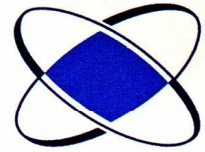


## The Psychological Benefits of Flexible Working

Interview with Wendy Lyons, Director & Managing Consultant, Human Assets



In many businesses, flexible working is almost seen as a highly-prized perk, but business psychologist Wendy Lyons argues it's an essential part of the modern workplace...



## Human Assets

### What part can flexible working play in an organisation's competitive strategy?

In order for organisations to have a competitive edge they need to make sure they are meeting their employees' needs. Nowadays people are looking for job satisfaction and a very critical part of that is flexible working.

### Why does flexible working lead to job satisfaction?

Flexible contracts enable people to be much more engaged, and more satisfied with their work. The primary reason for that is that they have more control over what they are doing. Research shows that by having more control, even if you've got a more demanding job, the stress will be reduced because of that ability to take control of the situation. A highly demanding job can inhibit learning too. But if you can give people that control back, even if the job is completely demanding, stress can be reduced and learning can be increased.

### To what extent does flexible working help to retain staff?

People have much more mobility in their careers now, so it's become a real challenge for organisations to really engage and retain their first class talent. The way that they can do that is by meeting people's needs. People have become much more choosy, and there is now an inflation of needs. For example, the stereotype is that Generation Y – people born between 1980 and 1985 – are particularly choosy and demanding. They want autonomy, so if organisations are really going to attract them and keep them, they have to be meeting those needs. One of the needs that comes through quite strongly is the ability to have a work-life balance, and I think flexible working contributes to that. I don't think it is really an option now for organisations to say they're not going to do it. There is such a demand for flexible working now, that people will just leave and go elsewhere. All organisations need to have this if they are going to compete in the marketplace.

### How can you ensure a flexible working policy is accepted by everyone within an organisation?

Make sure the HR and the business work closely together to come up with the policies and the procedures, because what you don't want is an HR initiative that is divorced from the commercial realities of the business. It's also about ensuring that the way you communicate it is fair, and trialling it before it's implemented broadly across the organisation.

### How can you address managers' concerns about flexible working?

It's about communication and about explaining the reasons why it is so important for the organisation. It isn't just about giving in to

individual employee needs it's about creating a flexible and compatible workforce. That's what needs to be communicated to the managers. It's also about setting the right examples; create a culture that embraces rather than begrudges flexible working. Studies have shown that individuals will basically imitate behaviour demonstrated by their colleagues, and hopefully, people more senior to them in the organisation. Therefore it's important for senior managers to be role models for how effective flexible working can be, in order that other managers and employees can identify the benefits of it.

### How can you monitor and evaluate flexible working?

It's just about looking at the productivity and seeing what impact flexible working has had. You need to look at the quantity of work produced, as well as the quality, and compare that to the situation prior to introducing flexible working. You also need to assess the impact it's having on you retaining staff. It's really important, but it quite often gets forgotten. Many organisations think they're adopting flexible working practices for the employee, but what they are actually doing is attracting and maintaining talented staff in a marketplace where talented staff are difficult to come by and keep. Flexible working is really enabling organisations to compete, survive and be successful.

### Are there any good examples of flexible working being put into practice?

The bank UBS are very well known for introducing a 'back to work' initiative for mothers, which has enabled them to tap into a source of talent that has previously been quite difficult to tap into, because a lot of mothers have felt that a lack of flexible working has been a particular barrier to going back to work.

### If you're a small business that doesn't feel they can afford to go all out on flexible working, will smaller steps still have an impact?

Absolutely; it can be the simplest things. For example, you could look at your core hours. Something we have implemented with a lot of success is instead of the hours being 9am-5.30pm, change the core hours to 10am or 10.30am to 4pm or 4.30pm, and allow people to be flexible around that.

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Wendy Lyons is a Director and Managing Consultant at Human Assets. She has experience across a range of public and private sector organizations, including HSBC, NHS and the Department of Transport.

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