

My flexibility story

The support of colleagues, available technology and acceptance of flexible working arrangements are key to success. **Renee Bennett** explains how these have benefitted her family and firm.

I commenced at wilson/ryan/grose Lawyers in 2000 and am a partner and head of the succession law department.

The firm has a head office in the Townsville CBD which accommodates about 50 staff. Wilson/ryan/grose now has a local presence on the Sunshine Coast, consistent with its regional focus that suits the communities of regional south-east Queensland.

I work every day in the office at reduced hours, and aim to finish early most of these days to care for my three-year-old twins. This, of course, is dependent on client and staff needs, functions, marketing events and court appearances. When I do finish early, I remain available on my mobile and email for both staff and clients with urgent matters.

There are also days when I stay late or am available after hours. As I have full-time care arrangements for my children, I am able to have another level of flexibility when required.

My flexibility arrangements are perhaps different to some others, as I was a partner when they were negotiated with my fellow partners.

The arrangements are not rigid in the slightest, and are very flexible, with the needs of our clients foremost in our minds when considering such agreements.

Our firm has had staff at all levels working flexibly for many years, and has worked hard to create team environments in which everyone supports each other to meet the needs of our clients.

We also have sophisticated precedents, quality assurance, and record systems and procedures in place that assist with flexible arrangements. It certainly isn't always easy, as not being in the office full time requires my time in the office to be truly productive. It certainly pays to be very organised! One of the greatest assets I have in working flexibly is my personal assistant, who is truly exceptional.

I am very lucky in that I don't have any real difficulties with my arrangements. However, with the ever-increasing sophistication of digital technology, I am technically available all of the time. The access to emails, phone calls, checking mail and settling documents remotely is of great benefit



when outside of the office. This also means that there is no real downtime, but this is the same for all practitioners.

I feel very privileged to have flexible working arrangements, and as a result, I work much harder than I had to prior to children to ensure that my flexible hours don't impact adversely on our clients, staff or my fellow partners.

Developments in digital dictation and remote access have been a blessing for me, although leaving early in the afternoon often means I will work at home late at night. It is a trade-off, but one that I think is worth it and that works for me.

Flexibility has not attracted a negative reaction from staff at our firm, as there have been 25 years of flexibility at all levels. I have four professional staff and three support staff in my direct workgroup, with three of the professional staff and two of the support staff also working flexible hours.

Our firm has an excellent culture with much support from other staff. We all accept that there is give and take with our flexible arrangements and it works well for both us and our clients.

In addition to my work within the firm, I am also lucky to hold positions on various boards and committees, including the QLS Succession Law Specialist Accreditation

Advisory Committee. I am also an adjunct lecturer in the masters program for the College of Law.

In my dealings with other organisations on which I hold positions, I have been provided with support and encouragement from board and committee members to be flexible in fulfilling my duties. Attending board meetings via phone or Skype and other initiatives are quite the norm these days, regardless of gender.

In my experience, I also find that many other firms and organisations now see the real benefit in allowing staff meaningful flexibility in order to meet their obligations both at home and in the office.

My flexibility arrangements are successful because I work hard, and I am blessed to have the support of my fellow partners, staff and particularly my family. The benefits that myself and my family have received as a result of my flexible arrangements are immeasurable.

This story appears on behalf of the flexibility working group, an initiative of Queensland Law Society and the Women Lawyers Association of Queensland. The group needs your story – good or bad. Please contact flexibility@qls.com.au and share your experiences with flexibility in the legal profession. Renee Bennett is a partner at wilson/ryan/grose.