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How flexible are you?

Flexible working has evolved into a buzz word within the business community and in many cases, has become a part of the way businesses organise workloads. The Business Quarter takes a look at how it could work for you...

A few years ago there was less understanding about the benefits of flexible working. But nowadays, more and more businesses are waking up to its benefits, and many have already implemented flexible working arrangements such as remote working, flexi-time and job-sharing.

Larger businesses are often blessed with the infrastructure and staff to be able to utilise flexible working solutions in many parts of their operations.

Some smaller employers, while aware of the general business benefits, are not always using flexible working to its full potential. This could be due to employers feeling it will place a strain on their finances and internal resource.

A study by PricewaterhouseCoopers revealed that almost half of employees surveyed, listed flexible working as the most valuable benefit, with performance-related bonuses in second place with 19 per cent.

In addition to the benefits to employees, flexible working can add considerable value to businesses and the customer base.

Through its £12.5m European Social Fund and Welsh Government funded project, Chwarae Teg, the agency which promotes the economic development of women in Wales, is working closely with SMEs across Convergence areas, to explain the business benefits of flexible working as well as offering practical support to ensure it becomes a viable part of businesses' strategy. Established in 2008 the project aims to work with 600 businesses.

An element of the Agile Nation project is aimed at reducing gender inequalities in the workplace and looks at how to close the gender pay gap through promoting flexible working

arrangements and showing businesses the benefits of embracing work-life balances.

Hayley Dunne, the Agile Nation project manager, said: "The workplace has evolved considerably over the years and with advances in technology, there are more options to work flexibly."

"There are a number of diverse reasons why staff may need more flexibility in the way they work as they attempt to juggle a number of other responsibilities in their lives."

"A few years ago, it was seen as working mothers who were the main beneficiaries of flexible working, however increasingly businesses understand and recognise that flexible working offers wider benefits to all employees and to the business itself."

"There are a number of factors to consider within the modern workforce. An ageing population means that more people in Wales have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives and there is an increase in the number of workers that fall into the 'sandwich generation' – meaning a person is caring for an elderly parent while simultaneously looking after a dependant child."

"The ability to work flexibly allows employees to work effectively, despite added personal commitments. Employer flexibility can reduce stress in the workplace, which is conducive to a motivated and productive workforce."

"In these difficult economic times, there is a need to go a step further for clients and customers and work more efficiently. Staff may be required to work long hours on a particular project but a flexible employer will allow them to have time off in lieu."

"Other options such as working remotely can help save time and money;



It can overcome the issue of expensive office space, avoid rush-hour commuting and reduce travel expenses. Adopting remote working where appropriate, can also help a company to reduce its carbon footprint, which helps employers present themselves as being socially responsible.

"There are many flexible working options available for all types of businesses. It's important that employers find the ones that suit them best. Businesses which have already adopted flexible working arrangements need to make sure they are promoting this as a valuable employee benefit, so they are able to attract and retain the best staff."

One company which has benefited from implementing flexible working is Cwmbran-based Pia which specialises in producing accessible communication materials such as braille.

Pia has a team of 11 staff of various ages, including two with young children. The Agile Nation project has supported the company in strengthening its flexible working policy and bolstering its ICT connections to maximise the opportunities for remote working.

One staff member has recently returned from her second maternity leave and was able to renegotiate her hours with her management team to two full days in the office and the option to carry out work from home, communicating with her colleagues by email and working on marketing copy.

Managing director at Pia, Sharon Williams said: "As an employer, it's important to be aware that there are things that are more important than work. I have a small close-knit team and we operate on mutual trust and understanding."

"If a member of my staff has genuine reasons for needing to work from home, whether it is domestic issues such as having their boiler fixed or childcare, I am happy to accommodate this."

"We have a robust flexible working

procedure which is available to everyone, not just the working parents. My team is aware of what is expected from them in terms of productivity, so I don't have a problem of employees taking advantage of the flexibility. "My experience of adopting flexible work has been very positive and has been utilised effectively by the staff."

"I am encouraged by the fact that our staff turnover is very low and the last person who left was in 2006. Many of the current staff have been there for a number of years and have progressed in their careers."

"The business is perhaps ahead of other businesses of a similar size when it comes to flexibility. We introduced five paid domestic leave days in addition to the standard annual leave entitlement. This allows our employees to take time off for life's emergencies such as if a relative is taken ill or if somebody has a doctor's appointment."

"I take my responsibility to be a fair employer very seriously and I feel flexible working is an integral part of this commitment. The Agile Nation project has benefited Pia in many ways; the project officers have provided advice on keeping the staff handbook updated, ensuring it meets legislative requirements and that our flexible working policy is fit for purpose."

"In addition, we benefited from the project's ICT expertise. They put us in touch with trusted suppliers to ensure we had a safe Virtual Private Network which allowed staff to work remotely. Because we sometimes deal with confidential and sensitive documents, having reliable technology is of huge importance."

"I understand the challenges, that today's workforce face and that adopting flexible working makes good business sense. Being willing to offer staff flexibility when they need it helps build employee loyalty which is essential for a functioning and profitable business."

workforce

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