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Security and flexibility - What the experts say

Business Wales have worked with industry experts on each of the six themes identified for SMEs to understand and work effectively within the Fair Work principles.

First published: 21 April 2024

Last updated: 21 April 2024

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Over the years, myself, FairPlay Employer and Chwarae Teg have become very aware that if businesses want to recruit high functioning, high achieving people, they need to be offering a workplace that enables them to work at their best. It does not matter where businesses are in their Fair Work journey, it is about having the right attitude, the right culture and the best practices in place to support people.

With over 19 years of experience within the private and corporate sectors working with large teams, I have gained a wealth of knowledge in implementing new practices which enable organisations to become more productive.

Part of this has been developing different working practices, such as hybrid working, which falls under the Fair Work pillar of security and flexibility. I am a big advocate for hybrid working and feel that it is important that businesses and organisations give their employees choices in their job design.

There are many ways that businesses can benefit from adopting security and flexibility for employees, and wellbeing and work life balance are key considerations. If you increase the flexibility of a workforce, general employee wellbeing increases.

As mentioned by Gethin Nadin in his article **Work Isn't Working, How Do We Fix It?** "In focus groups run by The Resolution Foundation in the UK, it's clear that for many workers, pay is now far less important to them than the other parts of the deal they get by going to work. Almost half of our youngest workers have poor work life balance, are struggling with their wellbeing and suffering from financial instability."

A positive to increased wellbeing within the workforce is that you reduce sickness and absences which ultimately improves the bottom line and the productivity of the business. This is not only a significant benefit to the business but also to the employee as they will be actively contributing to a goal and be within an environment that can support them.

It is important that when working to increase the diversity within an organisation that racial and religious equality are considered. For example, not everyone celebrates

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religious ceremonies such as Christmas and Easter, so organisations need to be mindful of the diverse number of religious festivals that happen throughout the year and offer flexible holidays and time off to their employees, allowing all the same opportunities to participate in cultural events.

Something we need to take into consideration is why this change was not happening prior to the pandemic. In fact, the question we must ask is: Why did it take a global epidemic for businesses to implement operational and cultural change which has increased their offering of job security and flexibility? It is quite shocking in hindsight, but perhaps the concept of change was potentially too big to comprehend, and it took a global pandemic to make businesses realise that this was achievable.

It is a complete cultural shift, but we have come a long way in three years, and we have seen substantial progress. Positively, we are seeing more women in the workplace and we are observing more flexible working that supports and impacts women.

If we take a step back, and we look at the bigger picture, gender gaps are still commonplace within businesses, corporations and the economy as a whole. For example, in our State of the Nation report, which is published annually by Chwarae Teg, we see that around 39% of women work part-time and that just 14% of Welsh SMEs are led by women. There is clearly improvement to be made.

The research tells us that the main reason women in particular choose to work part-time is because of their family responsibilities. Statistically, caring for children or elders falls to women within families and is very consuming of their time. As a result, businesses need to be more aware of how they can support women in the workforce and be mindful of the reasons why they might need flexibilities.

Focusing on hybrid and agile working practices, flexible or condensed hours, job sharing, and having family friendly policies and procedures in place are all tools that businesses can use to develop a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

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There is also a need to consider employees who work exclusively from home. At FairPlay Employer and Chwarae Teg, we work with businesses to help ensure that people working from home do not feel discriminated against or forgotten.

For example, Chwarae Teg is looking to break the stigma surrounding women who work from home, where there is often an expectation that, in addition to working, they will maintain household chores and caring responsibilities.

A huge benefit for employers in allowing staff to work from home is the potential reduction in cost due to less office space being required. These savings can then be diverted back into the business, perhaps for training or other business and employee development opportunities.

Therefore, encouraging businesses to address these issues and implement flexible working and job security allows them to construct a positive workplace culture. Businesses that do this and offer more flexibility in job design are now building more diverse workforces with more women applying for a broader range of positions. In turn, this begins to address the underrepresentation of women in senior roles and across certain sectors.

Looking to the future, at FairPlay Employer we see only positive change and impacts stemming from the utilisation of the Fair Work framework – for employers and their employees.

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