

FlexWork Blueprint No. 005

(Issue v.01 – 23/08/01)

Supporting women's access to work from home

Assisting SME's acquiring flexible workers.

This is one of a series of 'blueprints' designed to illustrate models of flexible working. It is designed for use by business advisors as a resource when providing assistance to SMEs who are investigating flexible working for their business, or whose business development might benefit from consideration of flexible working.

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1. Overview

This blueprint provides advice relevant to small businesses that seek to exploit opportunities for flexible working either to retain women employees who cannot work full-time or on-site, or to enable occasional employment of women to meet periodic peaks in work demand.

2. Rationale and Target Audience

Many companies lose women employees either because family commitments mean they cannot continue full time employment, or because family or personal choices mean they cannot maintain a fixed work schedule either in terms of timing of work or place of work. They may, for example, wish to be free at the start and end of the working day to drop-off and pick-up children from school, or they may find that family demands mean they cannot devote a full working day within the traditional employment period.

In a similar vein, many small firms may find it hard to recruit employees. Yet they may be situated in a region where the potential labour pool includes many skilled women who will not take up a standard full-time post. Many women may consider flexible working either in terms of timing or location. They may work flexible hours to allow a balance between work and home life (work-life balance) and may also consider working from home as part of such a pattern of work.

Furthermore, small firms may seek to attract employees to cover temporary increases in work demand, either because of periodic increase over normal customer demand (e.g. occasional increased contracts), or because of periodic reduction in employee capacity (e.g. holiday periods). The use of flexible workers can benefit both situations.

The target audience for this type of flexible working therefore includes SMEs who:

- find it hard to retain women employees
- have difficulty in recruiting full-time employees in their region
- need to deal with occasional high-demand peaks
- seek to maintain capacity if employees absent because of holiday or illness, etc.

Many of the benefits of flexible working can apply in this case, and especially:

- Reducing office space and costs.
- Increasing workforce on a temporary basis without commitment.
- Increased productivity and reduced costs.
- Better use of available personnel and skills.
- Access to remote skills.
- Use of out-sourced labour.
- Improve response to demand (use of freelancers).

Small business operators cannot easily afford to lose staff whose skills have been developed or adapted over time to meet the needs of the company. A high rate of staff loss can be a significant threat to such a business, and likewise, any difficulty in attracting suitable workers on time.

Advisors who are informed of flexibility issues in this kind of flexible working can greatly assist SMEs to develop a plan and implementation of flexible working to exploit the potential benefits and also reduce business risks.

The FlexWork handbook includes further detailed coverage on benefits, and more extensive advice on topics raised in this blueprint.

Example: Job sharing overcomes skill shortage

A small design company had trouble attracting experienced staff to work as project leaders. Many of their staff who had trained on the job had been women and they had taken career breaks to have children. Experienced female designers were reluctant to take up full-time posts while their children were small, so the company decided to offer jobs on a job-share basis. Two (or more) applicants had to apply for a post together and share the hours between them. They had to be prepared to work co-operatively (at a distance) to fulfil the requirements of the full-time post. This scheme was successful experienced female designers were brought back to work in a flexible way. The company ensured that all work-related benefits were available to the job share staff - but on a pro-rata basis.

Source: FlexWork Handbook. Available at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com>

3. FlexWork Usage Description

The 'usage scenario' for this blueprint is offered as a generic case incorporating features commonly seen in actual cases. The key drivers and proposed solutions apply to a wide range of companies who can be in any region, and in any business area.

3.1 Definitions and Scope

Within this usage scenario certain terms and ideas are used to describe flexible working opportunities offering access to work by women from home. These are associated with practices and arrangements with different scope or options, and the provision of guidance to SMEs must consider how to relate opportunities to the critical features of a particular business operation. Not all of this can be simply expressed as standard guidelines, and so a business advisor must develop a personal understanding of flexible working and take account of this in conjunction with the development of business advice including the broader business perspectives.

What is flexible working from home?

Flexible working from home, as the term suggests, means conducting work tasks from a home base, and so implies the need for flexibility in a number of areas. Work activities must be integrated and balanced with home activities. Work space must be arranged within the home in an acceptable way. The interaction between the employee-at-home and the other workers must be arranged to meet the needs of the company, yet still respond to the needs of the flexible worker. Security of equipment and information must meet company requirements, yet not pose an onerous task for the worker. The legal and contractual relations between the worker-at-home must meet requirements on both sides for flexibility, security, and legal status.

Type of Work

The type of work that can be conducted from home includes anything that is compatible with working in a home environment, and typically includes work which is computer-based. This suggests it is often restricted to work that can be conducted using a PC set-up which conforms to typical domestic usage (e.g. standard screen size) and so does not intrude at a higher level. However, usage of large or multiple screens can be included if space and integration are possible.

Timing and Organising Work

The overall arrangements of work time can be extremely flexible, and should be a balance of an employee's objectives and those of the company. Workers can produce significant contributions of time if allowed to fit this into 'available' time in the day or evening periods. However, some tasks may require specific timing, especially if interaction with the company and its other workers provide dependencies.

This suggests that working from home can range from full-time employment to part-time employment at a low level, and will be a critical decision both for the SME and for the worker. Filling work requirements may need coverage of work demand by multiple workers whose activities will have to be co-ordinated by the company, and who may have to collaborate with each other during work periods. It is therefore necessary to plan remote worker activities to meet needs for co-ordination, and in many cases it is simpler to ensure workers have discreet work tasks which they can do on their own and at their own pace. Whichever approach is adopted, it is the case that work management and co-ordination will have to shift emphasis from monitoring 'time at work' towards assessment of goals, budgets, processes, and measurable outcomes.

Contractual conditions

Companies exploiting this type of flexible working to retain staff who would otherwise be lost may seek to retain them on a permanent employment contract. However, since the conditions of work have changed they will have to consider how to express the new working relationships. There are example employment contracts available in the members area of FlexWork for registered members (at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com>) and these show how several companies have achieved a satisfactory extension to permanent work contracts.

A company may also make use of 'contract' labour through an agency or issue a 'labour contract' for work in a specified period. The regulations affecting such decisions vary from region to region, and it may be that a worker conducting more than a specified number of hours work per year, or for more than a specified period, may qualify for all rights as a permanent employee. Local employment legislation should therefore be considered carefully.

Another option is to employ someone as a 'freelance' worker who may operate as a 'sole trader' or as a registered company in their own right. This option tends to apply to specialists such as programmers or designers and other professions who typically operate in this way. Whichever model is chosen, the FlexWork handbook provides more detailed coverage of the topic and a business advisor should ensure that the adopted model fits with any general business development advice addressing the broader company perspective.

3.2 Benefits and Risks for Home Workers

Working from home as a flexible worker offers numerous benefits and also some potential risks as listed below.

Benefits

1. *Balancing Family and Work*

Many people find flexible working allows them to get the best from family life and working life. Achieving family priorities requires having flexibility to work to a preferred schedule and is of benefit to people with young children or with older dependents.

2. *Retaining/Accessing Work Opportunity*

The risk of job loss can be caused by company relocation or family commitments. It may also be a matter of lifestyle, and the current work opportunity may no longer fit. In such cases, flexible working can be an answer. For someone not presently in employment, and whose family commitments or lifestyle mitigate against a standard work pattern, flexible working can be an access route.

3. *Reducing commuting hours*

Some employees who can no longer find enough time in the day to engage in fruitful work activity can do so by avoiding the waste of time in travelling to work. Working from home may mean there is enough free time in the day to engage in at least part-time work at a level that has worthwhile financial benefit.

4. *Equal opportunities*

Women face inequality for a number of reasons. Often, their role in the family reduces their perceived availability, and this can be overcome by flexible working.

5. *Professional development*

For a number of women there is a traditional period spent out of employment especially when children are young. This can lead to de-skilling and difficulties in returning to work. Flexible working can allow more continuity (even if it is only conducted periodically) and so allows continuing development of relevant knowledge and skills.

Risks

1. Working in isolation does not suit everyone and can be de-motivating. Workers need to find ways to ensure social contact with others in similar jobs.
2. Home workers can find themselves being regarded as 'cheap labour'. The reduced cost of flexible working sometimes includes savings due to lower rates of pay that can be justified by worker savings (e.g. travel) to an extent. However, care should be taken to ensure that no undue exploitation is suffered.

Advisors should ensure that SMEs are aware of all of these benefits and risks and that they consider them in detail along with their employees to ensure benefits are

maximised and risks minimised. Being open and ensuring everyone is satisfied with the arrangements will avoid resentments and risk of losing flexible workers.

3.3 Work Life Balance

One way to achieve a good balance between work and home life is 'flexible working', but it is not necessarily easy to achieve. Even when working from home, childcare may be required and may require company support. A number of key issues have to be considered to achieve a good balance when flexible working.

Family and Childcare

Families sometimes do not take the work commitments of flexible workers as seriously as they should. This can result in pressure to attend to family matters and encroach on work time. Flexible workers should be encouraged to have open discussions about flexible working in the family to ensure they understand the importance of honouring work time. This should be made an explicit part of preparation for flexible working.

People working from home may have as much need of childcare facilities as people working in the company. This should be assessed as part of preparation and companies should investigate tax breaks for this provision. In some countries (e.g. UK) childcare vouchers are available from official sources and are a good way to provide support of this kind (see www.ibh.org.uk/balance for links to UK childcare options). Childcare options include day nurseries for daily care, childminders who accept children into their homes for specified periods, after-school clubs and holiday play-schemes. Companies can help by obtaining lists of registered nurseries, childminders and other sources.

Maximising Flexibility

Companies can maximise the flexibility of workers by considering the different ways it can be achieved. These include part-time working, job-sharing to allow an 'always-on' function to be maintained by more than one worker, term-time working with no duties during school holidays, and freedom to decide when work occurs (suitable only for non time-critical work). A company should include consideration of this as part of its preparation for flexible working.

Reducing Isolation

A key barrier to working from home is isolation. If a person would otherwise stay at home and not work then it may be less of an issue. However, if they are to work effectively then some level of contact with fellow workers is desirable.

Communication technology allows remote workers to maintain contact in new ways, and the remote worker can be made to feel part of the team. As well as being included in all email circulations, and having email contact with work colleagues, remote

workers should be encouraged to visit the site from time to time, especially when social events are occurring (e.g. celebrations, briefings, staff meetings, etc.). Detailed coverage is given in the FlexWork Handbook, and advisors should be prepared to address this topic as part of any support for SMEs deploying flexible working.

3.4 Managing Flexible Workers at Home

Management of flexible working has two sides to it – traditional responsibility for management of employees by the company, and a higher degree of self management by the remote worker.

Managing the remote worker

Traditional management approaches do not transfer well to a flexible scenario. Managers are less able to observe workers and so have to develop trust based on agreed goals and outputs as performance indicators. Managers also need to educate themselves about flexible working, and may have to increase their own use of ICTs to really maintain contact with flexible workers.

Flexible working may be resisted by managers who feel they ‘cannot monitor productivity’. Often they really mean they cannot monitor activity, and so they have to adjust to monitoring outputs. Managers may also feel it is harder to motivate remote workers or to ensure information control. They must deal with increased independence (of workers organising their own time) yet increased dependence (or workers on remote colleagues for support). Flexible working works best where hierarchies are flat, bureaucratic rules are minimised, job descriptions are flexible and workers are encouraged to work to targets which they have negotiated with their managers or team members. All of these issues have to be addressed as part of the planning process to ensure a new and more flexible management style.

Self management

In contrast to the ideas of freedom and flexibility, flexible working also brings increased responsibility for self-management. Workers must be more autonomous and take greater responsibility for their own work. This means companies must select people who are suitable for this style of work, and may have to provide training.

Flexible workers must recognise the new management style and be prepared to plan and manage their own work processes. This requires address to timing and ordering of tasks, tools (e.g. ICT) and how to use them, ensuring inputs from others, and testing whether their outputs meet the requirements of recipients.

Advisors must ensure consideration of these issues is included in any planning activity, and that preparation of both managers and workers is included before

implementation, then tested after implementation. Ongoing support for adjustment to the new flexible work style may also be required.

3.5 Finance and Taxation and Legal Issues

The issue of contracts was covered earlier and is addressed in detail on the web site and example contracts are provided to registered members. A further set of considerations under this topic include taxation and benefits.

In most countries the authorities support flexible working by ensuring tax allowances for people working from home (allowances against new expenses, allowances for childcare, etc.). A good source for specific detail on allowances is the local tax office, or regional telework organisation.

Additional allowances can be paid by employers for 'use of home as office' and this may make flexible working more attractive.

Additional resource consumption is normally covered by an allowance (power consumption, heating) and telecommunications costs are best covered by installing an extra line paid for by the company.

Concerning legal aspects, flexible workers should be covered by insurance to protect against heavy losses due to flexible working, and against occupational injury. Workers should not be monitored in ways that are outside the normal regulatory position on privacy of workers, and should not work hours which contravene local legislation on working hours.

3.6 Ensuring Health and Safety

Companies are still responsible for the health and safety of workers at home if they are engaged on tasks for the company. That means they are responsible for carrying out workplace risk assessment on home offices, and must advise on 'best practice' relative to the 'regulations on working with display screen equipment'. This should also take into account risks to the family from having work equipment and consumables at home, placement of furniture, cables etc., provision of adequate fire extinguishing appliances and security measures. Details of health and safety assessments (e.g. frequency, notice given, who should conduct them etc.) should be included in a flexible work contract.

Normally, the company is responsible for workers while using the home office, so it is necessary to ensure the home office conforms to guidelines, and to arrange appropriate insurance cover. Employers should spell out the extent of their liability, and may decide they are not liable for accidents involving third parties or family members. In this case a home worker should ensure adequate insurance cover.

Insurers offer policies for companies which cover employees working from home but some have conditions such as clearly specifying the 'working area' within which the employer is liable (the home office).

3.7 Ensuring Security

Flexible working by employees from home involves consideration of security both for the company and for the employee. Company security is a major barrier to flexible working and so the arrangements for securing equipment and data must have high priority. To this must be added consideration of 'confidentiality'. Companies may not choose to let certain information outside of the office, and so this may have implications for what kind of work can be done at home.

The most problematic incidents for the home worker are fire and theft. While the former is addressed in planning the home office area, the latter may require increase of home security measures and the costs for this are normally carried by the employer. The advisor must ensure careful address to security issues in flexible work planning.

3.8 Training and Personal Development

Employees located away from the office may miss out on training and promotion. Ensuring visits to the company by flexible workers, plus good communications between employees via email and telephone, can go some way to reducing fears and minimising risks. Training and career development can be made part of the employment contract, and require that the company develops a plan for inclusion of remote workers in training activities.

3.9 Technology for Home Working

Flexible workers operating from home can be supported by technologies readily available to small companies with minimal investment. Existing equipment can be transferred to allow an existing worker to switch to home working, and the added requirements are minimal. Much can be achieved using a PC, modem and phone line, but there may be specific technology or application requirements defined by the work tasks or work co-ordination, and these are addressed below. Advisors must ensure that careful consideration of work tasks exposes all equipment and application requirements as part of flexible work preparation.

PC – a standard PC consistent with the in-company standard should be used. The applications provided should be consistent with normal office usage. A modem should be added for email and Internet access.

Email – is a critical addition for remote workers and they should be trained in its use and prove competence before working from home.

File transfer – is a necessary facility for home workers and may be enabled via email attachments or via a shared file space.

Shared file space – if workers are part of a team who normally share information then a shared work space may be required. This can be achieved by using an application to link the remote worker to the local network (remote access application), or by arranging a shared file space accessible via internet (web site, password protected).

Audio conferences – workers who are part of a distributed team can use audio conferences for team meetings. These can be enabled from the company (with suitable equipment) or via a specialist agency at additional costs.

The range of technologies for flexible working are addressed in further detail in the FlexWork handbook and in the FlexWork technology briefings available on the web site (<http://www.flexwork.eu.com>).

In addition to selecting suitable technologies, a number of related issues must be addressed:

1. Provision of Maintenance and Technical Support

Companies must ensure their technical support arrangements cover workers at home, either by extending current arrangements or by introducing some solution for the remote workers (e.g. purchasing from a source who offer maintenance and support).

2. Liability

Equipment must be covered by the employers insurance or by a new insurance arrangement. A home policy for equipment 'on loan' to a home worker can be arranged as a low cost option.

4. Business Structural and Process Issues

The main impact on organisational structure is likely to be a demand for a 'flatter' approach to management structure that can be quite challenging for many managers more used to traditional hierarchies. The 'self managing' aspects of flexible working require a more team-oriented and results-oriented approach to management. Regarding business processes, the key issue is that of 'time critical' elements of work. For maximum flexibility the work tasks selected for remote working should not be time critical, but can be if workers can agree to fixed delivery schedules. As well as impacts on management processes, there will be impacts on training and support processes that must be adapted to meet the needs of flexible workers.

5. Deployment Advice

Provision of business advice to SMEs considering exploitation of flexible working opportunities must begin by presenting some general information on relevant aspects of flexible working. The handbook, cases and briefings provide a broad basis for selection of relevant material. The company must be assisted in defining its objectives (what they think they can achieve) and the likely deployment path. This should be developed as a 'rough draft' model of how it could work for them, and should include consideration of the kind of work, the employees to be involved or acquired, how they will be equipped and supported, and where they fit into the management coverage.

This draft plan should be a first 'reality check', and if the company remains confident, the advisor should assist them in working through the details of the key issues identified here, and any special issues which present themselves in the planning process.

A stepwise consideration of issues should be conducted to ensure clear address to each, and then the detailed plan should be reconsidered in its entirety to test for dependencies between elements. If existing workers are to be involved, the plan review stage is a good time to get them involved to ensure worker concerns have been fully met.

Some companies may benefit from a 'pilot' trial where one or more workers tries out flexible working from home. The experiences should be documented and shared to allow a considered evolution of flexible working that must be tailored to suit the company's needs.

Larger companies may benefit from the 'Phased Introduction' approach available at the FlexWork web site, along with checklists to aid in specific aspects of planning. For both smaller and larger companies, the 'Flexible Work Implementation Plan' (FWIP) approach can be adopted (see Handbook section 4) to ensure coverage of all relevant aspects at the planning stage (produces a structured document as a basis for planning). A cost benefit analysis approach is also included in the handbook and is supported by tools on the web site.

6. Related Cases

The web site at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com> includes a wide set of cases, technical briefings, and advisory documents. A large number of these are relevant to the themes in this blueprint. Items of specific interest include:

Regional cases:

Nor.pdf - Creating work and enterprise - teleworkers, telecentres, and SMEs.

DTI.pdf - Save Transport, Time and Energy: Work at Home some Days a Week.

Scot.pdf - Opportunities for work and enterprise; knowledge work and call centres.

Longford.pdf - Getting into ICT; training and promoting regional telework.

Fincoop.pdf - Sustainable Suburban Economy - Cooperative using teleworking.

Technology Cases:

c16 - Multimedia working for small companies (groupware)

c24 - Tools for distributed publishing (groupware)

c26 - Distributed software production

7. Related Information Resources

The web site at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com> includes links to a large number of online resources, many of which are relevant to this blueprint. Resources of particular interest include:

<http://www.flexwork.eu.com/> – general flexible working resources

<http://www.gilgordon.com> – general flexible working resources

<http://www.eto.org.uk> – general flexible working resources

<http://www.flexibility.co.uk> – general flexible working resources

<http://www.telecommute.org> – general flexible working resources

<http://www.tca.org.uk> – telecottage and telecentre association

<http://www.regen.net> – regional regeneration partnerships