



How to deal with a flexible working request

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According to a recent CIPD report the vast majority of employers offer some form of flexible working which can include part time working, term time working, job sharing, flexitime, annual hours, working from home, mobile/tele working and career breaks.

The term flexible working describes a working arrangement that has some degree of flexibility on how long, where and when employees work. However, it is reported that only 63% provide the right to request flexible working requests, yet in accordance with the Families and Work Act 2007 they are required by law. Working at home is the most commonly offered option. Large organisations are more likely to be able to accommodate requests compared to SMEs and flexible working is more common in the public sector. Women are more likely to use flexible working compared to men with most taking up part time hours.

Flexible benefits

Some factors contributing to the increased interest in the use of flexible working include:

- Its potential value as a recruitment and retention tool in a tight labour market. The changing profile of the workforce (for example, with more women in the labour market and an ageing population it is increasingly common for workers to have caring responsibilities outside the workplace).
- Advances in technology (facilitating, for example, remote working and hot desking arrangements).
- An increasing need for businesses to be able to deliver services to customers on a 24/7 basis.
- The economic situation - some organisations have offered part-time working or sabbaticals as a method of avoiding or minimising redundancies.

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- The increased demand for an effective work-life balance.

The benefits of flexible working can be much improved organisational performance, however, there can be barriers to its implementation. The main one appears to be operational pressures. Other barriers that feature highly are a need to maintain customer/service requirements, inability to effectively manage flexible workers, existing organisational culture and the attitudes of senior managers. It appears there are more barriers for larger organisations than micro businesses. The biggest obstacles can be the nature of the work and little relevance to the work.

Request denied

When making a flexible working request an employer may refuse it for a business-related reason which includes:

- the burden of additional costs
- detrimental effect on the ability to meet customer demand
- the inability to reorganise work among existing staff
- the inability to recruit additional staff
- where it will have a detrimental impact on quality and performance.

Having a flexible working request refused can be quite a shock to those who put in a request so employers should consider how to effectively communicate and implement flexible working. The following tips may help:

- Establish a clear process for how flexible working works in the organisation.
- Ensure that there are clear roles and responsibilities for employees, line managers and HR.
- Assess the current levels of support offered to line managers and ensure it is sufficient.
- Invest in ongoing communication and awareness raising.
- Assess how conducive the organisation culture is to flexible working – and take action accordingly.
- Make use of pilots (when introducing new initiatives) and trial periods (for individual flexible working arrangements) in order to highlight potential problems with flexible working arrangements.
- Build in opportunities and mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress with flexible working.

In addition, by providing a flexible working information pack that is given to employees containing lots of useful information on the process, provides further useful written communication. The pack could contain a flexible working application form that allows the employee to describe the existing working pattern, the proposed changes, the impact the

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change would have on the role, workplace and colleagues with suggestions of how the impact could be dealt with. This allows the employee to think through the implications for their request and to possibly overcome any rejection. The pack should also contain an appeal form and further information on that process.

In 2014 the government plans to extend flexible working practices to everyone and is currently consulting on this, therefore, it is really important, that employers get their act together and look at effective implementation as it is a powerful tool for staff commitment and retention.

**Sandra Beale set up SJ Beale HR Consult in February 2003 and delivers a high quality, flexible, professional HR consultancy to small to medium sized businesses. The HR services include telephone/email advice, on site support, employment documentation, HR training and employment tribunal representation. Sandra is able to provide clear, practical advice on any HR issue including grievance, discipline, dismissal, redundancy, TUPE, absence, re-structures, performance management, recruitment, pay & benefits, etc.*

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