

FlexWork Blueprint No. 06

(Issue v.01 – 05/09/01)

Starting women's enterprise through Flexwork

Balancing business start-up with family commitments

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.

Prepared for FlexWork by: Interaction Design Ltd, UK. <http://www.i-d.co.uk>

More FlexWork materials are available at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com>

FlexWork Blueprint No. 006 (Issue v.01 – 05/09/01)

Starting women's enterprise through Flexwork

Balancing business start-up with family commitments

1. Overview

This blueprint describes the case of a female entrepreneur setting up her own business using flexible working practices to ensure that she can combine her working life with family commitments. The features of a number of similar individual cases have been combined to form a generic blueprint, which covers a wide range of issues for illustrative purposes. All names and locations have been changed.

2. Rationale and Target Audience

This blueprint illustrates how flexible working can facilitate gradual growth for a start-up business with minimum risk/investment. The blueprint is relevant for both women returning to work who wish to combine a career with motherhood (whether working for an employer or alone) and individuals wishing to start up a small business.

Flexible working practices have a number of benefits for working mothers (or others with care responsibilities):

- Flexible hours can reduce need for childcare if children are at school
- Time can be taken off work for appointments, school performances etc. and made up later
- Success is judged through performance rather than time spent at the office – provided deadlines are kept and projects are executed successfully, the number of hours worked are not monitored.

Using flexible working for business start up has a number of benefits:

- Minimal investment is required for business start-up in terms of equipment, staffing and premises
- Using technology can reduce face-to-face meetings and so improve efficiency by cutting travel time and costs
- The size of the enterprise can be adjusted to meet market demand – overheads can easily be reduced during lean periods.

3. FlexWork Usage Description

3.1 History

Helen Prentice had worked for a number of years as a graphic artist for a company which produced brochures, leaflets and corporate art work for a number of large companies. A year after she had her first child, she returned to work full-time. She got

a full-time place in a local day nursery for her daughter. When she became pregnant with her second child a year later, she felt the demands of a fulltime job and trying to spend quality time with her daughter were too great and she decided to take a career break while both her children were small. When her second child, a son, was nearing school age, Helen began to think about returning to work. She made enquiries with her previous employer and a couple of similar companies. However it looked like the only opportunities available were for full-time posts – 9:00am to 5:30pm every weekday. Helen thought that this type of commitment would be too stressful and would limit the time she could spend with her children. She would have to employ a childminder every day – both to drop the children at school and pick them up afterwards. Helen believed that her children were too young to cope well with such an arrangement.

Instead she began to think about setting up from home as a freelancer. At home she and her husband had invested in a multi-media PC with Internet connections and she had kept up with major technological developments and upgrades to the software she used. Although she had not done any commercial work for some time, she had kept her skills ticking over by designing posters, invitations and tickets for playgroup events. However, it would be almost six years since she had worked and she lacked confidence in her ability to make the venture a success. After talking things through with her husband she decided to attend some courses at her local college and business advice centre while her son was at nursery school.

Over the course of the next year she embarked on a range of training courses. The first was an introductory Internet course at her local college to help her to familiarise herself with more recent technology. She also took a course in Desktop Publishing as she thought it might extend the range of services she could offer to clients. In addition she attended seminar days run by her local business advice centre on setting up in business, preparing a business plan, finance for small businesses and marketing. After this period of education and training she felt much more confident at setting up on her own.

She developed a business plan and went to see her bank manager about a business finance package. She found that she did not need to invest much at the outset. She already had most of the necessary equipment and a space in which to work. She needed to spend some money on consumable items and on advertising and promoting her business.

Once her youngest child was settled into the school routine, Helen started trading as Prentice Graphics. She designed her own logo and made up a set of leaflets and cards about her services.

3.2 Promotion and Services Offered

Helen had decided to offer quite a wide range of services so that she could capture large and small commissions. Services ranged from design of CVs, business cards, letterheads, leaflets, and menus to full brochures and promotional literature. She started promoting her business by putting cards up on notice boards, telling friends and acquaintances and distributing leaflets around small local businesses. She placed adverts in locally produced magazines and planned to advertise in the local paper once she had a few commissions.

3.3 Getting set up at home

Helen was equipped with a multimedia PC with Internet connection. She had a range of software packages which were suitable for the outputs she wanted to produce (Adobe Photoshop, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Adobe Illustrator, Quark Express) and to facilitate communications (Internet Explorer, Outlook Express). She also had a reasonable quality laser printer and a scanner. For communication with clients she had a telephone with answer phone and a mobile (for when she was on the move). A few months into her venture she decided to invest in a second telephone line to use as a business line for both calls and internet/e-mail access.

The computer equipment was already set up in the dining room – a room that was used mainly at weekends – the family ate in the kitchen during the week. Helen decided to use the equipment where it was. She invested in a small filing cabinet and a shelf unit for storage of materials and on-going work. She felt that it was important that she could tidy away at the end of the day so that the room was usable and that the children did not have access to her work materials.

Helen researched local print companies and found one that she would be happy to work with. As a small independent firm they were willing to take on quite small jobs and could turn round work within 24 hours. Helen decided that it would be both cost effective and effective to build up a relationship with a printer than to use a range of different companies.

3.4 Working from home

Each morning Helen began work at 09:15 once she had taken the children to school. Her working day began with taking messages (telephone and e-mail) which had come in since the previous day. She then made any necessary telephone calls and scheduled in any meetings, purchasing trips or research activities when she would be away from home. The rest of her time was spent working on commissions and trying to win more work. She set aside a couple of hours a week for administrative tasks – such as

finance, issuing invoices, paying bills, sending out quotes etc. Each day Helen finished work at 15:00 in time to pick up the children. During the day she ensured that she took a lunch break of 45-60 minutes and a couple of 10 minute breaks.

Early on Helen found that although breaks were essential, if she started on a household task it was easy to spend far too long 'out of the office'. She decided that all chores should be attended to outside of her working day.

After a couple of months Helen realised that the most difficult part of working solo was to keep an even work stream going. She found that sometimes she was swamped with urgent commissions while at other times she had no on-going projects. She decided to try to spend some time each week on promoting her business and trying to win new commissions and to schedule work realistically - not making rash promises to clients about when work could be completed. She hoped that these steps would make her work more evenly distributed.

After the first six months, Helen reviewed her progress. She had completed a range of projects of different sizes and her clients were all satisfied with her outputs. Her commissions included some work from her old company, design of business stationery for two small companies and design of a range of posters for a local charity. Occasionally she had trouble extracting the money for her work within her own time limit of 14 days. Usually she found a repeat invoice and a telephone call were sufficient to rectify the situation.

Two other problems also surfaced. First, she found working alone quite isolating and sometimes craved the company and office banter she had experienced when employed. Second, she began to find working within the confines of her dining room restrictive – as she took on larger commissions she found it difficult to tidy away at the end of each day and was beginning to run out of space. She also began to feel quite 'house bound'. She decided to see whether there were any contact groups locally where she could meet other people working from home. Luckily her business advice centre ran monthly sessions for women running their own businesses. Helen decided to go along to meet others in a similar situation and as a possible source of contacts.

Her other problem required a more drastic solution, after talking it through with her family she decided to convert their garage into an office. They decided that with minimal investment the garage would make a sizeable office that could easily be converted back if they decided to move. Helen took on a self-employed builder to help with the conversion. He made all the necessary structural changes and put up shelving and a built in work surface to house all the equipment. Helen helped with flooring and decorating. In under a month the job was complete and Helen had a new

office. She was pleased that it was separate from the house – she entered via a side door so she felt she was ‘going to work’.

3.5 Developing the business

After trading for a year, Helen decided that it was time to develop her business further. She was interested about the possibilities of using on-line interaction for more aspects of her business. She decided to try it out in a number of ways:

- developing her own web-site to promote her business and give potential clients a chance to contact her via e-mail
- to download files either directly to clients (e.g. for artwork for business stationery etc.) or to download to the printers.
- to explore offering a graphic art service for web design – a number of her clients had asked her to produce graphics for their web sites and so Helen realised another potential market for her work.

Helen had been using e-mail and the Internet for several years and so was confident of interacting with clients electronically. She realised that working this way would reduce the need for face-to-face meetings that should save her time travelling to clients' offices. She welcomed this change – travelling was one of the most stressful aspects of her working life as she was concerned about getting back in time to pick up her children. However, she was also aware that it would further reduce her 'human contact' and might make her feel even more isolated. She decided that she would have to attend to her e-mail more frequently – perhaps 2-3 times a day. In due course she found that increased e-mail usage supporting running dialogues between her and clients helped her to feel more involved with them and reduced her sense of loneliness.

She signed up for another training course at her local college – this time in web design. She hoped that this course would enable her to design her own web site; would familiarise her with the latest software and would help her to determine which formats would be most suitable for web graphics. The course was run for one morning a week over twelve weeks. Although quite a substantial investment in time, Helen found the course worthwhile. It fulfilled her expectations and gave her more confidence in dealing with newer technologies. While she was on the course she found that she needed to access the Internet more frequently and felt that her current agreement with her Internet Service Provider (ISP) was no longer the most appropriate. Like many home users she had signed up for a deal where for a fixed monthly premium she could use the Internet freely at off-peak times. She now found that she needed access more frequently during the peak working hours. After some research she found an alternative package which for a slightly higher monthly premium, offered Internet access at anytime.

During her course Helen investigated the options of sending work electronically to clients and to her printers. She found that her printers were happy for her to download files as attachments to electronic mail messages. They used the same packages for graphics and so had no problem interpreting her instructions. Some clients were happy to receive electronic versions of her work – especially as proofs prior to commissioning printing. Again sending file attachments was satisfactory. Helen found that sending material electronically made a real improvement in her efficiency as much time-consuming travelling was avoided..

A further benefit of her course was that she met a range of people – some of whom had their own small business and some who were keen to set up on their own. Helen was particularly keen to maintain contact with a couple of women in a similar situation to herself who were currently working freelance.

After eighteen months, Helen hit a crisis point where she had far too much work on the go than she could cope with. She had hoped that the situation would resolve itself with slippages coming from client schedules – however this did not occur. She decided that she had two courses of action: to turn down some of the work and risk not getting return business from those clients or to take on some additional help to get the work done. She decided that the second course of action was preferable as she did not want to risk her work stream drying up. She was nervous about taking someone else on and decided to offer the work as fixed term contract to another freelancer rather than employ some one else on the pay roll. She decided which contract would be the most straightforward to offer to someone else and made some costings. She decided that she would retain 10% of the fee to cover her time administering the contract, liaising with the customer and checking the output before it was delivered. As she had made a number of contacts through her college course, she decided to approach them first. She was lucky that one of the women, Jan, who lived quite close by was keen to take on the work. She generally worked as a freelancer and worked intermittently – whenever work was available. She was used to working on a fixed term contract basis and was already used to paying her own tax and National Insurance contributions as a self-employed person. Jan had three children who were all at school and so was in a very similar position to Helen.

Helen prepared a detailed design brief and had an initial meeting with Jan. They talked through ideas and agreed a schedule for the work. The project concerned updating the logos and letterheads for a local business. They also needed graphics for their new web site. It was expected that the project would be completed over a two-month period. Helen was initially concerned about ‘handing over’ to someone else – previously she had total responsibility for all her work. However, she maintained regular contact with Jan through telephone and e-mail. Every fortnight Jan forwarded

files of her progress so that Helen could monitor how the work was going and interact with the clients. The project went well, there was a small hitch when one of Jan's children was ill and so the schedule slipped by a couple of days – but otherwise Helen felt it had been a positive experience. The clients were pleased with results and Helen had felt more relaxed about her workload. Using a freelancer meant that Helen was not responsible for finding further work for Jan and had no further ties. Helen decided that she would be keen to repeat the experience if she had enough work to justify it.

During the following year, she found that she was increasingly using freelancers. She developed an 'associate agreement' outlining general terms and conditions and used it whenever taking on a new freelancer. She found that she almost exclusively took on female freelancers with children who were in a similar situation to her. She found that she worked well with other women and that they could cope with flexibility in working. Also they developed a work culture where no-one was afraid to mention when family difficulties arose – such as children's illness, contending with builders, school holidays etc.

Helen was happy with the way that her business had established. Through her networking approach she was able to take on a more varied and extensive range of projects than she would have been able to cope with alone. As she became more confident of her 'associates' she could identify other skills which they could bring to bear and so broadened the range of projects which she could take on. For the time being Helen was happy to stay based in her garage office – she did not want to expand so much that she would have to work full-time hours. However, she did not rule out the possibility of using a 'telecentre' style office to enable her to work more closely with her collaborators.

3.6 Work-life balance

After working for a year, Helen decided to assess how well her working life fitted with her family life and whether she had achieved a good work-life balance. In general she felt that her work fitted very well around the children. She was in control and was able to juggle the amount of work to fit in with her time. She found that during school holiday periods she had to be very organised to arrange that her children attended playschemes or that she shared childcare with friends in similar situations. She had a good arrangement with one friend where she would work the morning while her friend looked after all their children and then they would swap for the afternoon. The only problem with this arrangement was that the children sometimes were fed up with always being with the same group of friends. During the

holidays Helen tried to arrange her work so that it could be done in the mornings leaving her the afternoons to interact with the children. She was also careful to mark in definite holiday periods – where she was ‘on holiday’. She decided to take six weeks holiday a year and tried to stick to these weeks. Sometimes she would take messages during these periods – just to keep up with any crises.

The only problem she encountered was when there was an unforeseen need for her to be with the children - e.g. illness or events at school arranged at short notice. Here she found it difficult to arrange cover - particularly if a meeting was planned and sometimes had to ask her husband to take some time off work.

In general Helen did find it difficult to shut down from work and to stop work from taking over every waking moment. However, she found that if she was rigid about her working hours and practised good time management she could fit everything into her working day without feeling too stressed. She found that switching off was easier when her office was in the garage as there was less temptation to go and work during the evenings or when the children were around.

Helen found that her family were quite supportive about her work. They took her seriously and did not expect her to clean or shop during her working day. Helen found that she and her husband had to share more of the chores and she made use of Internet shopping wherever possible. When work was very busy, Helen employed a cleaner to keep housework to a minimum.

Helen was glad that she was not the main breadwinner for the family. She felt that her business was not big enough to enable her to take that position. She was happy earning some money but not being completely dependent on her earnings which would be much more stressful and would require working longer hours. She was very aware that her husband's income provided stability so that she could work and take care of the needs of their children. She had not wanted to work full-time until the children were more independent.

4. Technology Notes

The technology used to support the business start-up was quite minimal and is readily available to most people working from home. In this instance Helen already had a high specification PC with communications capabilities and all the relevant software. To keep abreast of new developments in software packages and services on offer, Helen subscribed to a monthly PC. Helen needs to be able to interact with others electronically and so requires compatible packages.

E-mail – was used to communicate with collaborators and clients. Readily available e-mail software packages were found to have all the necessary features.

File transfer – was used to transfer information to the printers, to show draft ideas to clients and to communicate with collaborators. It was achieved through email attachments. Most email software supports this activity, though users must have compatible software to access shared files.

Telephony – an additional standard telephone line was installed for business usage. It was not cost effective to upgrade the line to an ISDN connection as usage was not high.

Internet – the Internet was used for research, as a medium for design output and as a marketing tool via a website advertising Helen's services. Helen's ISP provided a cheap 'anytime' Internet connection for a reasonable monthly fee.

Mobile communications – limited to a mobile 'phone which was used to contact clients when on the move and to deal with unforeseen circumstances.

5. Business Structural and Process Issues

Using the approach illustrated here allows for business ideas to be tested with minimal risk and investment. It also enables work to be integrated with family life. The approach affords a great deal of personal control to the entrepreneur which has many benefits such as scheduling to fit in with the school day, determining your own work schedules with clients – however it requires discipline and a good understanding of time management, prioritisation etc.

One potential problem area is juggling between the amount of time spent executing projects and the amount of time seeking new work. The two activities must take place in parallel to guarantee a steady work stream.

When expanding the business to include collaborators the use of the 'fixed term contract' strategy reduces risks. The entrepreneur is not responsible for finding further work to sustain the collaborator and neither is she tied to using the same person if their output was not satisfactory or the experience did not work out in another respect. The distributed team work approach where each collaborator works from their own premises and communicates via e-mail, telephone and file sharing, has minimal risk and provides a degree of flexibility in taking on projects of different sizes and which require a range of skills.

6. Deployment Advice

Start small when setting up a business to keep outlay to a minimum and reduce risk. Once the business is underway with a healthy cash flow, more sophisticated equipment, accommodation etc. can be purchased. By working flexibly from home or on the move, savings can be made on accommodation.

Technology - make use of existing technology wherever possible. Nowadays most software packages have a rich set of features so always explore what you have before making a further investment. Try out existing equipment so that you have a clear idea of its shortcomings and thus a good specification of what you need. Do not be tempted to invest in equipment with lots of features you wouldn't use.

Training and networking - make use of any training and networking opportunities - they can help you keep up with new developments, identify markets, collaborators etc. They are also a good way of reducing isolation. Many local colleges offer courses and business enterprise agencies offer many seminars, workshops and networking sessions.

Timescales - always be realistic when scheduling work – take into account school holidays, possible illness etc. If working alone it is worth allowing a bit of slack for unforeseen circumstances.

Home office - if working from home it is vital to have a separate working space. A separate space helps you to distinguish between home and work life and it ensures that other family members cannot tamper with your work.

Bargain hunting - always investigate cheap offers and packages from utility and communications companies to find out whether they would suit you.

Communication - try to achieve a balance between communication with collaborators and clients. Increasingly communication can be achieved electronically – however some face-to-face meetings should be scheduled particularly in the early stages of a project. Face-to-face meetings are more time consuming but they do reduce isolation and can facilitate electronic communication later.

Business development - if you need to expand, do so slowly and compare taking on employees or working with 'associates' or freelancers on fixed-term contracts. Having employees on the payroll means that you are more responsible for ensuring there is work for them to do than with freelancers. Employees can offer greater reliability and loyalty to your company.

7. 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.
Aragon.pdf - Networking, collaboration and communication - telework and centres.
Longford.pdf - Getting into ICT; training and promoting regional telework.

Technology Cases:

c1 - BSCW shared workspace system
c13 - Virtual enterprise product information model
c16 - Multimedia working for small companies (groupware)
c17 - Bringing broadband to SMEs (SME collaboration)
c24 - Tools for distributed publishing (groupware)
c26 - Distributed software production

8. 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