



Flexible working and high-performance culture

21 January 2014 By Linda Smith

Topics: [Law firm & practice management \(URL=/Law firm - practice management/76.subject\)](#)

Flexible working should be seen less as a burden on firms and more as a tool to improve health, wellness and ultimately productivity, says Linda Smith.

Working in the legal sector has a reputation for being tough, and for a long-hours culture that remains unchallenged by many firms. Law is one of the most competitive industries to break into, so many employees put in the extra effort and hours to try and stand out from the crowd at the expense of their health and wellbeing, and perhaps even the health and wellbeing of their families and dependants. As almost half of legal professionals (49%) feel they are working too hard, according to research by Ranstad Financial and Professional, the question to employers within the sector is clear: what can you do to ensure your workforce remains happy, healthy and productive?

As Working From Home Week is upon us (20–26 January 2014), law firms should be considering the importance of flexible working as part of an attractive employee benefits package. Research by Cass Business School, commissioned by financial protection insurer Unum, has shown that the ageing of the UK workforce and the increased number of female workers over the last 30 years has led to flexible working rising higher and higher up the employee wish-list.

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The importance of flexible working for employees with children is well documented, however many employers fail to recognise the role that it can play for older employees - who could benefit from skipping the daily grind of the commute every now and then, for example - and those with caring responsibilities. On top of considerations around paid social care, the proportion of employees providing care for their older relatives is likely to rise as the population ages.

To support this 'sandwich generation' - the increasing proportion of employees juggling caring responsibilities for both children and older relatives with employment and, lest we forget, their own personal lives and commitments - flexible working should be seen less as a burden on businesses and more as a tool to improve health, wellness and ultimately productivity. Indeed, the government seems to agree and from April this year the right to request flexible working will be extended to all employees and some of the red tape required by businesses to work flexibly will be removed. In saying this, there is still a long way to go to make flexible working the norm.

Many employees fear that asking to work flexibly will jeopardise their career progression as they may be labelled as a 'part-timer'. However, there is a significant amount of research to suggest that employees that work flexibly are often far more committed to their organisation than people that work conventional hours, which is a fact that employers should recognise when designing their benefits package. It's also important for employers to change the perception that flexible working is a benefit aimed at women with children.

It should, in fact, be communicated to all employees no matter what gender or seniority – as should all benefits on offer. The Cass Business School research shows that offering benefits but failing to tell staff about them is actually no better than not offering them in the first place.

We also know - through our work with Working Families, a UK work-life balance organisation - that providing an attractive benefits package that includes softer benefits like flexible working alongside benefits that provide long-term financial security such as income protection (which pays a regular monthly income to staff if they are off sick for more than six months) has a tangible impact on driving trust and engagement between employees and employers. These types of benefits improve productivity and employee retention as well as employee health and wellbeing as workers feel more secure and more valued in their jobs.

Given the unprecedented demographic, social and technological changes that have transformed the workplace over the last 30 years, businesses need to be smarter than ever about how they hire, develop and retain talent, and how they keep their workforce healthy and happy. Providing a balanced employee benefits package that embraces flexible working and provides workers with long-term financial security can help firms create a truly high-performance culture that delivers real competitive advantage.

Linda Smith is HR director at Unum

Readers' comments (3)

- finola Moss23 January 2014 00:03 am

more as a tool to improve health, wellness and ultimately productivity',..... And make even more money.

The post modern workplace of workers and managers, 'us and them', depends on the workers- those that actually do the job, dare I say provide the expertise, being a disposable, bullied, stressed out, flexible, complaint resource, lucky to have an insecure future, let alone a career- that should do a lot for this resource's 'wellbeing' . .

Nor does it bode well for the quality and integrity of the service provided, and is inhuman and unjust for the worker, but appears the model of our present form of ruthless capitalism ..

- Fred Parkinson23 January 2014 11:25 am

Ha ha ha....oo-hoo....ha ha ha....oohoo...stop! You're killing me!!! I can't breathe....*gasps for air*....lawyers, embracing flexible working, across the profession....ha ha ha....now I've seen a dragon fly, and I've seen a horse fly....but I ain't ever seen flexible working fly.....eeee, that has cheered me up....keep these morale booster articles coming boys and girls.....now, 3-2-1 you're back in the room.....

- Anonymous23 January 2014 12:14 pm

Sound bite of the day.....Do people still read 1984 anymore? (and to think that it used to be classed as fiction). For my sins I used to write 'briefs' for a firm of architects and managed to sell a scheme for hospital beds to be set in a ward at odd angles. The finished product was universally hated by doctors, nurses, cleaning staff, patients and visitors, in fact everybody but boy did I make it sound like a brilliant scheme; there's a lot of it about. BEWARE