this. Sometimes she works five days in one week when running a particular training course, but then she takes the next week off.

Employee perspective

Liz Morgan, a programmer, took maternity leave and returned when her baby was six months old. She has worked for Flare for six years. "I feel I have the best of both worlds and have a good balance between paying for childcare and looking after my daughter myself. I went in to see Pat Davies, Products Director, about a month before I was due to return and asked if I could work part time. They were very open to this and for the past two and a half years I have worked three days a week. It works out very well, as in the work I do the time constraints aren't day to day or week to week, they are usually over a period of 6 – 12 months. My departmental boss knows how fast I work and she works out how much time is needed for a particular piece of work."

Sally outlines other aspects of the flexible culture at Flare: "When a new sales manager joined the company she was living in Manchester and had a baby. Working in sales it doesn't matter where you are located, so she works from home." The sales manager reduced her hours to a three and a half day week last year and this has not caused any particular problems.

Five account managers work from home, although they travel extensively around the UK. They, and any other employee who has to travel in their job, are provided with a laptop and mobile and travelling time is logged so that time off in lieu can be taken.

Sally admits that sometimes there can be small problems and there has to be a balance between personal and business needs. She would like to see a possibility for sabbaticals more generally so that all employees could take a break at some point, not only for childcare reasons. She thinks this would be good for staff morale, it would show goodwill on behalf of the company, who would retain the knowledge of someone who might otherwise resign and other staff would see that it was an accepted thing to do. Sally is aware of the April 2003 legislation and has updated the staff handbook. She does not anticipate that this will cause too many problems.

Sally Cox stresses that flexibility has to be a two-way process. Flare will be fair to its staff, but will expect staff to do a good job. Overall she acknowledges that having a flexible approach is good for companies.

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ Encourage people who want to change their working arrangements to work out exactly how it could work successfully.
- ✓ Don't say "no" straight away.
- ✓ Confront any potential problems head on. Flare's general culture is to bring any issues into the open, even where mistakes have been made. Honesty and integrity are highly valued.

Opportunity Links

Business profile

Opportunity Links is a not-for-profit organisation set up in Cambridge seven years ago to provide information about childcare facilities, jobs and training in the local area. It has grown considerably as an organisation and currently employs 40 staff. Its largest project is managing Childcare Link, the information website linking up all the childcare information services as part of the Government's National Childcare Strategy. Locally it manages the Childcare Information Service for both Cambridge and Peterborough Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs). Opportunity Links offers consultancy services on childcare and work-life balance initiatives to employers.

"Enabling easy access to information which supports families, individuals and employers in making choices about work-life opportunities." Mission statement.

Formalising policy on work-life balance

When Opportunity Links was first set up there were only a few employees and the working environment was very flexible. Now that there are many more staff it is felt it is time to formalise work-life balance options so that the organisation is both consistent and fair.

Kate Warboys, Director, explains, "We need to get a balance between having a flexible approach and setting some boundaries so that people know what their entitlements are. We do not want to be too bureaucratic but we need to have some parameters."

In theory, staff manage their own workload and are trusted to work the hours that suit them. They do not have set start and finishing times but choose how to arrange their 37 working hours. Generally the earliest anyone arrives at work will be about 7.30am and the earliest they will leave is about 4pm. Some work involves staff attending meetings or events during evenings or at weekends and they can take time off in lieu during normal office hours to compensate. One of the problems with having this flexible approach is that not all teams and managers are consistent so that some staff feel less sure about when they can take time off. New people coming from workplaces where there is more structure have been less flexible. Some staff have not felt comfortable about when they can take time off and in what circumstances they need to seek clearance from their line manager.

Staff working in reception and on the enquiry desks are constrained by specific opening times - the phone lines need to be operating between 8.30am and 5.30pm - and those staff cannot benefit from flexibility in the same way as others. This has meant that within one organisation two

cultures operate whereby some staff are restricted by a rigid shift system and are not enjoying the same level of flexibility as others. The management are currently reviewing the entire way in which the reception and enquiry desks operate including ways to be more flexible about shift patterns and it is hoped that this will alleviate this inconsistency.

A flexible attitude

The only constraint affecting the hours people work and where they work from is the need to ensure that there is a sufficient number of staff in the office at any one time. Staff must inform their line managers if they intend to be absent so that adequate cover arrangements can be made, not because those staff are not trusted. Most people are working on specific projects and have deadlines to meet. They can be relied upon to ensure they achieve these.

"We need to get a balance between having a flexible approach and setting some boundaries so that people know what their entitlements are"

In practice, most people choose to work fairly regular office hours and are full time. Many of the staff are quite young and there are only a few with children. Four staff have chosen to work part time because of personal circumstances. Any working arrangement would be considered where appropriate.

People can take work home but generally this has only been done on a casual basis, most people preferring to be in the office. There is one person who works from home in Scotland but that is specifically for the project providing the Childcare Link for the Scottish Executive.

The business case for retaining staff

"We are very aware of the cost of losing people, not just recruiting new staff but getting them up to that level of expertise and knowledge and the cost in time of doing that. We would go to extreme lengths to keep staff."

Kate Warboys recognises that to a large extent the selling point of their business is the knowledge, skills and capabilities of their staff. Any decision in response to a request for a change to their working arrangements would be based on the business case and would necessarily bear in mind the consequences of losing that particular member of staff.

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One recent example of taking a flexible view was when the IT trainer asked if he could continue to work for the organisation even though he was moving to Leeds where his wife had been offered a job. In fact about 50 per cent of his work involved travel all over the country so it was not an impractical idea. A decision has been reached initially for a three-month trial whereby he spends two days a week in Cambridge but is based in Leeds for the other days. Kate Warboys says it was not just a question of wanting to help him, there were cogent business reasons for being amenable. He is a valued and skilled member of staff with considerable knowledge of the sector who they wanted to keep. The cost of recruiting and training a new member of staff would have outweighed any extra expenses of his new working arrangement.

“Keeping staff helps our customers too – they build up a rapport – and people like to know who they are dealing with. I think that goes a long way.”

Flexibility as a tool for recruitment

In a highly competitive market such as Cambridge, businesses need to adapt a flexible approach to working hours if they are to attract and retain staff.

The Finance Manager who was originally recruited on a four-month contract to set up a new finance system was then approached to work for Opportunity Links on a permanent basis. He did not want to work full time permanently but an arrangement was negotiated for him to do the essentials of the job working three days a week. His workload is not always consistent, with busy periods coming before Board Meetings and at the end of the financial year. An additional advantage of this arrangement is that he can have periods of working longer hours followed by working less hours at less busy times.

Employee perspective

Lynette Prince, HR Manager, needed work to fit around her husband's job as a chef so that between them they can look after their three young children. He leaves for work at 5.15pm. each day so she needs to be home before that. She works from 8.15am until 4.45pm but sometimes, if she needs to leave earlier she will work through lunch.

“Here I can do that because effectively as long as all my work is done and I work a certain number of hours a week that is what matters. It is on a trust basis really.”

Lynette started working for Opportunity Links seven months ago and made it clear when she applied for jobs that she would need to work these hours.

The Work-Life Balance Standard

Opportunity Links are keen to achieve the Work-Life Balance Standard to provide a focus for improving and developing work-life balance policies that will enhance their business performance. Towards this goal they have already surveyed all members of staff and are in the process of analysing the response. One of the immediate points revealed by the questionnaires is concern about consistency and communication.

“Keeping staff helps our customers too – they build up a rapport – and people like to know who they are dealing with. I think that goes a long way”

“The standard will provide us with a framework to bring into place some of the solutions that we are already aware we need.”

[See page 31 for details on the Work-Life Balance Standard](#)

Preparing for the new legislation

- Opportunity Links has already changed its paternity leave provision and has increased paid leave from one week to two. Currently payment for maternity leave is enhanced “at the manager's discretion” for staff who have been with the organisation for at least two years.
- It plans to introduce an application form for requests to work flexibly as a way of ensuring consistency and documenting the procedure.
- Training will be given to managers to ensure they are fully informed about the changes and that information on the new rights is made available to all staff.

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ As Kate Warboys says: “You can have all the policies in the world but if they are sitting on a shelf and managers and staff don't know about them they are not worth the paper they are written on.”
- ✓ Keeping staff is good for keeping customers.

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Soha Housing

Business profile

Soha Housing owns and manages nearly 5,000 homes in south Oxfordshire. It is a non-profit making company with a turnover of approximately £15 million managed by a voluntary Board that includes tenants, councillors and people from local businesses. The 118 staff are mainly based at the head office in Didcot with two area offices in Thame and Henley-on-Thames.

The background

“We looked at the way we worked and how this affected service delivery. There has been a gradual cultural shift to provide work-life balance for people.”

Soha Housing was set up in 1997 to buy housing stock from South Oxfordshire District Council and at the same time many of the staff transferred from the Council. Many of these people had several years’ experience and were used to working in a very structured way. This involved having a very hours orientated approach, based on the idea that the ‘longer’ the day you worked the better you were doing at your job. A gradual shift has taken place with much more emphasis now on output – what happens at the end of the day – rather than how it is done. Katie Legg, Personnel Co-ordinator, says that they are fairly early on in their planned ideas of introducing work-life balance but the culture is definitely changing.

“We have been very much driven by our chief executive – Richard Peacock. He is very keen on moving away from an hours’ culture and moving towards an output culture and looking at how we can improve the quality of people’s lives. This is good because support from the top of an organisation filters down.”

Why work-life balance?

“It is about being an employer of choice. If we want the right staff we need to offer them the right package and to look at attracting people in other ways in addition to salary.”

One of the reasons for looking at work-life balance was because of the high turnover of staff especially in the first couple of years when there had been a lot of change and instability for staff

Now turnover is around average for the area. Competition in the buoyant local employment market means people have more choice about where they work, another reason for offering more flexibility.

“We want managers to appreciate that staff do have a life outside of work and that does not end at 9am and start again at 5pm. Sometimes it does infringe on the working day and we need to support staff to cope with their life outside work.”

What options are available?

Katie Legg felt it was important to consult with staff. “It was important that we talked to staff and found out what they wanted rather than just implementing what we thought they might want.”

A survey of staff was carried out in 2001 with regard to their working arrangements. The most popular options, including working from home, were picked out for consideration and the following options agreed:

The Options

- **Flexi-time.** All office based staff can take advantage of the flexi-time scheme. Core hours are 10am – 12pm and 2pm – 4pm. If staff build up hours they are entitled to take off up to nine days a year in addition to annual leave.
- **Reduced hours.** Fourteen staff, all female, work reduced hours. After maternity leave women have the right to return on a part-time basis at least for the first three months to ease them back into work. This was extended in 2002 to the right to request flexible working whether that is homeworking or reduced hours or job sharing.
- **Homeworking.** Only five employees take advantage of the homeworking scheme. They are all women who have returned to work from maternity leave although the policy was not specifically aimed at them.
- **Maternity provision.** Staff are paid an extra 12 week’s maternity leave at 50 per cent of salary over and above their statutory rights.
- **Paternity Leave.** Recently paternity leave has been increased from one week’s paid leave to two week’s.
- **Childcare Support.** Staff can buy childcare vouchers through the payroll thus saving on their National Insurance. In addition Soha sponsor a local childminding network.

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Work culture

“Our culture is very much that if you want something ‘ask’ because we will consider anything – the worst that can happen is that it will be turned down.” There is no written work-life policy as such but guidelines set out entitlement to the various options and include steps to be taken by staff wishing to apply.

First, staff discuss what they want with their line manager, who then discusses the request with the relevant director. The agreement rests with the directors’ group to ensure there is consistency of approach across all departments. A review process is built in and so after three and six months there is the opportunity for staff to sit down with their line manager to discuss any issues.

“It is down to trust really.” Katie says “As long as it does not adversely affect service delivery we are happy for people to take time off and make it up later.”

Employee perspective

Michelle Briggs has been a Development Assistant at Soha for two years. When she had her baby she wanted to carry on working full time but was worried about the cost of childcare. Her mother and mother-in-law both help but could not cover the whole week. After discussions with her manager it was agreed she work at home the equivalent of two mornings a week. Michelle is able to spend those mornings with her baby and makes up the time by working in the evenings and weekends. “I really enjoy working at home. I find I can often get more done because I don’t get interrupted all the time.”

Balancing the needs of employees with service provision

“The main purpose is to improve things for our staff but equally it has to work for the business – we are providing a service to tenants.”

There is a certain amount of going backwards and forwards to try to reach agreement. One request for homeworking did have to be turned down where an essential part of the employee’s role was visiting tenants on a daily basis. No way round this could be found. In all other cases a workable solution has been reached.

Putting it into practice

“Once different working arrangements are agreed, what is important is how you communicate this to staff and make sure it is clear and that they understand the procedure and what they are entitled to. It is really about good communication.”

As well as receiving information in writing, staff were given a presentation on work-life balance by the Chief Executive at the monthly lunches he holds with staff. Changes are also discussed at weekly team meetings.

There has been a 100 per cent return from maternity leave. All five returners have come back on different working arrangements. This has saved advertising, recruitment and training costs

“The main issue that we have had to deal with is the change in management style. Line managers have had to adapt and they have done this very well.”

A lot of time was spent talking to managers to get their support. Some managers did have concerns, but once they saw it could work they became much more positive. This has had a ripple effect on other staff as well. By holding a weekly one-to-one with those staff working flexibly, managers keep in touch and have the opportunity to talk about any issues that have arisen. This ensures that staff do not feel isolated and that they have a channel for communication. This is especially important if they are not able to attend the weekly team meetings.

For other staff too, communication is important. If a member of a team works at home the others need to be clear about that and know which day it is. Staff working at home should not have to prove themselves. In practice, when team members see that someone is doing their job well, and that they are not having to take on extra work, they relax.

Were the expectations met?

“My only surprise is that we haven’t had more people take up the options,” says Katie Legg.

The options to reduce hours or work from home are open to all staff but so far have only been taken up by women on return from maternity leave. Katie Legg thinks this may be because they have to reassess their lives after the birth of a child, whereas others tend just to carry on and not really think about how they work. She now intends to promote work-life balance to see if other people would be interested and to allay any perception that mothers are the only people for whom these options apply.

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“I was worried about staff perceptions about people who work flexibly.” A follow-up survey of staff was conducted, not particularly asking about individual working arrangements, but seeking comments from staff generally. The feedback has been fairly positive. There have only been one or two minor grumbles. The individual’s reviews have been very positive too. A recent large-scale customer survey included questions about service levels, for example, how easy it is to contact staff, and the response has been positive. There were no complaints about not being able to get hold of specific people.

Has it all been worthwhile?

Katie Legg explains: “Some of the results of introducing work-life balance are not always tangible but just by talking to people you can pick up the fact that people do value different ways of working and having more flexibility and more emphasis on their home life.”

- ✓ The main business benefit is improved retention and recruitment. The turnover rate has dropped.

There has been a 100 per cent return from maternity leave. All five returners have come back on different working arrangements. This has saved advertising, recruitment and training costs.

- ✓ Staff are more motivated and loyal to the company.
- ✓ Feedback from staff benefiting from these options has been positive. At least two women have said they would not have come back from maternity leave otherwise.

Katie Legg considers that the only real problem has been where they had to refuse somebody’s request to work at home because of the nature of the job. She felt they did not have anything in place to support that particular person.

“The main purpose is to improve things for our staff but equally it has to work for the business – we are providing a service to tenants”

“I think we still have a long way to go in providing work-life balance. I think there is more we could do in providing more options. We have made a good start and are offering probably as much as we can at the moment bearing in mind the constraints of operating the service as we want it to be run for our tenants.”

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ Consult with staff to find out what they want.
- ✓ Explain what staff are entitled to and the procedure.
- ✓ Ensure there are good channels of communication.

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Southfields Office Supplies (SOS), Wandsworth, London

Business profile

Southfields Office Supplies (SOS) is a stationery and office equipment supplier based in Wandsworth, South London. Managing Director Patricia Smith and her husband own it in partnership. Last year, turnover was about £500,000 and this is expected to increase to £750,000 this year. In addition to her husband, who drives and makes the deliveries, there are seven other employees. The firm supplies Wandsworth Council, as well as a wide variety of other customers.

Background

“I had two very small children – two and three years old. I used to work for a stationery company in Wimbledon, but while I was on maternity leave it closed down. My husband was a milkman and he was going to be franchised.”

Patricia Smith founded the company in 1994 after completing a Wandsworth Council Women into Business course. To start with she worked on a kitchen table in the smallest office she could rent. Her husband Peter kept his milkround and did the stationery deliveries in the afternoon from the back of their car. When he could no longer do all the deliveries required, she employed Janice in this role. In 1996, Patricia started employing other people.

Why a flexible attitude to working arrangements?

“People approach me for work because they know I am flexible,” says Patricia.

Apart from her husband, all other employees are women and most have children. Patricia feels that: “Working mothers know how to do a days work. You don’t have to watch over them all the time – you can trust them. The organisational skills they bring into the workplace, from running a home are very important. Especially as it’s a growing business.”

The wages are not high, but they are above the minimum wage. Patricia feels that it is fair all the way round. The women get the hours they want and she gets the commitment, loyalty and output she needs.

In the early days, Patricia experienced some serious problems with two previous staff members, which impacted on the business. It was at that point that she realised that the most reliable and loyal members of her staff were working mothers.

How the flexibility works

- Three employees work every day from 9am – 3pm.
- The accounts manager works three days a week 9.30am – 5pm.
- Another person works full time, starting about 8am working until 5.30pm.
- Two others, in their early twenties work full time.
- Patricia’s husband starts the deliveries at 5.30am so he can finish in time to pick up their daughter from school at 3.30pm. Patricia starts work at about 9 – 9.30am after she has got their two daughters off to school and finishes about 5.30pm.
- Each person manages their own customers, but they are also able to cover for each other. If a particular person is not available and a customer rings in, others help as much as they can. Regular customers know the arrangements people work.

Patricia explains: “All my staff work together and have the skills to swap roles.”

The way they are currently growing Patricia envisages taking on another two people on in early 2003. At this stage she will be looking for people who want to work full time, albeit with some flexibility.

“I have always said to them you work for your family and if your family needs you, your family has to come first. You don’t live to work – you work to live”

During the school holidays most staff are able to use family members to care for their children. Patricia has “a fantastic mother-in-law” who fulfils this role.

Two employees arrange to take their holidays so they can look after each other’s children. Another has a similar arrangement with someone else who doesn’t work at SOS. No one is directly paying for childcare.

continued →

Employee perspective

Janice has fulfilled many roles at SOS since she started working two hours a day for Patricia in 1997. She has two daughters who are nine and 12.

“Trish was looking for a part time driver and I was a school dinner lady at the time. To begin with Trish wasn’t convinced that I could do the lifting needed, but she let me try and it wasn’t a problem. I used to drop my youngest at nursery and then do driving between 9am and 11am. I then took her out of nursery at 11am and took her to playgroup. After working in the school kitchen at lunchtime, I picked her up from school. In the evening I worked in a bar.”

When her daughter went to full time school, Trish was looking for a credit controller to work in the mornings. They agreed that Janice would work in the office from 11am – 3pm after finishing the driving from 9am – 11am. She doesn’t do driving any more and has worked in the office for about three years. When the account manager left – she took over the customer side over because she had some knowledge of this. When her children were small she had done a book-keeping course.

“The flexibility is very important to me. Next year Donna and I will arrange our holidays so we can share childcare. Donna’s husband works nights as well. One of my children is under the orthodontist, and every six weeks I have to go to the hospital. If any one of us is sick, we’ll try and get cover for our children and someone will work late if necessary. My partner works for himself. The most important thing for me is to be with my children when they need me. If a school phones up to say Donna’s son is sick, I will drive Donna to the school to get him. Trish allows us to do that.”

Time off to care for sick dependents

“It happens – I am a mother too. I have always said to them you work for your family and if your family needs you, your family has to come first. You don’t live to work – you work to live.”

SOS is a very successful business and Patricia feels that everyone involved has made it successful. It does take give and take on all sides and flexibility has to be there.

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ You need to be loyal to staff to balance their loyalty to you.
- ✓ Listen to staff, but they also have to listen to what the business needs.
- ✓ With loyalty from a member of staff, you can be flexible. If you are, they put in every effort that can.

In October 2002, Southfields Office Supplies won the Boss Federation National Award for Marketing. This was in recognition that a marketing campaign and education exhibition saw sales more than quadruple. In addition, Amber Kelly, marketing manager, finished as runner up in the Federation’s Young Professional of the Year Award.

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Springbank Industries

Business profile

Springbank Industries, situated in Stone, Staffordshire, supplies and manages a range of vending machines for customers across the country including offices, factories, leisure centres, hospitals, schools and colleges. Since 1984, when the company was founded by Bob Bowers from the front room of his house, Springbank has rapidly expanded. It currently employs 60 staff, and has an annual turnover of around £4 million.

Background

Of the 60 employees, 15 staff are based in the office and warehouse in Stone. The rest are out in the field providing the direct service to customers. The operators, who tend to be women, look after the machines, keeping them supplied on a regular basis. The engineers, usually men, carry out any repairs to the machines. Operators and engineers usually live in the area where they work and have responsibility for their own particular route. In this way they service the vending machines for their customers in all parts of the country and visit the headquarters in Stone at least once a week. There are also relief workers who may have to travel the whole country to cover for staff who are sick or on holiday.

Valuing people

There is no doubt in the mind of Kim Jones, Financial Director responsible for the day to day running of the company, of the importance of having the right people working for you.

“Our people are our strongest asset. They are the ones delivering customer service and the company standards. By being supportive we bring out the best in people. If people are happy they will do their job better.”

There has always been recognition that people’s lives outside work are important. For example, the office has always closed at 4pm on Fridays so that staff can go home early to their families for the weekend.

Another innovative practice showing how the staff are appreciated and valued is what the company calls ‘the extra mile’. Staff are chosen from each team once a quarter to be given a weekend away with their partner at the company’s expense.

As well as acknowledging that people have a life outside their work there is a belief that people will perform better if they do not have to worry about how to cope with various domestic situations they may have.

Finding solutions

The company has no overall written policy on work-life balance or flexible working arrangements but as situations have arisen a number of solutions have been adopted to help staff meet their domestic responsibilities.

- ✓ The operators, who tend to be women, can work shifts that suit, from 4am till 12 noon or 6am till 2pm. They can start work very early in the morning, be finished by lunchtime and be at home with their children after school. Two women operators work term-time only and special routes have been worked out for them. They supply the vending machines in schools and colleges, which only need this service in term time – a solution that suits both the employees and the company.
- ✓ There are three part time staff in the office. One works three days a week and the other two work five days but during school hours only.
- ✓ At one time a route was shared by two women who both wanted to work less hours, one because her husband was ill and one who was returning from maternity leave.
- ✓ Staff with children who want to take holidays during school holiday periods are given preference.

Kim Jones says that she would listen to any proposal put forward by staff who wanted to change their working arrangements.

“By being open we encourage people to be open too and to tell us if they have a problem so that we can help them.”

Employee perspective

Elaine Vinnicombi has worked with Bob Bowers, the owner of Springbank, for about 20 years. After the birth of her first child she continued to work for him but from her home. When her second child was born she worked fewer hours but carried on just doing the payroll. She now works in the office 18 hours a week during term time spread over 3 days, 9.15am to 2.45pm and usually two full days during school holidays. Her work includes dealing with the payroll, personnel administration, the staff uniform and fleet administration. Now that her children are older she would gradually like to increase her hours again.

“I would not have been able to work without the flexibility that I have been given. It would have been difficult to find anywhere else to work that gave me the hours that suited me.”

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Retaining staff

Springbank is firmly committed to training and gained the Investors in People award in 1995. It has a continuous training and development programme for all staff including its own independently verified NVQ style qualification. Its strong investment in its staff is a good reason in itself for retaining people where possible.

“We want people to stay with the company and for women to return from maternity leave because the people we know are invaluable to us.”

The company pays full Maternity pay for 26 weeks and in addition pays a bonus of about £600 to women who return to work. Fathers already receive one week's paid paternity leave but often save up holiday in addition. Adoption leave has not come up but Kim Jones is sure she would have treated it in the same way as maternity leave.

The company sickness policy is quite strict for short-term illness but when someone is ill on a longer-term basis Kim Jones feels they are very generous.

“By being open we encourage people to be open too and to tell us if they have a problem so that we can help them”

Time off to look after sick relatives is paid in certain circumstances. For example, one woman with a disabled mother has had time off when necessary. If someone's child is ill Kim Jones would prefer staff to be at home looking after them than be at work worrying about them and feeling uncomfortable. Other staff are very supportive of each other's needs in this way.

Occasionally, if practicable, a member of staff might take work home in some circumstances. However, generally the policy of the company is not to encourage taking work home so that there is a clear divide between work life and home life.

“We have enhanced benefits as we have gone along and I can only say that we have experienced positive results in that our staff are very loyal. I think that the new legislation giving parents the right to adapt their working times where possible must be the way forward.”

Open management style

The open plan office at Springbank HQ in Stone, Staffordshire, reflects the company's team-based approach and its rejection of the standard concept of a rigid management structure.

“People understand our open plan environment and team philosophy much better now than 10 years ago when I first started working here. We have a very flat structure and I sit in the office and answer the phones with the others.”

Staff are encouraged to play an active role in suggesting better ways of doing things and their input is valued greatly.

“We are always looking for better ways to do things and we encourage the people who are actually out there doing the job to come up with ideas. They are the ones who are delivering customer service and the company standards.”

Generally the opportunity for staff to contribute their ideas occurs at the team meetings. Teamworking is considered very important at Springbank, with teambuilding courses a regular feature. Staff are also encouraged to raise issues at their quarterly reviews. An annual staff survey in which people are asked about their working day and how the company can enhance this for them. If staff prefer, perhaps when there is a more personal element involved, they will take up a matter direct with Kim Jones.

The only downside of encouraging staff to make suggestions is that sometimes staff will be disappointed if a decision is made that it cannot be put into practice. All ideas will always be considered though and feedback is given to staff on the reasons for decisions that are made.

Staff are kept informed of company policies at team briefings and any changes would be discussed at team meetings. In addition everything is always documented and copies given to all staff direct to ensure they are kept up to date even if they miss a meeting.

Recognition for the company's reputation as an industry trend-setter was gained last year when it was awarded Vending Operator of the year as part of BT's Innovation Awards – an industry wide challenge to reward companies that excel in their field.

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The Training Exchange, Dinnington, Sheffield

Business profile

The Training Exchange is a training and development company based in Dinnington, Sheffield. It is owned by its founder and current Chief Executive, and is managed by him and a team of three. With a turnover of over £1 million a year, it currently employs 30 people and is about to expand. It provides training and development for local people in their communities (funded through government initiatives) and commercial training and development – mostly for managers and supervisors.

Background

The Training Exchange was started in 1992 by Simon Pugh, Chief Executive. Within a year the company employed six people and by 1998 they provided training in centres from Oldham in the North West to Ipswich in the South East. This was a tough time for the company and they had to change fairly rapidly to survive. Since then the commercial work has grown hugely and they now deliver training for some household names as well as for smaller Sheffield businesses. The community-based training is now funded through partnership franchises with Rotherham and Sheffield Colleges and is typically delivered in community centres and church halls. Trainers take laptop computers and learning resources with them.

“Employees can fit their hours around childcare needs and work from home. If you meet staff halfway with their personal needs this makes a massive difference to the business,” Simon explains. “No one is ever criticised for when they do the work, as long as the work gets done and customers’ needs are met. The result is more contribution, more commitment and more effort from staff.”

Why work-life balance?

“As soon as I started employing people, I had this notion that I wanted the company to be a good employer. I wasn’t quite sure what this meant, but I knew it wasn’t only about paying just above the going rate. The unmeasurables include offering a work-life balance.”

Simon thinks the company should pay well and competitively, but is of the view that productivity comes as much from the work environment as from the money employees receive. They have invested heavily, particularly in the head office, in providing a good working environment where people feel at ease. What you get is increased commitment – people feel they are making a contribution and have an increasing sense of ownership. Simon suggests that “a measure of this would be the number of my colleagues who talk about the company as ‘we’.”

What options are available?

There is no formal flexitime scheme, but there are also no set working hours or days or places of work. However, there are two parameters. Firstly, everyone has a contract of employment, which spells out the boundaries. Secondly a basic principle is that they are there for the customer.

Two or three of the staff work set hours – they are more comfortable arriving at nine and leaving between 5–5.30pm.

How is the work-life balance achieved?

- Two thirds of staff, just over half of whom are female, work full time. One third work a range of different permutations of part time, varying from eight hours over three days up to full time over four days. Working arrangements are always negotiated individually and for many their patterns change as their personal circumstances change.
- Two people work term-time only and that works well. The work isn’t really cyclical, although it is a little bit quieter at Christmas. Other than that there aren’t regular peaks or troughs. Their customers want them throughout the year and they provide that service.
- The company equip all professional staff, (12 trainers and tutors) to work from home. It is up to them how they organise this.
- Career breaks have mainly been taken for childcare reasons after maternity leave or in one case after a period of ill health – where the person had three young children. One member of staff had a month’s paid break to complete a Masters Degree.
- When people need to take time off to care for sick dependents the company work around this. Simon Pugh recognises that this is part of the deal of employing women of childbearing age. “It’s as well to realise that at such a time the children will come first and work will come second.”
- A paternity leave scheme has been in place for over ten years, but so far has only been taken up twice. Pay is currently discretionary after the first few days and line managers have the authority to make this decision.
- Information on childcare support and childminders is provided. A few years ago, the company looked into setting up their own out of school childcare club. In the end the council’s regulations were such that it wasn’t worth it for half a dozen staff. This was abandoned in favour of looking at other local provision.

Employee perspective

Mark Gill started with The Training Exchange as a trainee under the Intermediate Labour Market scheme in July 2001. He was taken on as an employee after a year and now works on software development, hardware upgrades and in developing solutions for outside clients. " About two months after I started my partner and I had a baby and I was able to take two weeks off, using three days paid paternity leave and taking the rest from holiday. My second child was born three months ago and I was able to make similar arrangements. The company is very flexible - the best I have worked for from this point of view. I am also able to take time off to take the children for their jabs and make the time up later. "

Balancing the needs of employees with service provision

"When people want to change their working pattern they will need to justify their case. Out of this can come not just better ways of working but improved service provision. There's no doubt in my mind about that"

"The single most important factor is the ability to be responsive to the high percentage of staff who have young children"

The very nature of the work lends itself to project management techniques and the measurement of outputs, rather than a focus on the need to be at work from 9am-5pm. Flexibility is needed in order to deliver for customers and Simon recognised that this could be used as a good trade off for the people they were employing who needed the opportunity for flexibility in the terms of their employment.

The flexible practices have evolved over the years. At the beginning, 10 years ago, only about half of the practices now operating were in place, but the framework has always been there. For example they started with the idea that offering paternity leave was a good thing, but it was six years before anyone took advantage of it!

"I believe that if you get things right for the staff then you have more happy customers and run a better business. The way that happens in practice is that if you make a commitment to see a customer at say midday on Xmas eve (as I have this year) then you do it. That's the deal. I expect everyone in the business to manage their time productively in order to achieve personal targets and keep that balanced with other commitments they have in their lives."

Is it worthwhile?

"The single most important factor is the ability to be responsive to the high percentage of staff who have young children. It is about being able to employ talented people who can work for us for 20 hours a week and do a good job, where some other employers wouldn't give them a chance because they define jobs more rigidly. This gives us a commercial and competitive advantage."

There is another compelling reason for being flexible. They have two employees who have long-term illnesses. In general these don't prevent them from working, but in one case when the person is off she may be off for a long period.

"When she's at work she's my right hand. She's invaluable and has been with me for eight years. Although her health is deteriorating most employers would have pensioned her off – but her work is first rate."

Broader objectives

By being demonstrably a good employer, Simon Pugh thinks that they attract the best recruits. Although he can't quantify it he is certain that his business is more profitable because of the way they operate. There is a strong culture of trust which encourages people to manage all aspects of their life.

Because staff can manage their own time, in return the company gets greater loyalty from them – they feel part of the company.

Have expectations been met?

"We seek feedback regularly from staff. We have a very responsive approach to everyone's actual circumstances."

This provides a framework where it is recognised that each person's needs are individual and different. That's why they don't operate a standard flexitime system. Simon acknowledges that if they were much larger they would need a more structured approach.

They also ask regular customers for feedback and there have been positive comments about the flexibility available in the services they get. This feedback reflects well on The Training Exchange's approach to work-life balance. Their customers see them as absolutely reliable. They work in a sector (training and development) where reliability is not that common.

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The new legislation

The member of staff with personnel responsibilities has already researched the new duties being placed on employers. As a company they see themselves as being well ahead of compliance with the legislation and do not think it will impact much on them. The only aspect is the way the Government places a burden in the administration of maternity leave and pay on to the employer.

Tips for other organisations

- ✓ Always give people a fair hearing – even if their request seems preposterous to begin with. They've always got a reason for asking.
- ✓ Tell others about your positive approach to work-life balance. This will give your organisation a very good reputation, particularly with potential future employees.
- ✓ Don't codify everything, be flexible but consistent.
- ✓ Value the individual. Reassure employees that when they ask to change their work pattern it won't be to their discredit or their disadvantage in any way.

The Training Exchange were recently national runners up in the new Castle Awards. They were second only to Asda “who have more people in personnel than we have people!” The Castle Award was presented for their practices in fair pay and conditions for all staff, including women and part-time workers and for promoting staff training and development to all colleagues.

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Wind in the Willow Nurseries

Business profile

Wind in the Willows, a private partnership, operates three nurseries in St Helens, Merseyside, providing care for about 200 children. Ginny Taylor, a Health Visitor, started her first nursery with her husband Neil 13 years ago when their own children were young. Ginny was very aware from her conversations with new mothers of the problems they faced when they wanted to return to work but were prevented by the lack of affordable childcare. Opening their first nursery was a brave step involving mortgaging their home and giving up their jobs.

The needs of working parents

Ginny Taylor is well placed to understand the needs of working parents for work-life balance including flexible working hours:

“The reason we went into nursery provision was because we had two young children of our own and we had no extended family to help us – we dealt with our problem by setting up a nursery.”

As well as providing a childcare service for parents when they are at work, Ginny is aware of the needs of her staff who work at the nurseries. There are 35 employees, all women except for her husband and a chef, and most of them work part-time.

The nurseries are open from 7.30am–6pm from Monday to Friday, with most staff working an early or a late shift. It is agreed at the interview stage what hours people want to work and this can be adapted if necessary during the induction period. Some staff have their children at the nurseries themselves. A single parent who has worked at one of the nurseries for about four years changed her hours last September when her child started school so that she could work within school hours. She now starts work at 9.15am and leaves at 1.45pm. Another employee works three full days while her mother looks after her son.

A juggling act

The needs of the children, their parents and the staff who work at the nurseries all have to be balanced to provide a good nursery service.

“Parents like to see the same face when they come into nursery so that is something we take into consideration and we try to keep shifts the same. We try to have consistency for the children and parents and for the staff.”

It can be a difficult balancing act for Ginny. Her first priority is the safety and welfare of the children and ensuring there are the required numbers of staff at any one time to comply with legislation governing nursery provision. Each child has a key worker as a point of contact.

In addition, the nursery is providing a service to parents and they want consistency. They would prefer to have the same member of staff looking after their children every day. There are times when Ginny feels parents themselves could be a little more flexible and understand that the staff have their own lives and responsibilities too. For example, sometimes parents have been unreasonable if staff have taken special leave of absence.

Ginny wants to be able to give her staff flexibility too whenever possible. There are often occasions when she depends on their flexibility and goodwill so that sufficient cover is provided for the children. This may involve asking staff to work over and above their normal shift or sometimes to work in a different nursery if there is a shortage.

“It’s a two-way process. You know that if someone needs time off work for whatever reason they will make it up another time when you need them. It is about trust and attitude. So there is a benefit to my business of being flexible.”

Employee perspective

The new company, Wind in the Willows (Nurseries) Ltd is keen to employ people on a flexible basis too. Lisa Mabon, their recently appointed financial consultant, works the hours she wants to fit in with her two young children. “I worked for Nat West Bank for 13 years and they were very good. When my children were born I was able to reduce my hours from full time to three days a week. But when my first child started school I found that in many ways my childcare arrangements were more complicated and the costs were escalating. I wanted to be at home for more time and to be able to choose the hours I worked. Working for Wind in the Willows is ideal. I am looking at financial software packages for them and setting up their financial systems. I usually work about eight hours a week and can do this from home. I am working fewer hours but this is offset by the reduction in my childcare costs. I do miss some of the interaction with other work colleagues but find working from home I can be fully focused and am working at my best.”

continued →

Investing in people for a successful business

“One of the business benefits of work-life balance is that it helps reduce the rate of staff turnover. Many of our staff are on a continual training programme so I need to look at succession planning too.”

The Wind in the Willows nurseries provide opportunity for training including the modern apprenticeship scheme. They applied for the Investors in People standard as a pilot scheme with the St Helen's Chamber of Commerce and achieved it in 13 weeks. They have also achieved the Pre-school Learning Alliance accreditation award 'Aiming for Quality'.

“It's a two-way process. You know that if someone needs time off work for whatever reason they will make it up another time when you need them. It is about trust and attitude. So there is a benefit to my business of being flexible”

Now as well as being one of the premier childcare providers within the area of St Helens, the Taylors have joined forces with TransAtlantic Partners, a management consultancy to form Wind in the Willows (Nurseries) Ltd, one of the National Volume Providers for the Government's Neighbourhood Nurseries programme. Tom Hobbs, from TransAtlantic Partners explains “the combination of complimentary skills puts us in a prime position to fulfil our objective of delivering 1600 childcare places”. They already run 20 nurseries nationwide and are planning a further 22. They are working with Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) and their projects involve collaboration with others including schools, Sure-Start, the NHS, local businesses or voluntary organisations.

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About the organisations

The NSPCC

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children.

The NSPCC's mission is to end cruelty to children. The NSPCC FULL STOP Campaign and Appeal were launched in March 1999. FULL STOP incorporates a number of innovative projects and initiatives. Many of these are managed directly by the NSPCC; many other are being implemented in partnership with other organisations and agencies.

Through public and professional education and awareness, campaigning and lobbying, we aim to achieve a fundamental shift in values, attitudes and behaviour towards children and young people, so that they are genuinely valued. The NSPCC is looking at what practical steps employers can take to support parents so they can care for and protect their children.

Email: cmonkcom@nspcc.org.uk

The BCC

The British Chamber of Commerce (BCC) comprise nationally a network of quality-accredited Chambers of Commerce, all uniquely positioned at the heart of every business community in the UK.

Chambers are local, independent, non-profit making and non party-political organisations, funded by membership subscriptions. Accreditation is managed and developed by our business membership and monitored at the national level, to ensure we deliver only the very best standards of service and performance.

Currently over 135,000 businesses benefit from membership of Chambers, from growth-oriented start-ups to local and regional subsidiaries of multinational companies, in all commercial and industrial sectors, and from all over the UK.

At all levels, local, regional and national, the British Chambers of Commerce provide a powerful voice for business. Our regular surveys, consultations and reports provide grassroots business opinion and have strong influence on government ministers and officials, MPs, and other decision makers and opinion formers.

We are run by local business for local business, with each Chamber's Board and Committee structure drawn from the membership. No other business organisation can claim the quality, credibility and reach of our relationship with business.

Contact: Corrina Langelaan, British Chambers of Commerce, 5th Floor, 50 Broadway, St James' Park London, SW1H 0RG. Tel: 020 7152 4046.

Email: c.langelaan@britishchambers.org.uk

The FSB

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) is the voice of the small business sector with over 170,000 members. Based in Blackpool, the FSB has principal office in London, Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast. Our website helps you to find out what we are saying to the media, Parliament and others in the political and economic fields.

The FSB is the largest campaigning pressure group promoting and protecting the interests of the self-employed and owners of small firms. Formed in 1974, it now has over 170,000 members across 33 regions and 230 branches. On the member benefits side, it offers assistance and support 24 hours a day, while its lobbying arm - led by the Westminster Press and Parliamentary office - applies pressure on MPs, Government and Whitehall, lobbies politicians in their constituencies and puts the FSB viewpoint over to the media.

The FSB is non-profit making and non-party political.

One of the major benefits is the FSB's legal helpline which operates 24 hours a day. Last year, the helpline received over 100,000 calls, the majority of calls on employment matters but also dealing with issues such as commercial contract, landlord and tenant and consumer affairs.

During 2001, the FSB allocated £500,000 to members as a result of the Foot and Mouth outbreak. This money was available to businesses that were facing financial difficulties in the form of interest free loans.

Contact: Juliana Leonard, Federation of Small Businesses, 2 Catherine Place, Westminster, SW1. Tel: 020 7592 8100.

Email: juliana.policy@fsb.org.uk

The Work-Life Balance Standard

The Work-Life Balance Standard provides:

- A framework within which Work-life balance policies and practices can be developed.
- A benchmark against which organisations can be assessed.
- Recognition of good working practices helping organisations become employers of choice.
- A tool for continuous improvement.

The Work-Life Balance Standard was developed by Work-Life Balance Centre (WLBC) with the support of the Government. WLBC promotes Work-life balance policies and practices to employers of all types and sizes through the use of a national Work-Life Balance Standard.

For further information please visit:

Web: www.wlbc.ltd.uk



NSPCC, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH. Tel: 020 7825 2500
Or visit our website at www.nspcc.org.uk

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NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**