**Guidance on managing flexible workers and teams**

Flexible working is increasingly become more popular with employees and organisations for a range of reasons. Advances in technology have revolutionized how, when and where we work. For many workers, a laptop and Wi-Fi connection means they are effective anywhere and any when. Video conferencing also provides a practical alternative to face to face meetings saving time and travel costs.

Working flexibly can help employees to balance work and family commitments, reduce commuting time and costs, reduce carbon footprint and improve personal wellbeing. Flexible working frequently comes top of the list of factors that influence an individual's decision on whether or not to accept a job. From an organizational perspective offering flexible working can support inclusion, improve productivity, reduce the gender pay gap and is a powerful driver of talent attraction and employee engagement.

In light of these developments and demands, it is very likely that most people managers, are or will be managing at least one employee who works flexibly, or would like to do so. This guidance provides practical guidance on how to lead a flexible working team effectively.

**What is flexible working?**

The term flexible working typically describes a working pattern that does not adhere to the traditional nine to five, Monday to Friday working week that is based in an office or other workplace setting.

Examples of common flexible working practices include reduced hours, compressed hours, flex-time, home working (full or occasional), 9-day fortnights, staggered start and finish times and phased retirement. More information is available on StaffNet, [here](https://www.staffnet.manchester.ac.uk/human-resources/current-staff/leave-working-arrangements/flexible-working/).

**Legal right to request flexible working**

Employees who have 26 weeks service with the employer have the statutory right to request flexible working and have that request reasonably considered.

You can find our policy on flexible working, [here](http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=9).

**Informal flexible working**

Not all requests need to be made formally. Informal everyday flexibility is a key part of creating a culture that genuinely encourages flexible working. For example, if an employee wishes to work from home on an occasional basis or go to an event at their child’s school, this does not require a formal flexible working request – you can agree how to manage this between you and your team. Everyday flexibility ensures that team members can deal with things that crop up in their lives outside work in the knowledge that the organisation and you as their line manager see work as a flexible activity that can accommodate them and their changing needs.

**Recommendations for people managers**

As well as ensuring that you proactively explore ways of working with team members that best suit them and help them to perform at their best, there should be flexibility in the way that team members are able to work on a day-to-day basis. An individual's commitments outside work are constantly changing and they will need different things at different times to ensure a healthy work-life balance.

In practical terms, this means that your team will have a certain degree of assumed flexibility around when, where and how they work. You can agree as a team what these flexible parameters are.

We encourage our people managers to work proactively with their team to find ways of working that suit the operational needs of the University. There is a wide range of research to show that teams are likely to be more engaged, motivated and productive if they are given the freedom to work in a way that fits in with their other life interests, aspirations and commitments.

**Ensuring Success**

Allowing your team to work flexibly involves an element of "letting go" and that can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Giving your team more freedom to decide how they want to work will change the way you evaluate their contribution. Your evaluation will be less around their physical presence and the hours they work and more around output and results.

There are three principles that you need to observe to make flexible working a success for you, your team and the organisation.

* Trust your team. You have to trust that your team will work diligently towards their objectives without you controlling every aspect of how they carry out their work. You trusting your team to work conscientiously when you cannot see them is fundamental to the success or otherwise of flexible working in your team.
* Know your team. Each employee that you manage is an individual with their own unique combination of strengths and weaknesses and particular set of personal circumstances and life commitments. What other life commitments do they have? What are their aspirations? What motivates them from day to day?
* Have confidence in yourself as a manager. Your confidence in your ability to guide and support your team will create a positive environment within which you and your team can explore and incorporate new ways of working. Knowing your weaknesses can give you valuable insights into when you need to pay particular attention to how you are doing something and lets you work on what you need to improve.

You should make sure that flexible working is something that is, and is seen to be, equally available at all levels of the organisation. It should not be a status symbol or something that is only available for some employees. The job itself should dictate whether flexible working is possible.

Once flexible working starts to be accepted you may find yourself in a position where everyone wants the same arrangement, for example everyone may want to start an hour earlier in the morning so that they can leave an hour earlier or to compress their hours so that they do not work on a Friday or a Monday. You can address requests in the order that they are received. There may be occasions where you are not able to say yes to everyone – please however be mindful that some requests (if the employee has a disability) may be reasonable adjustments. Discuss this with your HR Partner for further advice and information.

**Essential skills to lead flexible workers**

The skills that you need to lead a team of people that work flexibly are the same skills that you need to lead a team that works more conventionally. However you will need to be more skilled at certain things including communicating, relationship building, coaching and managing by results. For example, it is relatively easy to communicate with your team if you bump into each other all the time. When lots of team members have different working arrangements, it can be more difficult. If most of your interaction with an employee is by email or over the phone you cannot rely on body language and facial expressions to help convey your message or to better understand what an employee is saying to you. For this reason a manager of an employee working remotely needs to be an excellent communicator rather than a competent one.

Timely and effective communication with your team, whatever their working arrangements, is vital to ensure that they:

* feel part of the team;
* understand how their work fits in with the team's objectives and how the team's work fits in with the organisation's objectives;
* receive regular knowledge updates and information about organisational developments; and
* receive regular feedback on the quality and quantity of the work they are producing.

To achieve this you will need to use a range of communication tools including face-to-face meetings, telephone and video calls, emails and instant messages. Select whichever one is the most suitable for each particular communication bearing in mind what you want to say.

When a team of individuals are physically present in the same space this provides lots of opportunities for team members to share knowledge and ideas and discuss issues as they arise on an informal basis thereby strengthening relationships within the team and enhancing team performance. When a team works flexibly, spontaneous communication and knowledge-sharing can be more difficult. However, it is possible to simulate similar interactions by using secure, online communication and collaboration tools.

An instant messaging tool can be a good way for you and your team to interact with each other socially regardless of whether or not they are physically present in the office.

It is important to retain some face-to-face interaction to be effective. Setting clear expectations about how much face-to-face time is required at the start of any flexible working arrangement will help to avoid potential conflict around this issue further down the line. The amount of face-to-face time needed will depend on various factors including the employee's role, the nature of the work they do, their knowledge and experience, the amount of supervision and support they need and how the team operates. This can be included in any flexible working agreement or in informal team ways of working.

If you have individuals in your team who work on different days or on a different timetable be mindful of this when you are organising meetings or social events.

At the beginning of any flexible working arrangement, it is a good idea to agree any regular events that you want everyone to commit to regardless of their working pattern. Wherever possible agree these as a team and give people plenty of notice.

Meetings should have a remote dial-in to join where possible to ensure that team members are not excluded from attending if they do need to work remotely.

**Set objectives and manage performance**

Measuring an individual's performance by results and not by their presence in the workplace or the number of hours that they work is the best way to ensure that flexible working arrangements succeed. A person's presence in the workplace does not necessarily mean they are working. Equally, when someone is working from home, or on the move, this does not mean they are not working or slacking. Often it is the reverse. Given the freedom to work in their own way, employees almost always get on with the job and appreciate being trusted to choose when and where to work.

To assess an individual's performance by their output you must set formal objectives through the P&DR process. Discussions about performance should be an ongoing activity for everyone – not just an annual event.

You should also try and get some insight into any challenges that are particular to team members who work remotely. You could explore if there is anything that slows them down from a technology point of view to ensure that you are aware of any potential issues. You could also ask them if they feel they have access to the right level of support from other team members and if there are any individuals in particular that they think they would benefit from working with more closely.

Adopting a coaching management style is good practice for all employees, including flexible workers. You not being in the same physical space as your team members all or most of the time means there is less scope to help trouble shoot problems when they arise. Team members need to develop the skills to solve problems independently. A coaching management style, which involves you guiding individuals to work out things for themselves by asking powerful questions, will help them do this.

Using coaching to help solve a team member's problem could involve you:

* asking the individual for a clear summary of the problem;
* reflecting the summary back to them to check that you have understood them;
* asking for their proposed solutions and then suggesting any other relevant options;
* discussing the pros and cons of each option; and
* letting the individual suggest the best way forward.

If you adopt a coaching approach to management you will help your team to grow and develop while also giving them the confidence to deal with problems more independently. Our Staff Learning and Development team run regular courses on coaching for managers.

**Addressing flexible working challenges**

Managing a team of people on different working patterns can present challenges from time to time.

Flexible working arrangements often fail to reap the benefits that are possible because some managers find it difficult to wholeheartedly support them or are concerned with possible operational problems.

The most important thing to consider when you are assessing whether or not a job can be done flexibly are the requirements of that job. You can find our more [here](http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=37553) about assessing a job for flexibility. Explore ways to make flexibility happen and discuss these with your team members.

It is imperative that you are fair and consistent when you assess whether or not a particular job can be done flexibly. You must be able to explain to your team which jobs are flexible and which are not, and why. You must also ensure that you deal with any requests to work flexibly from your team objectively. Any refusal for flexible working must be clearly explained, in writing. Your decision may be appealed.

If you are unsure how suited a job is to a particular flexible working arrangement, consider having a trial period. You would need to agree the length of the trial period and agree what outcomes would be required during that period with the employee beforehand. If you conclude at the end of the trial period that some parts of the job are suffering then consider if there is an alternative arrangement you could try. Do not immediately revert to a conventional way of working. Find out more [here](http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=36768) about managing a trial period.

You will find that it is frequently possible to meet the needs of the organisation and a team member at the same time. If team members have some input into how, when and where they work you will find that they take responsibility for making things works.

**Dos and don'ts**

* Do talk to candidates about flexible working during the recruitment process.
* Don't wait until you receive a request from a team member to consider whether or not they could be working in way that suits them better.
* Do try to find a solution that works for the individual and the team.
* Do use trial periods to help you identify what will work in a particular role.
* Don't automatically say no to a request because it makes things less convenient or slightly harder for you.
* Don't assume that the question of whether or not a job can be done flexibly is an all or nothing question, it may be that parts of it can be done flexibly. See our ‘how to’ guide to help you assess a role for flexibility.
* Do lead by example and adopt some of the behaviour and practices that you want your team to adopt.
* Do examine your beliefs about flexible working and whether or not they are justified.
* Don't assume that the most effective way to manage your team is to maximise the time that you are in the same physical space.
* Do make sure that you and the rest of your team can use technology to allow flexible working colleagues to communicate.