

What are flexible working arrangements and why are some people against them? Can companies benefit from offering flexible working arrangements to their employees?

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. a mindset
2. supervision
3. employee retention
4. to commute
5. to work remotely
6. to micromanage
7. to hang around
8. a boundary

Definitions

- a. to stay or spend time in a place
- b. to travel regularly between work and home
- c. to work outside a traditional office environment, e.g. to work from home
- d. watching someone to make sure they do something correctly
- e. to manage people through excessive control and attention to detail
- f. a person's way of thinking
- g. a real or imaginary line that marks the limit of something
- h. an organisation's ability to keep its staff and not have them leave the company

Flexible working

Fred works for a traditional company that expects him to start at 8.30 a.m. and leave at 5.30 p.m. or later every day. Most of his work is done on a project basis and, as a manager, he is responsible for the quality of work that is produced and for meeting deadlines. On most days of the week, there is often extra work to be done on a project, and Fred stays late in the office or brings his work home. Occasionally, when he finishes all his work before 5.30 p.m., he finds himself hanging around, chatting with colleagues and waiting for the time he can officially leave.

With two small children at school, Fred has to use up his annual leave in order to take time off when his children are ill, when he wants to attend their sports day or any time the kids have a half-day at school. Fred also lives an hour's drive from his office and therefore spends two hours a day commuting.

In the interest of increasing productivity and making better use of his time, Fred suggested the idea of flexible working to his director. His director, however, rejected his suggestion, saying that he saw flexible working as problematic for the company.

Fred's director isn't alone in this thinking. In many organisations, there is still a culture in which the employee who arrives the earliest and leaves the latest is considered the most hard-working, and many bosses still believe that they can't trust their employees to work remotely. They worry that there are too many distractions for workers at home or that team working and communication won't be as good if workers are physically disconnected from each other. Some employers think management is about the close supervision of employees to direct and control not just what is done but also exactly how it is done.

However, the nature of a lot of work today involves meeting deadlines, achieving certain objectives and hitting targets. As most people who've worked in these kinds of environments know, productivity is less about how many hours you spend in the office and more about how well you meet those goals. Even though they're outside the office, the remote worker who is not meeting targets is quickly noticed. Micromanaging bosses don't help productivity either. In fact, research shows that controlling bosses can have a negative effect on their employees' performance.

In contrast, giving employees the freedom to organise their working schedule to fit with their personal life means they are working when they are best able to engage fully with their work and are therefore more efficient and productive. Having choices in their working environment and timetable creates responsible and motivated workers who are likely to get better results, knowing they can meet the demands of both their job and their personal life.

Whether it is giving employees the right to work remotely, offering job sharing or part-time working, or allowing non-fixed start and finish times, flexible working is not just about practical working arrangements but also about a culture and a mindset. For example, many remote workers find themselves working past their working hours, partly because there is no commuting to mark the boundaries between work and personal life, making it hard to switch off from work. Companies might need to consider training both workers and management staff to help them better understand what flexible working is, how to implement it and how to encourage a results-driven approach. Only then can flexible working truly result in happier employees, increased productivity and better employee retention.

Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

| | Answer | |
|---|---------------|-------|
| | True | False |
| 1. Fred's director doesn't want Fred working remotely because he sees Fred making small talk and not working when he's in the office. | True | False |
| 2. If Fred was allowed to work from home, he'd work less and spend more time with his children. | True | False |
| 3. It is easy for a manager to know if a remote worker is not working effectively. | True | False |
| 4. Bosses who are very controlling get better results from their team. | True | False |
| 5. Giving employees more flexible working conditions doesn't really benefit the company. | True | False |
| 6. People who work from home often end up working longer hours than when working in the office. | True | False |

Task 2

Complete the sentences.

| | | |
|----------|-----------|---------|
| remotely | boundary | hours |
| freedom | retention | mindset |

- Working means that employees can use their commuting time to work.
- Flexible working gives employees more to make their own decisions and they become more engaged with their work.
- Remote workers are more motivated and may work past their normal working
- If employees are happier, they are less likely to leave for another company. Flexible working can improve employee rates.
- One disadvantage for remote workers may be that there is less of a between work and personal life.
- For flexible working arrangements to work well, staff who are used to traditional ways of working may need to change their

Discussion

Do you think more companies should offer flexible working arrangements?

Answers

Preparation task

1. f
2. d
3. h
4. b
5. c
6. e
7. a
8. g

Task 1

1. False
2. False
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True

Task 2

1. remotely
2. freedom
3. hours
4. retention
5. boundary
6. mindset