

# Maintaining a work-life balance

## Better recruitment and retention

**F**lexible working, family-friendly or a better work-life balance, are current buzzwords in the government and media – and they have a direct relevance to employers and employees. Antonia Chitty looks at the benefits of helping staff to fit in their out-of-work priorities with their working life.

People have different priorities depending on their religion, health, ways of travelling to work and participation in out-of-work activities such as the arts, sport or voluntary work. Everyone has different pulls on their time, and home life sometimes encroaches upon the working day. Nowadays, there are financial and career pressures for both parents to work but the strain can show if childcare arrangements break down. An inclusive programme to enable everyone to get the right work-life balance will not just help parents, but will take into account the different needs of all employees.

Out-of-work priorities, such as caring for children or elderly parents, can sometimes get too much, and valued employees may see no other option than to quit, or seek a lower level, part-time job elsewhere. Employees with keen outside interests may decide that work is getting in the way, and start looking to scale down the time they spend there each week. Also, people approaching retirement may feel that the pressures of work are stopping them from enjoying life, and consider taking early retirement.

### Family-friendly initiatives

Recruitment costs money, so it is worth investing in retention first. Employee turnover can adversely affect a business – and has financial costs. The loss of an employee can cost a business from about £4,000, up to as much as £8,300 for professional staff. The cost of an empty consulting room, patients who cannot get an appointment when they want one, and underemployed dispensing staff soon adds up.

Many couples now wish to continue to work after starting a family but are faced with the pressures of finding the best person to care for their children, as well as the cost of childcare. After weeks or months spent rushing from home to nursery or school, to get to work, the strain may begin to show. Parents may start to question whether the family would be happier if one or both parents worked part-time, or if one of them stopped work altogether. Without family-friendly policies, there may not be much of a choice between full-time work and them handing in their notice.

Fortunately, optical employers have



for many years seen the benefits of part-time working. Working as a locum can enable professional staff to stay in control of their own work-life balance. Now, the government has introduced a raft of new family-friendly initiatives, including the right to request flexible working for parents of children under six, to meet the needs of the growing number of people with care responsibilities.

There is a whole range of different working patterns, including – annualised hours, compressed hours, flexitime, homeworking, job-sharing, self-rostering, shift working, staggered hours and term-time working. Some of these may be more suitable for an optical practice than others.

Annualised hours would allow an employee to work longer at certain times of the year, but with the benefit of a regular monthly wage based on the average time worked each month. Flexitime and self-rostering may seem problematic, but are possible if hours are scheduled far enough in advance so patients can be booked appropriately. An evening clinic may be useful for busy professionals and suit staff wanting to work outside normal office hours.

It could also be worth considering a scheme similar to the GP retainer scheme, which enables staff who would otherwise take a complete break from practice to carry on working for a minimum of one morning a week. A member of staff, who is considering not returning from maternity leave, may be interested in maintaining their

professional skills this way.

Every practice has busy and quiet times, so flexible working patterns may help the employer cover the hectic periods with more staff, and have fewer people at other times. This maximises efficient use of labour, and can cut pay bills too.

### Long-term benefits

As well as reducing employee turnover, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that family-friendly policies can improve productivity and performance. In their study, "The nature and pattern of family-friendly employment in Britain", the researchers found that in general, family-friendly policies were associated with improvements in productivity and performance. The report also found an argument against the view that the costs of family-friendly policies outweighed the benefits. It found positive links between above average productivity and (non-statutory) parental leave, paternity leave, the ability to change from full-time to part-time work, and having a broad range of family-friendly policies.

Improvements in quality of performance were associated with term-time working, the ability to change from full-time to part-time work, the employer providing help with childcare and a broad range of family-friendly policies. Reduced staff turnover was associated with offering job-shares, flexitime, childcare help and working from home.

Other benefits for employers include having a more motivated, productive and less stressed workforce. Employees will feel valued, and this will add to the employer's reputation. In the long run, this can attract a wider range of candidates for vacancies. If you are finding it hard to fill a post, older part-time workers and carers can prove reliable and committed to a flexible employer. A well-designed pattern of work can also reduce absenteeism – less stress can reduce ill health. Employees will feel happier at work and at home, and have a greater responsibility to the business, as well as a sense of ownership. Devising flexible working plans can also improve staff relationships with management – it is a visible demonstration of the company's commitment to its employees.

### Key points for the DTI's guide to implementing flexible working<sup>1</sup>

#### Consider

- The impact on patients of new ways of working
- If everyone must start and finish at the same time
- Management time needed to co-ordinate a more flexible workforce
- Back-up arrangements for sickness or leave
- Scheduling to cover busy periods

#### Checklist

1. Identify core business needs
  - Survey staff about what they want
  - Work out what you want
2. Formulate policies
  - Consult widely
  - Agree strategies
  - Write procedures for implementation and monitoring
3. Communicate the change
4. Run a pilot or trial period and evaluate it
5. Amend and/or extend the programme if necessary
6. Monitor and evaluate

### Short-term help

It is important to acknowledge that flexible working rights just for parents could engender resentment in those without children, so consider whether all staff could benefit. If a member of staff has reduced their working hours, it is unreasonable to expect the others just to cope – either the workload should be cut or extra hours offered, or another person employed to cover.

For new parents, returning to work at all can depend on the availability of affordable childcare. If several of your professional staff or receptionists are young parents or parents-to-be, look at linking up with your local nursery to offer reduced cost places. Childcare vouchers are an easy way to do this at little cost to the employer, yet could save the employee almost a month's nursery fees each year.

Childcare vouchers enable parents to save up to 11% on annual childcare costs because they are exempt from all National Insurance (NI) payments under regulation 19(1) (d) of the Social Security (Contributions) Regulations 1979. Employers save on their NI contributions too, by 12.8% of the salary paid. Vouchers are valid for virtually all forms of childcare and can be provided in addition to any other childcare support (percentage savings may differ for contracted-out organisations and are subject to any changes in NIC levels and limits).

Employers pay a service commission to companies providing vouchers such as

Accor ([www.accorservices.co.uk](http://www.accorservices.co.uk)), Busy Bees ([www.busybees.com](http://www.busybees.com)), or Sodexhopass ([www.sodexhopass.co.uk](http://www.sodexhopass.co.uk)). Local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships run a local Childcare Information Service, which will be able to provide a list of local nurseries, playgroups, after school clubs and holiday play schemes.

An extended break can leave any professional lacking self-esteem and confidence in their skills. Optometry update courses such as those run by the Institute of Optometry are useful for returning practitioners and could also be a helpful incentive to attract new employees.

The Department of Trade and Industry has a range of helpful information for any employer considering the implementation of flexible working. The Department of Health also has several initiatives to recruit more doctors and keep the ones they have – these ideas could also help optical practices to find new staff, and retain employees. To find out more, log on to [www.doh.gov.uk/iwl](http://www.doh.gov.uk/iwl).

#### References

1. [www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance](http://www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance).

#### About the author

Antonia Chitty is an independent health writer and optometrist. She has worked for the British Medical Association, *Which?* magazine and the Royal National Institute for the Blind. In the past, she has worked in a primary care clinic.