

CARERS Scotland

the voice of carers

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Flexible Working

A triple win for enterprise,
people and the environment



Improving productivity is currently a key concern for Government as we strive as a nation to improve economic growth and prosperity. A key enabler of a more efficient and effective economy is flexible working. As well as the cost savings flexible working can bring to organisations, there is also evidence to show that it can reduce economic inactivity.

Flexible Working – A triple win for enterprise, people and the environment



Flexible working is not just about flexibility in the location of work, it is about flexibility in timing and the balancing of individuals' home and work commitments. Already 5.4 million workers in the UK have some sort of flexible working arrangement.

Corporates, as well as government and public sector bodies, are increasingly coming round to the benefits of flexible working, having acknowledged the effectiveness and efficiency gains it offers – and many RDAs and councils, for example, have already introduced flexible working arrangements for their people. Research shows that the adoption of flexible working would contribute to the 2.5% efficiency gains that Government is currently demanding of public sector bodies.

For smaller businesses, flexible working offers a number of benefits, not least of which are those relating to recruitment and access to skilled employees. By adopting flexible working, businesses can retain skilled employees with other commitments and have wider access to skills outside their catchment area.

For the majority of organisations, some journeys are unavoidable and there will probably always be a need for face-to-face meetings with colleagues. However, with advances in technology, there are increasing opportunities to utilise audio and video conferencing for meetings, webinars instead of seminars, and online training – which all combine to make flexible working increasingly attractive to a significant section of the workforce.

The trend of adopting flexible working is increasing but it needs stimulation and support. By implementing a policy of flexible working, organisations can go some way in helping their people achieve a better balance between work and leisure. Bringing onboard a flexible working policy shows that an employer understands that achieving a good quality of life is about balancing home and work commitments. This strategy would also fit with development agency objectives across Britain of driving change through a combination of enterprise, people and environmental initiatives.



The challenge

While flexible working has been shown to offer many advantages to both employees and businesses – UK organisations, and especially small or medium-sized companies (SMEs) – have been slow to implement it. Reasons for this include a lack of understanding concerning the costs of implementation and an inability to quantify the business benefits. To overcome this, it would be advantageous for organisations – including those from public and voluntary sectors – to share their experiences of flexible working. A way forward could be for public-private partnerships to set up flexible working initiatives via information and communication technology (ICT) grant schemes and they could learn from companies like BT, who was an early adopter of flexible working.

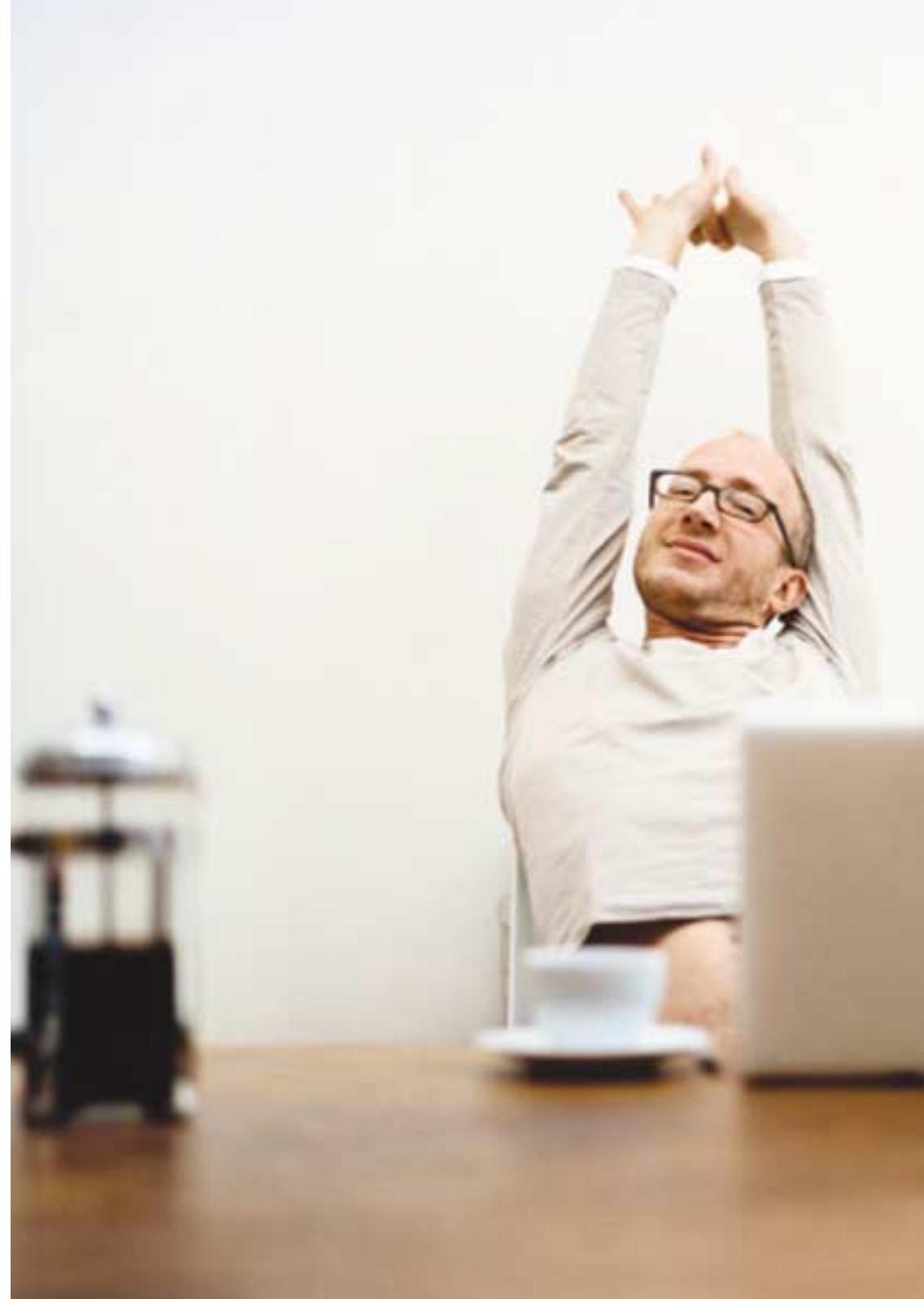
What flexible working means for enterprise

Flexible working offers a myriad of advantages to organisations. There are obvious savings on accommodation costs, while it has also been proven to increase productivity. In addition, embracing flexible working allows a company to be more flexible in its approach to the world – allowing it to react to good and bad market conditions more efficiently.

There are also benefits to human resources, as organisations that embrace flexible working gain recognition as good employers, which makes attracting and retaining people easier. Flexible working also gives organisations access to a wider resource of skilled people. In addition, absence through sickness is reduced and all of these positive factors mean that the overall cost of recruitment should fall.

The affect of having a happy and settled workforce filters out into the marketplace at large – an organisation's reputation is increased, which contributes to customer loyalty, while customers also notice if the people they are dealing with are happy.

Organisations introducing more flexible ways of working need to ensure they address a number of issues and BT has the experience and the practical solutions to help with this. The legislative environment requires clear, consistent and equitable policies and practices. Flexible working environments should be safe and office practices and tools should be provided, supported and used.





Key facts:

- Through utilising flexible working, BT has saved £350 million in accommodation costs to date.
- Enterprises embracing flexible working enjoy a 20% productivity gain on average.
- With its home working policy in place, BT has 20% less absenteeism than the national average.
- BT estimates that every home worker employed saves the Group around £6,000 per annum on overheads, such as property costs, ensuring a more profitable use of facilities.
- According to BT, companies offering flexible working are seeing an increase of between 15% and 31% in productivity.
- Each week 2,000 people start up a new business from home.
- UK's smaller businesses recognise that flexible working policies can positively impact on their organisation, with 65% citing staff motivation and 50% increased productivity as key reasons to adopt them.
- 59% of Directors in small businesses believe they can embrace flexible working just as successfully as large organisations.

What flexible working means for people

There is a real demand in the marketplace from both employees and society for organisations to adopt flexible working. For the increasing number of mothers returning to the workplace – flexible working is not just an ideal but a necessity, meaning that they can more effectively juggle their home and work commitments.

In fact all types of employee can benefit from the adoption of flexible working – including lone parents, people living in remote communities, older people and those constrained by fixed commitments. It also assists both the disabled and carers – helping to improve their work-life balance.

The commute to and from work can take hours out of an employees' day and on top of this, it is often extremely stressful – adding nothing to the work-life balance.

It can also be expensive – with the cost of a rail ticket or car ownership often standing in the way of somebody doing the job they want to do or are qualified for. Flexible working gives people more options and can take away the need for long hours and the constraints of nine to five working.

Employees who are given the option of working flexibility are likely to be more committed to their employer and are less likely to take time off work due to sickness or stress.

Advances in technology are making flexible working a very real option for people all over the UK. In fact, the impact of email, internet access, virtual private networks (VPN) and the availability of broadband to virtually all communities is facilitating a step-change in the adoption of home-working opportunities.





Key facts:

- 99% of BT employees on maternity leave return to work, compared with the national average of 49%.
- Flexible working results in a 7% improvement in job satisfaction – and happy people mean happy customers!
- In 12 months, flexible working has saved BT employees an equivalent of 1,800 years of commuting.
- 7 out of 10 BT people work flexibly and nearly 10% are home-based.

What flexible working means for the environment

Offering workers the ability to work from home has benefits for local communities, families and the environment. With less time spent commuting and a reduction in stress – workers can devote more time to their families. They are also likely to be able to contribute more to their local communities – bringing dormitory towns back to life and reducing environmental damage.

Flexible working also benefits people who live in isolated or rural areas and therefore helps their communities to thrive. It means that workers can continue to live in these

areas and yet still play a key role in the world of work – without having to depend on poor transport links or driving many miles to the office. In fact they don't have to travel to work, the work travels to them.

The environment is also a key beneficiary of flexible working. With fewer commuters on the road each day, congestion is reduced and carbon monoxide emissions are lowered. Over time, this will result in an improvement in air quality, particularly in urban areas.



Overcoming the barriers



Key facts:

- Within ten years, teleworking and technology is predicted to achieve an 18% reduction in heavy goods vehicle journeys.
- By 2010, the benefits to the UK economy in reduced congestion costs could be as much as £1.9 billion.
- BT employees save on average 12 million litres of car fuel a year by working flexibly.
- Increased home working has the potential to cut the worst peak traffic by up to 10% within five years – a reduction that would save 14.5 billion miles a year. This equates to 17 million cars foregoing a trip from Land's End to John O'Groats.



To successfully implement a policy of flexible working, there needs to be a greater understanding of the benefits, particularly amongst SMEs, together with an accelerated shift in the working culture of the UK. For a flexible working policy to work well – there needs to be trust between employers and employees and management styles need to adapt, to take into account those employees working from home.

Of course, working from home isn't for everybody – some people need the companionship of other colleagues and don't like the isolation of being away from the office environment. Others find it hard

to work under their own initiative and need reassurance and encouragement that they are doing their work well.

It also stands to reason that not all roles are suitable for home working and some high level jobs cannot necessarily accommodate flexible working.

However, the increase in demand for flexible working is affecting all organisations – both private and public – and they need to be prepared to work together to drive the flexible working revolution forward and share solutions along the way.

Moving forward with flexible working



Now is the time for employers to ‘step up to the plate’ and embrace flexible working. The technology exists to facilitate successful flexible working and the benefits to enterprise, people and the environment can be easily measured. As society changes and we understand better how people want to work and interrelate, it is organisations that must now look to meet this challenge.

All sizes of organisations should commit to flexible working, role models acknowledged amongst workforces and more information available on the benefits of flexible working options. When employees see their employer encouraging flexible

working by defining their jobs by outputs not inputs, then organisations and people will flourish. Managers need to be trained to manage in different ways and those at the top must champion flexible working.

Now is the time to explore initiatives to remove the barriers and encourage flexible working in all organisations, with incentives to stimulate its adoption (by SMEs in particular) for the benefit of UK enterprise, people and the environment – the ‘triple win’. BT can work with you to raise awareness of the benefits of flexible working, giving you the opportunity to lead the way to smarter working. If you agree – let’s talk.



Sources:

- BT
- YouGov Omnibus Survey
- Ovum Research
- RAC
- DTI