

My flexibility story

Flexible working arrangements are available. It's just a question of asking says this Brisbane-based practitioner.

Solicitor Robyn Davis, pictured, is a legal costs consultant and court-appointed costs assessor who works as an independent contractor.

Robyn was first admitted as a barrister and solicitor in 1986 in the Australian Capital Territory and then as a solicitor in New South Wales. Over the next decade, when she and her family relocated due to her husband's postings with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), she was further admitted as a barrister and solicitor in Victoria, as a solicitor in South Australia, and as a solicitor in Queensland.

She currently consults for, among others, DGT Costs Lawyers (DGT).

"I first started consulting as a contractor with DGT in Sydney in 1990 when my first child, Catherine, was born, preparing itemised accounts for submission to registrars in the New South Wales and Federal courts," she said. "I was keen to be a home-based mother. My husband was required to travel with work commitments, so one parent had to be available at all times for the family.

"As a consultant, I take work when offered or when my workload permits. I am home-based for that work. With a home-based consulting service, there has to be discipline to achieve work in prescribed time limits and cooperation with other family members to assist when workloads are heavy."

In 1991 Robyn, her husband and their daughter moved to the United States when he was posted to Texas. After they returned to Australia in 1994 she worked with Phillips Fox in Adelaide.

"I was with Phillips Fox in 1997 when my second child, Kristine, was born, and the working arrangements were flexible. I would work in the office in the mornings after dropping my daughter into family daycare and would pick her up around lunchtime. I would work from home for the balance of the day, as I had access to the firm server from my home computer. I was mainly doing commercial leasing at the time and just kept in contact with support staff to ensure work was processed each day.



"When we moved to Queensland in 1998 I also worked part-time, two or three days a week, with firms in Toowoomba."

In 2000, Robyn began consulting again for DGT in New South Wales, and after the business expanded to Queensland in 2005, she undertook contracting work for the firm in both states.

Solicitor Director of DGT, Kerrie Rosati, said the firm utilised about 15 consultants in the two states, and between its Sydney and Brisbane offices had 11 staff, some full-time and some casual.

"We have offered flexible working arrangements for many years. Due to the nature of our work and our IT program, we can have our employed solicitors and costs consultants working from home," Kerrie said.

"Offering this flexibility means we have been able to attract and retain a highly-skilled and dedicated team. We are also happy to adapt to meet individual needs and situations as they change. We have a large number of working mothers but we also have quite a few male lawyers who were looking to work in a manner that was different to mainstream practice.

"Robyn has been with DGT on and off for 25 years, and as a valued member of the team, we have worked with her to ensure that she can work from wherever she is."

Robyn said one of the difficulties of a part-time or flexible arrangement was not experiencing the day-to-day social interaction between firm members.

"You need to find interaction in other areas. I do volunteering. I used to be a high school canteen volunteer. Sometimes when I was on call to give expert evidence to the court I was serving pies and sausage rolls. It was a case of, 'Will it be tomato sauce with that, your Honour?'"

"Due to my working arrangements, I may not have been offered some of the same 'plum' jobs other fee earners were given over the years, but it gave me the opportunity to mentor some of the more junior staff, who then went on to become associates and partners in the firms I worked with in due course. Some of those staff members are now also well-respected barristers.

"By showing the firms a no-fuss method to achieve a flexible arrangement, they were more likely to offer such arrangements for others who wanted to be at home with their children.

"Flexibility has to be part of the modern workplace. In March this year I watched my eldest daughter be admitted as a solicitor in the Supreme Court of Queensland. Of the 20 or so practitioners admitted in the first batch for the day, all but four were women. The profession is changing with more women admitted who will need a break to be able to raise their families.

"There is more outsourcing occurring in firms and there doesn't need to be the same level of face-to-face interaction with clients who are more informed, thanks to access to the internet. Technology is assisting the change with the use of webcams, Skype meetings, and teleconferences. Other organisations offer job sharing, different start and finishing times for work and 24/7 work arrangements.

"Flexible working arrangements are available – you just have to ask!"

This story appears on behalf of the flexibility working group, an initiative of the Queensland Law Society and 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.