

Do you risk losing staff to more flexible workplaces?

Life in lockdown during the pandemic has been tough for many reasons. But for many who have been working from home, there are things to like about it: more time with family, no commute, and perhaps less distraction from noisy colleagues.

As lockdowns lift, many employees are heading back into the workplace with a keen understanding of the benefits of flexible working – and knowing they can be just as productive at home.

Research for SEEK found that 64% of candidates think work-life balance is extremely important. And more than half (55%) of candidates want hirers to offer remote or flexible working.

Importantly, 28% of candidates also say they are looking to change jobs in the next six months. So ensuring you understand what they want in terms of flexibility is crucial for both retention of existing staff and attracting new candidates.

With this in mind, do you know what your staff expect when it comes to flexible work arrangements?

Why flexibility matters more than ever

Flexible work encompasses many things, from start and finish times, through to days of work and the location of work. But the ability to work from home is the standout aspect of flexible working for many people, particularly during the past two years.

While only 19% of employees worked with flexible conditions before the pandemic, now 35% of workers expect these conditions.

That's one of the findings from research conducted for Telstra by Deloitte Access Economics and the Australian National University. And more than half, or 54%, of employees think that flexible working is at least as important as a 5% pay increase.

The pandemic did two fundamental things for office workers, says Nick Gotsis, Executive Director HR, ING Australia.

“It exposed managers to the realities of working life for employees and highlighted that ‘work’ and ‘life’ are really not mutually exclusive. It also made employees genuinely want to prioritise their health and wellbeing above anything else.”

Casey Hotham, Head of Future Workplace Experience at Telstra agrees. “Flexibility is here to stay – it's not going away,” she says.

“But there's a sizable gap between what employees want and what senior leaders think their

people want,” she says. “That can result in an inability to attract and retain top talent in this very competitive labour market – and that war for talent has only intensified.”

Flexible workplaces are attractive to employees who are becoming more career mobile and are open to changing employers – taking their skills with them.

“Flexibility is a must-have for leaders if they want to have a highly engaged workforce,” Hotham says.

Flexible working also opens up your potential talent pool to candidates with more diverse backgrounds, disabilities and those in regional areas, Hotham says.

How flexibility boosts business

These days, flexibility means more than just offering varied starting times, Hotham says. It might also include flexibility around work time, days and location as well as additional leave options such as volunteer and cultural leave, as well as the ability to take career breaks.

In return, workplace flexibility offers benefits to business such as:

- **A boost in employee engagement** and motivation, because they’re trusted to deliver outcomes, not just clock ‘hours at work’.
- **Empowerment for employees** who can choose how, when and where they work.
- **Retention of staff** who would otherwise be looking for more flexible options elsewhere.
- **A stronger staff culture** through higher morale and more frequent communication.

“Proactively engaging with employees around flexible working shows you care about them,” says Gotsis. “When people at work feel supported, respected and heard they are likely to be more engaged, productive and loyal. We often hold open forums to encourage two-way dialogue with our people to hear their views on important topics such as flexible working.”

One example of delivering flexibility could be managers setting up team meetings and projects around the needs of individuals. “Have meetings at certain times of the day if you have parents on your team who need to do the school drop-off and pick-up,” she says.

The Deloitte research also found that flexible working boosted business performance through productivity gains of up to 22% and raised business income by 6%.

While productivity outcomes will vary across businesses, this provides a useful insight into the potential positives for the bottom line. “It busts the myth that we need to be back in the office to be productive,” Hotham says.

How to start the conversation

Leaders in businesses of any size play a critical role in bringing flexibility to life, Hotham says. “It’s one thing to have a conversation, but if they’re not seeing those behaviours being role-modelled, it’s like paying lip service.”

People leaders can do things like formal quarterly check-ins with staff, in addition to more frequent informal conversations to stay connected to their teams’ needs and preferences around flexible work.

Gotsis says a good way to start the conversation could be to say to employees ‘let’s chat about the return to the office and what flexibility you need to make the transition back better for you.’

Some questions you could ask as part of this are:

- **‘What commitments do you have outside of work?’** (such as dropping kids to school or day-care, caring for children or elderly family members, a weekly fitness class).
- **‘What are your non-negotiables?’** (such as needing to block out 5-7pm each evening to care for children).
- **‘How do you want to structure your working day?’** (such as starting and finishing times).
- **‘How often would you prefer to work from home?’** (how many days and whether they’re fixed or flexible)

You need to decide what works best for both your employee and your business, but it’s important that this happens as part of an open conversation.

“Fundamentally, leaders need to create an environment where their teams feel safe to talk about their flexible working needs,” Gotsis says. “Historically, organisations have built work systems around the assumption of visibility, or being in the office”.

“Trust is paramount as we move to a new way of working. Helping leaders understand how to manage outputs and processes in this changing environment will also prepare them for the conversation with their teams.”

Hotham says you can help get the conversation started:

- **Regularly talk with your team** about their needs and preferences with flexible working. Informal check-ins will spark more organic conversations about what’s going on with staff in and outside of work.
- **Be available and open** to having those discussions when staff are ready.
- **Share experiences** about how flexible working has worked for you.
- **Be open** and share the challenges that you’ve faced and how you’ve overcome them.
- **Support each employee’s preference for flexibility** and, where possible,

accommodate different needs.

- **Create safe spaces** for people to talk about their work and personal circumstances.
- **Communicate clearly** and often with staff about flexible work policies.

“Wherever possible, have these discussions in person with an employee to discuss flexible working needs and organisational policy and practice,” says Gotsis.

Many employees who have worked from home for weeks or months on end have had a taste of true flexibility. Now it’s up to employers to find out whether staff really want to be back in the workplace full time or have the benefits of flexibility. Flexible working attracts top talent, fosters engagement and motivation among your employees and opens up the talent search to a wider pool of candidates.

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature of behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4000 Kiwis annually. Published November 2021. Deloitte report for Telstra – Busting the productivity myth: Hybrid working in Australia (2021).