



Flexible Working

Flexible working is a versatile phrase that covers any contractual departure from standard hours or workplace location. It includes part-time employment, hours accumulated over a specified time, job-sharing, temporary contracts and shift working. And it allows for the extension of the workplace to any remote site, which might include the employee's home, customer or business partner premises, a hotel or café, or any WiFi hotspot.

In 2013, the Government is extending the right to request a variation in the time and place of work to all employees, and employers must consider these requests in a reasonable manner, while retaining the right to decline them for business reasons.

In practice, thanks to enabling technologies which includes Superfast Broadband, Unified Communications, cloud computing and a plethora of devices that allow mobile access to business applications, many firms have already embraced at least some of the benefits of flexible working.

Flexible working isn't just about the employee's needs. It can also have a positive impact on productivity, availability and the culture of your business.

The Role of Technology in Flexible Working

In addition to Superfast Broadband, several other important technology trends are also playing a key role in the rise of flexible working:

Unified Communications

Unified Communications (UC) is a high-tech industry term for systems that consolidate voice, data and video communications over the same secure network, using the Internet Protocol (IP). There are reasonably priced packages developed specifically for SMBs. They simplify infrastructure management and integrate business applications such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems with the telephony network, as well as giving the business a complete picture of employee location and availability.

Virtual Private Networks

Most UC systems include the possibility to set up Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) – networks that use public infrastructure, such as the internet or the cloud, to give remote and mobile staff secure access to business applications and systems. A VPN can deliver significant cost savings compared with expensive leased lines.

Mobile connectivity

Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) is a trend which reflects employee expectations that they should be able to access business tools and applications via their own smartphones and tablets, regardless of where they happen to be.

This cultural shift has been influenced by the prevalence of high-speed broadband services and Wi-Fi hotspots. The advent of 3G and now, 4G, networks means that corporate-quality wireless data connections can be expected rather than hoped-for. With the help of the security features of UC systems, you can give your staff remote



access to systems via the mobile network and through broadband connections in their own homes.

Cloud computing

These days, businesses increasingly prefer to buy applications and systems as services rather than spending time and money on the infrastructure required to run them in-house. Tools such as Skype or FaceTime, for example, can make perfectly acceptable, low-cost video-conferencing services for remote and mobile workers.

Many of these applications can be sourced from the cloud, a rather hazy term for hosted services that include everything from internet access to document sharing and collaboration tools, up to data storage and application development platforms. By eliminating infrastructure, cloud computing can be a core tool in implanting a flexible working strategy.

Much of the technology you need to enable flexible working will be relatively low-cost, or even free.

What Business Benefits Can I Expect?

Staff retention

Staff attitude surveys regularly show that employees see flexible working as an incentive to stay with the business. And back in 2009, a Department of Work and Pensions taskforce discovered that 65% of employers saw improved recruitment and retention levels following the implementation of flexible working policies – whilst 58% of SMBs reported improved productivity.

Staff represent a significant investment in customer knowledge and your business's intellectual property. So it makes sense to accommodate life events such as parenthood, or remote domestic locations, and find ways to retain their services through different working structures, rather than risk losing them.

Motivated staff

If staff feel trusted and empowered to work away from the office – at home, for example, during 'downtime' when they would normally be commuting or waiting between appointments, or when they are at a customer or partner's premises – they will be more productive.

Video-conferencing and remote collaboration tools can help them keep in touch with each other and involved with the business. If you are nervous about consigning management to a virtual world, you can schedule regular physical meetings to provide additional structure.

Significant business travel cost savings for your company can be matched by the wellbeing of employees who avoid the stress of the daily commute. If staff are unable to travel to the office due to bad weather or disrupted transport, today's technology frees them to work just as efficiently at an alternative location.



Cultural change

Don't underestimate the potential of flexible working to influence positive cultural change across your business. It shifts the emphasis from inputs and activities tied to specific time (the traditional working day) and place (the office), to the actual achievements and outputs of your staff.

By enabling remote working and collaboration, you are not losing control of the reins. The same tools that allow your people to work together virtually and flexibly will let you monitor and manage them, and keep track of their outputs.

The wide range of handheld devices – smartphones, tablets, even digital pens and scanners – means that previously manual tasks such as form-filling and reporting can be completed on the road or at customer premises. These devices can hold a myriad powerful business applications and tools. Delays incurred by traditional, paper-based communications can be virtually eradicated.

Organisational change

Over a period of time, flexible working could also have a positive impact on your recruitment strategy. You might find it easier to recruit premium staff who will be attracted by the prospect of being given greater initiative to manage their time and resources. It might also allow you to react more quickly to business opportunities by employing staff on temporary, part-time or short-term contracts.

Improved partner and customer relationships

Flexible working policies can help you to extend business hours by providing more versatile cover for customer service. For example, some staff might prefer to compress their hours into fewer but longer days, while others might want to start and finish work earlier or later.

Mobile staff at customer sites can provide a more proactive service because they have instant access to company systems and information via their device. Flexible working also raises the possibility of closer collaboration with business partners who might benefit from having your employee working on their premises on a routine or ad hoc basis. The same technology that enables mobile working will let your employee treat the partner's location as an extension of your office.

Reduced office and IT costs

If your business spends an average of £8,000 every year to maintain each desk in the office, flexible working could reduce your overheads simply by enabling staff to work at home. Your only outlay would be the cost of the broadband connection they need to access business systems.

It depends on the nature and size of your business but flexible working could also help you to minimise your investment in IT infrastructure. By consolidating your communications and access strategy on a UC platform, you could reduce many traditional costs – particularly voice calls, as these will now be free across the IP network.

And of course, the combination of less hardware in the office and reduced travel will reduce the size of your carbon footprint as well as your energy and fuel bills.



How Do I Get Started?

There is plenty of debate about the pros and cons of flexible working in the light of the Government's move to make the concept available to all employees. But many people agree that individual employees' requests aside, most businesses can benefit from a flexible working strategy on some level.

So rather than waiting for staff to make requests, look at areas of the business where it would make sense to implement an aspect of flexible working – staggering hours to avoid peak-time travel, for example, or outsourcing basic applications to the cloud.

Top Tips

Review your broadband access before moving forward

Unified Communications requires reliable high-speed broadband connectivity

Think about outsourcing commonly used applications to the cloud

The cloud allows you to collaborate and share documents, complete forms and perform many tasks securely from a smartphone or tablet, with just one password

Revisit your security policy

If you are encouraging a BYOD culture, you will need to make sure that access to business systems is secure and managed

Be prepared for flexible working requests

The Government is legislating to make flexible working available to everyone but rather than waiting for staff to make requests, assess the wider benefits to your business now

Keep an open mind

Flexible working is not about surrendering authority. It is about letting your employees take the initiative for their contribution to your business – whether they are at home or in a café