

## **Learning to think flexibly? The Reality versus the Rhetoric of Flexible Work Practices**

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Many organisations talk about workplace flexibility but what does it really mean for -

- the employer;
- the employee; and
- the manager?

What is the reality and rhetoric of flexible work practices. Families At Work has recently completed research to start answering this question. The research was funded by the NSW Department for Women, sponsored by the Labor Council of NSW and conducted by Families At Work.

The objectives of the research were to:

- find out whether companies that provided an array of flexible work practices were really assisting employees to balance their lives - whether the reality was different to the rhetoric; and
- to promote good practice in the area of flexibility and the use of flexibility by employers by developing some strategies to promote flexible work cultures.

### **Who we studied**

The research was done in 1998 with 3 companies who have been recognised as best practice by the *Business Council of Australia and Financial Review Work and Family Awards*. These companies have a broad platform of flexible work options to assist employees manage their work and personal lives better. The companies are all large, with offices in Sydney and outside of Sydney. We focussed on Sydney offices only.

The organisations were:

- a government department;
- a large private company; and

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- a large financial institution.

## What we did

We met and interviewed:

- representatives from each organisation's human resources division;
- unions representatives;
- employees and managers through focus group participation; and
- two or three individual employees in each organisation who are utilising some type of flexible workplace policy.

The following table shows the number of employees and managers interviewed in the focus groups.

	employee focus groups				manager focus groups			
	number of groups	females	males	total employees	number of groups	females	males	total managers
Company A	1	6	4	10	1	2	5	7
Company B	1	6	3	9	1	6	3	9
company C	2	13	4	17	2	18	5	23
total employees		25	11	36		26	13	39

## What we learned

Most people we spoke to believed that their workplaces were delivering the goods when it came to their ability to work flexibly. Most of those interviewed said that they were committed to the organisations and that the organisations deserved their loyalty. Those not using flexible work practices felt confident that if they wanted to they could access them.

These comments were not universal, nor without reservation about how easy it is to access a particular type of flexible work option and how easy it is to advance in an organisation while working an alternate work schedule or taking leave provisions.

## The common themes

## **1. Working flexibly or using flexible work practices**

As we interviewed employees and managers it became apparent that there was a clear distinction between flexible work practices and working flexibly. We had never identified this distinction before.

- Flexible work practices - were about negotiating a formal arrangements such as job share, part time work or working from home on a regular basis.
- Working flexibly - employees organised their work time in a way that suited them, while ensuring that business needs were met. For example, starting and finishing work late, taking time off to attend a child's school concert and then making up the time later.

In one of the organisations we were told by employees that very few employees use flexible work practices, but we know that many of the employees in that organisation take rostered days off (RDOs). RDOs are clearly formal arrangements between the employer and the employee. Some employees did not regard RDOs as flexible work practices. It may be that this type of flexibility is so ingrained into the organisation's culture that employees do not identify their work practices as anything but the usual way of working.

Another reason employees may not use flexible work practices is that there was a view expressed to us by some employees that using flexible work practices was detrimental to employees' careers. Employees said that although they could use the flexible work practice they wanted, they preferred to work a traditional arrangement because those that did use flexible work practices were perceived by the employees interviewed to be either less dedicated to their work or perceived to be such by management.

## **2. Trust**

A key theme that emerged was trust. Employees thought that without trust flexibility would not work. The successful use of flexible work practices is entirely dependent on trust between the employee, their manager and the organisation. The old regime of managing by control and needing to see employees doing their work in the office will not work effectively in the current workforce climate.

Each of the organisations had established job share situations at a relatively high level. This is indicative of the trust that some in the organisation were prepared to show to employees. All those we spoke to who were job sharing felt supported by their managers and the organisation in general.

There were a number of incidences cited where management made it difficult for employees to do their work in a more flexible way, for example calling when employees were working from home and monitoring of work.

### **3. Workplace change**

Workplace changes and ways of working impacted greatly on whether employees believed they could use flexible work practices comfortably and the type of flexibility employees used.

#### **(a) Restructuring and downsizing**

All of the organisations we spoke to were in the process of restructuring. Employee's jobs were insecure and in some areas they were worried about their job security. There had also been downsizing which has resulted in:

- increased workload for employees;
- longer hours; and
- diminished ability to work flexibly.

#### **(b) Increased competitiveness**

This was discussed in all organisations and links to many of the other common themes. Competition from within and outside the organisations drives the introduction of flexibility but ironically, it is this competition that leads employees to work longer and push harder to get ahead in their jobs and this can result in less flexibility.

#### **(c) Emphasis on the individual**

An emphasis on the individual meant that many employees believed there was less focus on the union's role in flexible work practices and an emphasis on employees being trained or at least expected to ask for what they want.

This posed a number of problems for some employees. These employees believed that the emphasis being placed on the individual resulted in those who are able to speak up for themselves the loudest being able to negotiate the best deal, and those who are considered the most valuable employee, making themselves indispensable will have the best chance of getting the flexibility they want.

### **4. Managing flexibly**

We were told a number of times about where employees who worked flexibly were not provided with the same opportunities as those who did not use flexible work practices.

There was some contention about why this was the case. Reasons such as the employee's perceived lack of dedication was one. But one of our individual interviewees who worked in a job share position, took the view that getting a promotion was not about the employee's lack of dedication but the fact that the organisation had no experience of job sharers at her level. It did not know what to expect, it was unsure it could work. She

blamed a traditional mindset amongst some of her colleagues and managers. Despite the obstacles job sharers have secured promotions in several of the organisations we studied.

We spoke to a woman who was on maternity leave who got a promotion while she was on leave. She also came back to work at the higher level part time. This occurred primarily because her manager pushed it through with her seniors. The lack of experience in employees working this way and the fixed mindset made it difficult for this women to get what she wanted.

There seems to be a universal theme that it is possible to get ahead in your career if you:

- are a valuable employee;
- are prepared to ask for what you want;
- know how to argue for what you want; and
- are persistent until you get it.

One employee said to us she got the flexibility she wanted because she was prepared to be pro-active and take the initiative, she found a way of getting flexibility and she made things happen. This was echoed by all the employees we spoke to who had negotiated to work an alternative work practice. For the most part the employees have done it themselves.

## **5. Performance equals output**

There was agreement amongst all the organisations that the contemporary way to manage staff is to provide targets for staff and determine their success based on an employee's performance and their output rather than the time they spend in the office. Although in theory no one disagreed with this, we were told a number of times that employees who were seen a lot were more likely to be promoted. Some of our respondents said it was great the organisation had flexible work practices but they didn't use them themselves.

One issue of concern expressed by one manager was employee's time is not measured. In some areas managers continue to increase the workload for individuals, paying no regard to how long the work will take. This means that instead of becoming a more flexible way of working, some employees are doing 60, 70 or 80 hour weeks to complete the work they have to get through.

We were told by some of the managers that to work successfully in an environment where performance is equated to outcomes, an organisation needs to:

- change its expectations of what an individual should be asked to complete;
- ensure resources are managed better;
- work smarter by using technology better;
- improve billing practices; and
- get rid of inflexible systems.

## **6. Inflexible systems**

So how do systems impact on flexibility. They can relate to:

- work practices;
- the actual systems; and
- workplace infrastructure.

### **(a) Working practices**

For example, we were told about an employee who suggested she change the part time days that she worked each week to fit in with the demands of the organisation. Although this would have worked well for the organisation and the employee, she was told that the administrative system could not cater for different days each week.

Other examples include - the existence of an attendance clerk, a sign off and on book, doctors certificates for sick children, a strict cap on time in lieu, the paper based human resources system, and the superannuation scheme which inhibits employees from going part time before retirement.

Some of these barriers are related to employee perception, internal management or imposed externally through legislation or regulation.

### **(b) The billing system**

In one organisation we were told the billing system was a problem. The organisation does not always bill an internal client for the actual number of hours worked on a project. This means that the internal clients can ask for work to be done and then change specifications at the last moment without worrying about extra costs. The outcome of this is that employees can be asked to work excessively long hours and sometimes do work that is a total waste of time as it is completely changed the following day.

One manager suggested that if the client was billed for the actual number of hours their work had taken they "won't ask so many questions or ask for as many useless things that you do, that don't add value".

### **(c) Workplace infrastructure**

One manager used the example of the mailing system. The mail arrives at 7am and has to be out by 5pm. This means it is impossible for anyone to work after 5pm if they needed to meet mailing deadlines. He said the organisation needs a different system to move the mail around.

Another issue brought up by a regional manager was that she prefers her employees to take a day off rather than a couple of hours because it is easier to get cover or a temp to fill in. This is preventing employees from using flexible work hours to attend to personal matters and is costing the organisation money.

One of the systems that increase employees' insecurity about working part time is the way the head count system works. If a manager is asked to cut back by 10 or 20%, the easiest way is often to cut a part time position.

## **7. Long hours**

The number of hours an employee works is dependent on:

- the business unit or group;
- the type of work;
- the type of manager;
- whether there is a deadline to meet; and
- whether an employee is on contract or packaged or whether they are under an award.

This varied markedly within each organisation. In all organisations employees we spoke to said long hours were an impediment to working in a flexible manner, primarily because it was difficult to manage work and the rest of life when you were expected to work extraordinary hours. We heard of marriage break ups and parents not able to spend time with their children, particularly from some of the managers.

Many employees across the board were not unhappy about this situation. There seemed to be a generally accepted belief that long hours was just part of the job, that it had become the norm.

There was a view expressed that although employees were working long hours, they were working flexible hours and taking time off in the day to attend to personal business and go to appointments and this was why they accepted the long days. We were told by some employees that the sheer demands of work meant they worked overtime regularly and although in theory could take time in lieu or a rostered day off, in practise they never had time to take it.

We were told by some of the employees that if an employee was working excessive hours it was their responsibility to refuse to do it. Employees in the focus groups said they believed that men find it more difficult to 'put their foot down' and say "I refuse to work long hours".

## **8. Flexible thinking versus policies**

A prominent theme expressed by all the organisations was that flexible work policies are all well and good but if managers are not prepared to think flexibly, they are of little use. By flexible thinking the employees meant being open to individual needs and requests without being a stickler for tradition, convention or strict policy adherence. In each

organisation we heard of areas that were dinosaurs compared to other divisions that were highly innovative when it comes to flexible thinking and practices.

One of the issues raised was that the spirit of flexibility was welcomed but should permeate the way the organisation is driven.

One of the most common words we heard throughout this study was 'mindset'. Employees kept referring to mindsets that were not conducive to flexibility. They saw this as one of the most detrimental aspects to the ability to work flexibly. It was not just managers who were being referred to. We were given examples of colleagues' inflexible mindsets that made it difficult for an individual to work the way that suited them. We were told about co-workers putting pressure on team members to pull their weight and believed that using flexible work practices meant that you were not pulling your weight.

The problem with inflexible mindsets was explained as simply a fear that it had never been done before and may not work, and therefore would require someone to clean up the pieces afterwards, rather than a determination not to try anything new.

Some employees thought that their organisations needed to develop a more trusting attitude to staff and the staff's ability to make things work, particularly where the employee is often very keen for the alternative work practice to succeed so they can change their lifestyle.

The employee often has more to lose than the organisation if it doesn't work.

## **9. Management skills**

Employees talked about the lack of education that managers had to ensure they could manage alternate work practices. Managers themselves talked about how hard it is to manage employees all working in different ways and how it is easier for them if everyone is working the same way. Because of this they did not always actively encourage flexibility.

Some managers said that if a manager had personal experience either using a flexible work practice themselves or managing someone else, they were more likely to be responsive to their employees requests, encourage them and endeavour to make an alternative way of working successful.

There were fears expressed to us that if some people were allowed to use a particular work practice it would 'catch on like wildfire'. Some managers were hesitant to encourage their staff to work in alternative ways. Some human resource people also expressed their concern that if a flexible work practice such as career breaks were allowed the organisation would not be able to cope with the number of employees wanting to take breaks. This fear is not borne out in this research. Most people do not want to use flexible work practices, they are just pleased to know they can if they ever need to.

There are examples of job share in all three organisations and at least one example at a senior level. Employees had experienced resistance to job sharing and part time work in senior positions. It is clear from the few job share or part time positions that exist at a

senior level that there are very few job share opportunities and these need to be encouraged. A number of managers believed that an employee could not job share or work part time if they had contact with clients or had to supervise staff. We observed that there was not much comfort about managing flexible work practices at high levels.

## **10. Who gets to use flexible work practices**

There was a lot of discussion around whether some people got to use flexible work practices more than others. The discussion hinged around:

- level in the organisation;
- value to the organisation;
- the business unit you work in;
- the manager you are lucky or unlucky enough to get; and
- whether you have family responsibilities or not and what gender you are.

### **(a) Staff level**

The type of work practices an employee could access seemed to come down to whether we were talking about flexible work practices or flexibility. A number of comments were made regarding how flexible work practices such as job sharing, working from home and part time work were fine for those in administrative positions or those who did not have much responsibility but it was impossible for a manager or someone with a great deal of responsibility or client contact.

The same people who thought it was difficult for employees at a high level in the organisation to use flexible work practices, also thought that these employees could decide the times they would work, take time in lieu whenever they needed and could work from home when they needed to. In other words, employees on lower levels were more likely to be accessing flexible work practices and employees on higher levels were more likely to be taking advantage of the organisation's flexibility.

There were other opinions expressed that employees who were higher up had the option to do what they wanted while employees who worked at a lower level had to toe the line and take what they were given if they wanted to keep their job. Managers expressed how difficult it was to allow employees to use any flexible work practice or make use of any flexibility because of the lack of staff and the need for employees to be rostered on when customer demand was high.

Another issue an employee raised was that because they perceive that if they are on contract they are expected to work harder and lose their rostered days off. One employee said she didn't want to go onto contract because although she might get more money she would lose her RDO, the day she spends with her children to attend school activities. We were also told that packaged staff sometimes have less flexibility as they are expected to be more dedicated and hence more available, that is work long hours.

Perhaps one way for employees who are contracted to be able to access work flexibility, would be to include flexible work practices as part of the contract rather than dollars earned.

**(b) Staff value**

It was made very clear that the more valuable or indispensable an employee is, the more likely it is they will be able to access flexible work practices. We heard about an employee who worked with clients, who wanted to quit her job because she was finding it too difficult juggling full time work with children. Her managers got together and decided to approach her with the suggestion that she job share as they thought she was too valuable an employee to lose. She agreed to stay and job share. We were told that reliability in an employee is also very highly desired.

The irony is that to be considered a good worker in the minds of some of the managers and employees we spoke to, a staff member needs to work long and hard and be seen to be available at all times. This way of working does not fit well with employees wanting to work part time, job share, work from home, or take leave, in other words an employee who wishes to use flexible work practices is proving in the minds of some that they are not dedicated to the organisation. This of course may not only hinder chances of getting flexibility but also chances of bonuses, promotion and in the worst case scenario employment itself.

**(c) Business unit and manager**

The other key determinant about who gets to make use of flexibility is where an employee works. We were told that within each organisation there are many different sub-cultures. The business unit or group where you work and the manager you have is crucial to what sort of work practices employees can expect.

In one organisation employees said there was an issue surrounding the implementation of policy in that they could not rely on policies being interpreted in the same way. One employee said that when he worked in a geographically remote area it was very flexible. When he started work in a business unit in head office he said a culture of working overtime and weekends was pervasive. Since a new manager arrived things have changed again as the manager said that staff should not be working overtime without being paid for it.

A manager said that smaller teams bear the load so that others can be flexible. He believes that smaller teams must work harder because they have less staff and other resources and are less able to accommodate flexibility because of this.

We were told by managers that many of them tended to work incredibly long hours. None of them worked under 50 hours per week and some of them regularly worked 70 or 80 hours per week. Managers and employees said that there lacked an understanding of

flexibility in theory and in practise and that it was quite volatile and employees face increasing pressures to work long hours to meet deadlines.

There are areas in organisations with specialist knowledge with critical business priorities and intense customer services at peak times that have to be met that were constantly cited as places where it was too difficult to provide much flexibility for staff.

#### **(d) Family responsibilities and gender**

Although all the Human Resources people we spoke to said the organisation's flexible policies and programs were not just geared for people with families, some employees believed that in some areas of the organisation, co-workers used their family responsibilities to get more flexibility. There was some resentment expressed about employees with children getting priority for leave in school holiday periods. One employee said that this happens more frequently when employees move from team to team rather than staying in the one team where employees tend to take turns with holidays.

A manager we spoke to said that he had noticed that there was some tension between people with families and those without. He said it was important for him as a manager to be conscious that he did not have different expectations of employees who don't have children.

There was some discussion about whether women were treated more favourably when it came to use of flexible work practices. There was no clear agreement about this. An employee gave an example of when a meeting was changed and it clashed with his agreement to spend some time with his children who were going on an excursion from their child care centre. He went to the meeting for half an hour and then stood up and said he had to go as he had an appointment with his children. He said "all of my colleagues particularly the older guys who have had families virtually applauded me for doing it. There's no way my wife would be able to do that."

Some employees believed that women were treated more favourably than men when it came to being able to access flexible work practices. One employee said that women are "just less likely to refuse to work long hours or accept conditions" that are detrimental to their family life. We spoke to employees - both male and female, who were not going to apply for a promotion because they thought it meant losing their rostered days off, which is the day they set aside for their children.

All organisations have affirmative action goals to assist in increasing women into non-traditional jobs. One of the managers said that this played a part in the fact that one of her female managers was allowed to come back to work part time after she had her baby even though this had never been done before in that particular job role.

Another manager said that for women to get promoted it does not help to have children. He said that the people (and it is generally men) who make the decisions about promotions want employees to be available each day until the job is done and if an



Work & Personal Life Specialists

employee has to rush out the door at 5.30pm to get to the child care centre then they would not be a good bet.

## **C. Strategies for developing flexible work cultures**

### **1. Identify the link between customer service and flexibility**

One organisation has already begun this research. In order to assess the link between better customer service and flexibility, Human Resources are examining the link between staff satisfaction, customer satisfaction and shareholder profit.

This is an effective way to position flexibility with measurements of business effectiveness.

### **2. Make managers more accountable**

Asking managers when their performance is being appraised what flexibility they are showing their staff is a regular reminder to them that this is part of good management practice. It may also encourage managers to be more pro-active when it comes to assisting staff to make use of flexibility and ensuring that there is equal access to who gets to use flexibility (men and women, parents and non-parents, part timers and full timers and employees regardless of their level in the organisation).

This may also provide Human Resources with a way of establishing which managers need more help in managing flexible work practices and the organisation could develop a training program specifically for these managers.

### **3. Integrate flexibility training into effective management of employee development**

All of the organisations already do this to some extent.

Both senior and line managers in particular, need to know why it is important to be flexible and what the benefits to the organisation are. They need to know that it is often the intention or the spirit behind a flexible work practice that needs to come across to staff not just the understanding of a particular policy or practice. They also need to accept that employees who want to use flexible work practices are dedicated and committed and as productive as other employees. Training should include:

- why and how their own business performance will be enhanced if employees are able to integrate their personal lives with their work more easily;
- understanding of flexible work practices being offered in different parts of the organisation, what's working and what's not. Perhaps where flexibility is working well, employees and their managers could be called upon to talk about how it works and answer questions;
- awareness of all documented flexible work practice policies and programs and what employee's entitlements are;
- statistics and research about the productivity improvements made by employees using flexible work practices;
- how to communicate and negotiate with employees about working more flexibly;

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- the importance of trust and respect for employees to effectively manage employees their work and how best to foster this;
- how to be pro-active with employees and approach them with ideas about how they might work more flexibly (and more productively). Decisions about flexibility need to reflect business needs and managers need to demonstrate empathy with employees' requests for flexibility;
- how to get across to employees that the amount of time the employee is in the office is not important to their promotional prospects - that promotion is purely dependent on performance and delivery;
- how to manage employees working flexible arrangements;
- information and ideas about policies that may work for the employees and how to access them in an induction process when an employee starts work in their team; and
- how to overcome logistical problems associated with working from home and other flexible work practices.

To increase their personal experience, managers might be encouraged to use some type of flexible work option themselves on a temporary or permanent basis or suggest and encourage one of their employees to make use of some type of alternative way of working.

One of the main aims of the training program would be to challenge existing mindsets where they are outdated and preventing change and effective utilisation of flexible work practices from occurring.

#### **4. Increase employee awareness and skills on how to work more flexibly**

Some organisations are currently implementing this strategy. This training is important to assist the employee to do their job in a flexible way but also to ensure they establish a flexible mindset to co-workers' need for flexibility. Employees need to be reminded that colleagues that use flexible work practices are just as dedicated and committed to their jobs as they are. Training should focus on:

- awareness of flexible work practices being offered in different parts of the organisation, what the employee's responsibilities are, what's working and what's not. Perhaps where flexibility is working well, employees and their managers could be called upon to talk about how it works and answer questions;
- what the individual's options and responsibilities are for their particular job, that is, would they be able to do their job working from home or job sharing etc;
- how to communicate and negotiate with their manager about working more flexibly;
- how to be more assertive explaining their needs to managers;

- understanding of the business context of decisions; and
- how to work from home effectively, in particular, how to blend work and personal life successfully, ensuring that work does not intrude on personal space and time with families.

## **5. Work towards a reasonable number of working hours**

One of the concerns we heard a great deal about was the difficulty many employees felt about working flexibly when they were required to work long hours. Working hours are increasing in all of the organisations. They told us that there were expectations for them to work for as long as it takes to get the job done. This was particularly evident when they had deadlines to meet. They said the unspoken rule is 'if you want to get ahead you need to be visible'.

Employees need to be encouraged to manage their time so they can maximise their productivity and minimise the number of hours they spend at work. This needs to be coupled with a culture change in the organisation that does not make stars out of the people who spend the most time at the workplace.

Managers who refuse to work long hours should be used as case studies in management training and they should be written about in the internal newsletter. Managers need to ensure that allocated work can be achieved within a reasonable span of hours.

If an organisation is serious about reducing the number of hours employees work to a reasonable level, it could establish a high level taskforce to examine whether it wants to preserve its culture of long hours into the next millennium. This taskforce should include senior staff members from each section of the organisation.

## **6. Organise a campaign with the message - employees who have flexible arrangements are hard working dedicated staff**

The main aim of such a campaign would be to encourage managers to provide challenging jobs, bonuses, training and travel opportunities, and in particular promote employees who are using flexible work practices including part time work, job sharing, getting pregnant and taking leave and working from home.

## **7. Overhauling workplace systems**

Systems that have been in place for many years prior to the introduction of flexibility have not been revamped. In some cases these systems are working to prevent employees having access to the flexibility they need and reducing employees' ability to proactively identify new ways of working that will benefit the business. For flexibility to work it is important to rely on employees and their integrity. Employee's performance should be based on what they produce, not the number of hours they are in the office.

Systems that meet the business needs should also support employees' ability to be proactive about their own flexibility.

## **8. Create a safe place and foster an environment of trust**

The history, culture and inflexible mindset of most Australian workplaces make it very risky for employees to ask for something different. For organisations to succeed in having employees use the flexible work practices they need, it must become a place employees feel comfortable and secure in. There is a certain resistance amongst employees to say they use flexible work practices, this may in part be related to the fear that they will be discriminated in some way because of it. Employees need to know that working in a flexible way will not jeopardise their career opportunities, their chances of promotion or worse, will not lead to their dismissal.

## **9. Provide options for employees going on contract or a package**

Ensure that employees who are requested to go on contract or a package are aware of their options and ability to negotiate flexibility as part of the contract. Don't assume that employees on contract won't want to work flexibly such as have a day off per week or fortnight, whether it is called RDO's or compressed work or part time work. The organisation needs to be flexible when it comes to negotiating contracts and packages with employees and employees need to know what, if any are the parameters, that is, what have other people been able to negotiate?

## **10. Start a register of potential job share partners from within the organisation. Have a list of people from within the organisation, who are on leave or recently left the organisation who could fill in at short notice**

There was some discussion about how difficult it was to find a casual employee that had experience in a particular area at short notice, and therefore permanent employees were asked to work longer hours to complete a project. A register of potential job share partners would be a good place to start looking for the appropriate person. A form could be put on the intranet or circulated to employees asking them to express interest in going on either of these lists and detailing times available, skills and experience.

The register should be integrated with an organisations main stream recruitment and job selection process.

## **11. Advertise positions and promotions within the organisation without categorising into a standard mode**

All jobs should be advertised giving those people who want to work less than full time the option of applying for them unless there is a specific reason why a particular job could not be done part time or job share.

## **12. Run an education campaign to ensure employees without family responsibilities do not feel disadvantaged and make sure they have equal access to flexibility**

Articles could be put in the internal newsletter or on the intranet about employees using flexible work practices that do not have family commitments. Examples could be given at management and employee training courses.



There's a lot to do from a union, employee and employer perspective.

A lot has been achieved - but there is still a long way to go before all flexible work practices are deeply ingrained in a workplace culture that they are just part of how things get done.

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